The academic journeys of returning postgraduate students:

Perceptions of appropriate educational provision for their

web-based learning.

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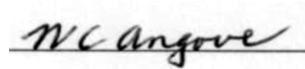Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)

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Attestation of authorship

"I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning"

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Ethical approval

Conduct of the research reported in this thesis was approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee in two stages, Reference Numbers: 09/206 and 10/174.

Abstract

This thesis makes an original contribution to research into the challenges facing mature postgraduate students returning to web-based study. The distinct challenges this cohort faces distinguishes it from other student groups, but little research has been conducted on the transition process these students undergo in adapting to the online environment. In particular, the thesis focuses on the academic literacy needs of these students. It seeks to capture both the challenges this cohort encounters and also the enabling strategies that facilitate their studies. Using a grounded theory approach, the study explores tutor, support staff and student perspectives regarding these challenges and strategies. In this way the thesis addresses a gap in the existing literature.

Data collection involved focus groups, semi-structured interviews, and a document and records review. Three parallel streams - tutors, support staff and students from five New Zealand universities - participated. Findings revealed continuing tension between the traditional view of academic literacy practices as autonomous and transparent and the contemporary perspective of writing as socially situated practice.

The findings, which are in agreement with the literature, confirm that there is a distinct gap between undergraduate and postgraduate studies, and particularly in the area of web-based studies. The students need to find ways to manage this gap. The thesis identifies four main areas of challenge faced by students in adjusting to the academic environment: managing the gap though induction, developing self-management, developing critical reading, and developing critical writing.

Student experiences demonstrated that face to face induction was an enabling strategy which established expectations, began socialisation processes, and familiarised students with the web-based mode. Self- management, along with induction, established the foundation for student learning. Students spoke of creating a study environment, being a self- starter, and employing time management strategies from course commencement. Support, both in their home environment and from the institution, was important, along with the confidence to proactively seek assistance.

Reading was often perceived in terms of reading to write, with a focus on required readings. Some students described their initial experiences as being at the level of reading for understanding, rather than reading critically; consequently strategies which

encouraged reading for a purpose, combined with interaction on discussion forums (DFs), were valued.

Writing for assessment included both traditional and applied genres and digital text formats, which differed according to context. Writing was often framed by an emphasis on structure, having a sequenced argument, demonstrating an acceptable tone, integrating readings, and staying within the ideas expressed in the literature. When writing, some students felt that new viewpoints, even if supported by the literature, were not encouraged.

Recommendations arising from the findings include making the detail and purpose of course activities explicit, providing specific links to institutional web-based support, ensuring the availability of targeted assistance, and responding to individual needs at induction.

 Further research into the perspectives of other non-mainstream cohorts in the web-based environment would add to knowledge in the area. Research that focuses on the challenges of the online environment from course coordinators' perspectives would also inform teaching and learning. This study has indicated that there is insufficient cooperation between various support services and postgraduate academic staff at New Zealand universities, and this area requires further investigation. These are issues of great concern in a rapidly changing educational environment.

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Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1 The aims of this study

This project explored the academic journeys of postgraduate students returning to study in the online environment. All the student participants were mature students who had not been involved in academic study for at least three years. The perspectives of these students, their lecturers and support staff at the universities were gathered in the hope that students' academic journeys might illuminate appropriate educational provision for this cohort. The lack of relevant literature about the experiences of students transitioning into the online environment provides the rationale for this project (O'Donnell, Tobbell, Lawthon, & Zammit, 2009; West, 2012). It is hoped that the findings of this study, informed by the perspectives of participants, will assist postgraduate student transitions. This exploration of the transition experience, viewed in relation to online support approaches (Cain, Marrara, Pitre, & Armour, 2003), is intended to add depth and insight to teaching and learning. The study suggests ways that student challenges can be addressed in relation to professional practice and course design.

1.2 The context of this study

Significant changes in higher education have occurred internationally since the 1980s (OECD, 2008). For the most part, change has been driven by government policies in response to economic imperatives, globalisation and communication trends based on technological innovation (Binde, 2005; Leu, Kinzer, Coiro, & Cammack, 2004). In this post-Fordist era, standardised production lines have given way to competitive, customised niche markets, and a change from manufacturing to services (P. Scott, 1995). Economies in developed societies have been transformed from dependence on material goods to dependence on knowledge for competitive advantage (Candy, 2000). Knowledge organisations are found in areas such as medicine, computer software, architecture, advertising and technical research (Sveiby, 1992). In these businesses, intangibles such as human capital, intellectual property and customer service have come to the fore (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009). Traditional forms of hierarchy and control between managers and workers have evolved towards a flat organisational structure, with self-managing teams designed to enhance decision making, problem solving and

negotiate dialogue. As Roberts (2009) argues, neoliberal ideas have been adopted in New Zealand in response to the dominance of economic imperatives and the demands of globalisation. Accountability mechanisms such as performance league tables, funding criteria and quality assessment measures mean that the role of universities as "critic and conscience of society" (Universities New Zealand, 2015), while still enshrined in statute, has been curtailed by successive government policies (Zepke, 2012). Grey (2013), for example, argues that the twin features of pragmatism and instrumentalism conspire to constrain resistance to the "hegemonic narratives of marketisation and managerialism" (p. 700), which impact both society and the universities.

It is argued that knowledge workers are essential in knowledge-intensive organisations, since their esoteric and growing bodies of information provide competitive advantage in fast-moving economies (Candy, 2000). Graduates with advanced knowledge in specialised areas and links with industry and the professions provide specialised skills in an information-rich society. Employees need to know how to think critically and utilise innovative and collaborative problem solving as a way to manage ongoing change (Gee, Hull, & Lankshear, 1996; Smyth et al., 2006). In place of the old division of labour and production-line outputs, attributes such as independence, an ability to multi-skill (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009), and technological competencies are required in workers (Greenhow, Robelia, & Hughes, 2009).

Tertiary education, which includes all forms of formal education beyond secondary school, has become a major driver of economic competitiveness in today's knowledge-driven, global economy (OECD, 2008). Businesses, universities and government agencies are collaborating in order to promote economic growth (Wilson, 2012). The commodification of knowledge as goods and services has blurred boundaries between academic and vocational spheres (P. Scott, 2006) and the principles of lifelong education have been reshaped to meet marketplace requirements (OECD, 1999). A move towards a more unified tertiary education system (P. Scott, 1995) has led to revised curriculum and delivery approaches. Another outcome, which is relevant to this study, has been the increase in part-time students, particularly in vocational and professional areas. By 2006, about half the student body was part time in New Zealand (Jeffrey, Atkins, Laurs, & Mann, p. 3). Significantly, universities have responded by adapting programmes and providing convenient time frames and delivery modes, as

well as offering relevant vocational courses, since students expect to gain marketable skills (Zepke, 2012).

The changed role for universities came with the reform of higher education immediately after the Second World War and the rapid growth of education in advanced industrial societies. Higher education has been transformed from elite systems to mass systems, with a distinct role of producing lifelong learners and workers for an information-rich society (Candy, 2000). Traditional university systems have been criticised for being closed, independent and narrow (Candy, 2000; P. Scott, 1995). Their focus was to provide a liberal, general education in established subjects solely for gentlemen who were destined to take leadership roles in society (Trow, 2007). While forms of exclusive education survive to provide specialised, scholarly academic training in elite contemporary universities, other universities have responded to the pressures of massification, competition from other educators, and market imperatives (P. Scott, 2006). They educate a broad range of people for vocational, technical and economic competencies.

Since the 1990s, government policies have been key drivers in shaping university roles by placing an increased focus on accountability and value for money. Funding is increasingly linked to national priorities, the strengthening of ties with the labour market, and an emphasis on quality and relevance (OECD, 2008).

These policies have been both praised and severely criticised (Kleinman, Feinstein, & Downey, 2012). A concern is the change in relationships amongst academics, wrought by pressures for efficiency, reduction in government funding, and privatisation, which has transformed the traditional culture of collegiality and independence (Kleinman et al., 2012). Yet there are also advantages to an increased openness in academic culture engendered by the intertwining of university and business. Some universities embrace the notion of being "economic powerhouses" which contemporary society demands (p. 2398), and encourage new initiatives and partnerships in both research and education.

In fact, universities are often seen as key drivers and a source of strength in the knowledge-based economy (Olssen & Peters, 2005). Business and university partnerships are evident through collaboration in programmes, work experience opportunities and recruitment of graduates to match business needs. Business interests also partner with university-based centres of research excellence. More flexible,

interdisciplinary pathways are encouraged to foster both the integration of knowledge and novel approaches to finding solutions to problems. Technology and global competition have driven the development of universities as knowledge-intensive organisations, where information is created and distributed for economic advantage (Huston, 2012).

The movement towards mass systems has led to increases in tertiary enrolments internationally (OECD, 2005). Student numbers, integral to the knowledge economy, increased by 40% across OECD countries during the 1990s (OECD, 1999). Between 1980 and 1990, tertiary enrolments in the United Kingdom increased 41% (P. Scott, 1995, p. 22). This increase was accompanied by the development of online learning to accommodate increased student numbers (Larsen & Vincent-Lancrin, 2006; Schiffman, Vignare, & Geith, 2007). Allen and Seaman (2008) report that in 2007 a 12.9% growth rate in online enrolments exceeded the 1.2% growth of the overall higher education population in the United States (p. 1). Growth in digital education directly impacts on equity for mature students returning to study after three years or more, the focus of this thesis.

Equity policies promote widening participation and allow for a relaxation of entry criteria, a principle captured in a 2003 UK White Paper entitled *The Future of Higher Education.* This document states that "education must be a force for opportunity and social justice, not for the entrenchment of privilege" (Department for Education and Skills, 2003, p. 67). Even so, more inclusive admission criteria are not necessarily synonymous with equality of opportunity in the changed education environment (Archer, 2007). Ingleby (2015), for example, considers that identifying higher education with employability, or addressing inequality by admitting disadvantaged students to lower-ranking universities, represents a simplistic and contradictory linking of neoliberal values with emancipatory pedagogy, an approach to education which is inherently flawed. Equally, however, admission into higher education for these students may provide a pathway to employment and a better quality of life. From the teaching perspective students arrive with greater linguistic, cultural and social diversity (Lillis, 2006), and varying levels of readiness. Discipline-specific preparation prior to entry, where home-based students specialise in specific subject areas at school before transitioning to university, can no longer be assumed (Ivanic & Lea, 2006). Diversity is

also apparent in internationalisation of the student body. Almost 3.7 million tertiary students enrolled outside their country of citizenship in 2009 (OECD, 2011, p. 318).

The picture is further complicated by the increasing use of technology in education, and an understanding of the intertwined nature of literacy and technology is integral to this study. While such technology has much to offer, the move from traditional to virtual classrooms for web-based learning also involves pedagogical shifts which may create challenges for both students and facilitators (Giddings, Campbell, & Maclaren, 2006), and the transition experiences of students, particularly those who are not familiar with such web-based learning, can be those of frustration, distress and confusion about expectations. The literature has much to offer about online pedagogical practices but there is very little discussion of the challenges faced by these students.

The study reported in this thesis, then, sought to answer the following research question: How might returning postgraduate students' academic "journeys" be understood to throw light on appropriate educational provision for this cohort?

1.3   Research design

The primary methods of data collection for this study were focus groups and one-to-one interviews. Student participants, who were recruited from five accredited New Zealand universities, were enrolled on postgraduate diploma or masters programmes in the broad areas of health, education, social sciences and business management. All these programmes had a number of web-based off-campus modules. The three groups of participants were students, academic support staff including library staff, and course coordinators. These parallel streams of participants ensured that multiple perspectives were voiced in order to capture the complexities involved in the enabling factors and challenges in relation to educational provision. In addition to the main research question, the following questions provided the focus for each group of participants:

1) What do students perceive as the academic challenges and enabling factors they face when returning to study at the postgraduate level and using the web-based, off-campus medium?
2) What do lecturers perceive as the academic challenges and enabling factors for students returning to study at the postgraduate level and using the web-based, off-campus medium?

3) What do academic support staff including library staff perceive as the academic challenges and enabling factors for students returning to study at the postgraduate level and using the web-based, off-campus medium?

1.4   Overview of thesis chapters

Chapter 1 introduces the background context for this research project, which is the changed environment of 21st-century higher education and the new roles for universities as education providers. The objectives of the research are stated, along with the research design and questions which provide a focus for data collection. The need for this research arises because, unlike other transitions, there is a lack of information about the challenges for returning postgraduate students in a web-based environment.

Chapter 2 reviews the literature, taking a comprehensive approach on the different conceptions of academic literacy, and the influence of competing perspectives in pedagogical approaches to academic literacy development. The interplay between academic literacy and technology influences in the web-based environment is discussed, and themes for investigation are identified.

Chapter 3 reviews the literature on the diverse characteristics of students enrolling in contemporary higher education. Heterogeneity amongst the student body in New Zealand is then discussed, including characteristics of mature, postgraduate students returning to study. An exploration of web-based courses follows, along with consideration of students' academic literacy practices and needs in this environment. Interaction as part of web-based pedagogy is outlined before considering the supporting processes of induction, computer-mediated communication, information literacy needs, and the role of student academic support centres.

Chapter 4 describes the qualitative methodology used, beginning with the analytical framework. This is followed by an explanation of the constructivist version of grounded theory, the suitability of this approach to the study, and my own position as researcher. The data-gathering process and methods are then described, followed by discussion of the adequacy of the methods.

Chapter 5 presents demographic data of the participants followed by analysis and discussion of the first two categories which emerged: managing the gap through

induction and developing self-management. The strengths and weaknesses of induction are examined from the perspectives of the three groups of participants. Proactive approaches to self-management including personal organisation, seeking academic support, and engagement in interactive technology practices are identified.

Chapter 6 examines the two categories of developing critical reading and developing critical writing, key aspects of the students' academic journey. Critical reading perspectives are interpreted in terms of reading readiness, informed use of strategies, and the role of critical reading in understanding and advancing disciplinary knowledge. Critical writing development in the web-based environment, including expectations, approaches and strategies used, are examined in terms of the academic literacies framework, and conclusions drawn.

Chapter 7 identifies the challenges and enabling factors in relation to transitioning postgraduate web-based students and their academic endeavours. The four categories analysed in Chapters 5 and 6 are integrated under the core category of "Managing the gap". The findings are summarised and presented as an integrated theory for the enhancement of returning postgraduates' academic journey during their transition. The limitations of this theory and contributions to the field are outlined.

Chapter 2 Literacies in higher education

This chapter reviews the literature on the nature and background of academic literacy. The review covers a wide area and some articles are more pertinent to the research than others. However it was felt that a broad coverage of the area allowed better contextualisation of specific issues being explored. The chapter begins with a discussion of the changing conceptualisations of literacy from a historical perspective. The concept of a single literacy, the "literacy thesis," is followed by a shift of focus that produced a theory of literacy as social practice characterised by the "new literacy studies" (Gee, 1999). Tensions between the two perspectives are apparent today in pedagogical approaches to language and literacy development in higher education. These different approaches to academic literacy are outlined and discussed, along with consideration of their significance in the contemporary university. To begin with, critical literacy frames a discussion on the influence of power and identity and the ways critical literacy is utilised in instruction. Other contributing perspectives to academic literacy development include genre acquisition from three broad perspectives, and the concept of knowledge transfer. Composition writing and writing across the curriculum (WAC) are also described. Academic literacies, as a field of enquiry (Lea & Street, 1998; Lillis & Scott, 2007) is then considered. Academic literacies is important as it has provided a conceptual framework to inform this study. An investigation of multiliteracies and their place in contemporary academic literacy development follows. Finally, conclusions are drawn about the relevance of these different approaches and their significance in relation to transitioning, postgraduate web-based students.

2.1   Literacy or literacies?

"Literacy" is a word beset by a cluster of ideologies and associations (Baynham, 1995). Where higher education is based on the Western European tradition, the different conceptualisations of literacy are important because their assumptions and underpinning beliefs influence the shape of literacy practices and policies (Chege, 2009). The traditional view, popular between the 1960s and 1980s, was that of a single, universal model of literacy termed the "literacy thesis" (Halverson, 1992). A challenge to this view came in the 1980s with the articulation of a socially situated, plural view of literacy that became known as new literacy studies (NLS) (Street, 1993). Since then, debate and contested notions about literacy have been ongoing. A review of these

different perspectives follows in order to provide an understanding of the contrasting assumptions which remain influential in contemporary higher education.

2.1.1   A single literacy: The literacy thesis

The traditional view perceived Western literacy as a single, universal and neutral skill with transformative consequences in cognition and language at both societal and individual level (Gee, 1986, 1989b; Street, 1984, 1993). Literacy acquisition is perceived narrowly as the attainment of technical competencies in reading, writing and calculating (Workshops of UNESCO, 2004). The key arguments of the literacy thesis (Goody, 1973; Halverson, 1992) were presented in *The Consequences of Literacy* (Goody & Watt, 1968) and in *Preface to Plato* (Havelock, 1963). These authors argued that the Greek enlightenment, the transformation of Western society, and individual cognition were a consequence of alphabetic literacy acquisition (Goody & Watt, 1968). From this perspective written literacy engendered economic, cultural and democratic development in society. Furthermore, literacy acquisition was claimed to lead to higher-order thinking, improved logic, critical enquiry and self-conscious reflection (Street, 1993). Characteristically, the literacy thesis followed the Great Divide theory, which assumed the superiority of writing over speech, a view derived from long-standing Western notions based on the civilized versus primitive dichotomy (Collins & Blot, 2003; Goody & Watt, 1968). Other such binaries, also used to emphasise transformative qualities, included orality versus literacy (Collins, 1995; Gee, 1986), traditional versus modern (Scribner & Cole, 1988), and concrete versus abstract (Levi- Strauss, 1962).

2.1.2   Writing restructures consciousness

Proponents of the literacy thesis looked to established research to support the claim that "writing restructures consciousness" (Ong, 1982). An early 1930s cross-cultural study by the psychologists Lev Vygotsky and Alexander Luria (as cited by Wertsch, 1985), for example, found a cognitive contrast between literate and non-literate participants. Non-literate subjects grouped objects according to their concrete experience; literate subjects grouped objects using abstract, syllogistic reasoning and demonstrated decontextualised higher mental functions. The results of formal schooling, as distinct from other means of literacy acquisition, were an unexplored aspect in this study which was not addressed until four decades later, when Scribner and Cole (1988) researched the effects of literacy without schooling (see below).

Structuralist anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss, in *The Savage Mind* (1962), added support to the dichotomous assumptions of the literacy thesis when he distinguished between the savage and the modern mind. Levi-Strauss referred to the science of the concrete to describe "bricoleur" scientists, who used physical objects, in contrast to engineers, who employed a science of the abstract. Similarly, Havelock, in *Preface to Plato* (1963), supported the dualism of the literary thesis by describing the shift from concrete to abstract thinking in Greek culture. Havelock demonstrated this shift by comparing the early writings attributed to Homer around 700 BC with those of Plato around 350 BC. He portrayed Homeric epics as characteristic of the oral tradition, because they demonstrated poetic processes such as formulaic structures, standard epithets and mnemonics to assist memory. Plato's writings, by comparison, were described as characteristic of alphabetic script and as demonstrating autonomous thinking, which was analytic, conceptual and reflexive.

In *The Consequences of Literacy* (1968), Goody and Watt developed the traditional view by basing their argument on the division between orality and literacy. Oral qualities were portrayed as empathetic, situational and aggregative, relying on face-to-face communication and memory strategies such as mnemonics. In contrast, written literacy qualities were claimed to involve cognitive processes such as objectivity and scepticism rather than acceptance, logic individuality, and syllogistic reasoning. This line of thinking was extended by Ong (1980), who argued that formal written text "was an absolute necessity for the analytically sequential, linear organization of thought" (p. 199). Ong (1985) also claimed that the technology of writing developed thought processes and was essential to literate thinking. In turn, Goody (2000) provided further support, claiming that writing provided "a technology of the intellect" (p. 132). He asserted that interaction between writing and the human intellect produced advances in knowledge, such as the processes involved in calculating mathematical tables.

Ong (1985) argued for an objectivity which took the form of the fictionalisation of both the author and the audience in a rational exposition where meaning resides in written text. In this sense written literacy allowed for context-free thinking which is reified and complete in itself (Besnier & Street, 1994; Street, 1993). Similarly, Olson (1981) linked the claims of the literacy thesis to formal written genres which remain in Western education today. Olson also cited steps towards making language explicit. One example was the development of rules such as standardised definitions which allowed abstract

thinking. Another was the construction of sentences so that they have only one interpretation. The effect was to preserve meaning across space and time. These characteristics led to texts with "autonomous representations of meaning" (p. 182) and culminated in the formal essay technique in Western education. Olson also argued that the essay form was most visible amongst 17th-century British essayists, who evolved the genre to demonstrate objectivity, precision, logic and abstraction (p. 183). Expository text writing, which met the needs of the scientific community, became the basis of modern science as a specialised genre, which also provided a metalanguage for scientific procedures (Turner, 2011).

2.1.3   Challenges to the literacy thesis

From the 1980s, supporters of the literacy thesis were challenged as part of the ongoing debate about literacy. Both Halverson (1992) and Snyder (1990) criticised Olson's claims that formal texts were autonomous and exhibited context-free thinking. Halverson argued that scientific writing was neither intrinsically complete nor objective. Because reading a text was based on pre-existing, shared assumptions, texts were always theory-laden (Guba & Lincoln, 1998). In response, Olson (1990) denied the importance of context, or that the reader was involved in meaning construction, a reader-response view. Olson maintained that meaning resided in the text, and that context-free thinking was a step forward in the scientific, linguistic tradition. Similarly, Goody (2000) defended and clarified his arguments, claiming that opponents such as Street (1984) had misinterpreted Olson's use of terms such as "restricted literacy", "logic", and "the notion of cause" (Goody, 2000, p. 8). Street (2006) for his part argued against the polarisation of terms such as "restricted" and maintained that too much emphasis had been given to the differences between written and oral modes of communication.

The literature suggests that explanations to justify exceptions have weakened the plausibility of the literacy thesis (Halverson, 1992). Goody (2000), for example, presented the notion of "restricted literacy" to account for occasions where oral and written literacy coexist. Ong (1985) also followed this reasoning, claiming that writing grew out of orality by stages. He argued that the formulaic prose style was still present as residual orality in Tudor England, some 2,000 years after Plato. In response, Gee (1986) used a residual argument to question the oral-literate dichotomy, a position also taken by Street (2006). Both men challenged the claim of distinct differences between

literacy and orality, moving away from the idea of a divide to that of a continuum, asserting that insufficient credit was given to the mixing of oral and literate modes. Gibson (2005) followed this reasoning, and suggested an interplay rather than a sharp division between oral and literate traditions. This perspective was demonstrated through analysis of two key Platonic texts, on the grounds that Plato's dialogues contain traditional oral forms of communication as well as literate prose. Arguments for complementarity between orality and literacy also drew on religious practices, since written messages were transmitted orally to religious congregations (Graff, 1982; Olson, 1981).

Increasingly critics considered that the transformative claims of enhanced cognitive ability, economic development and democratic practice predicated solely on the literacy thesis were not sustainable (Street, 1984, 2006). Graff (2010) asserted that the claims constituted a "literacy myth" because pervasive assumptions were not proven (Graff, 2010; Graff & Duffy, 2008). Literacy, it was argued, was not a precondition of economic progress, but a means to promote certain values, and to maintain social order and compliance in the interests of economic development. The portrayal of literacy as neutral and universal disguised underpinning cultural and ideological assumptions. The assertion was that Western notions of literacy had been imposed so that power and identity aspects impacted at both institutional level (Graff, 2010; Street, 2006) and at individual level (Collins & Blot, 2003). Within contemporary education, a persistent assertion which appears to support these claims is that students are positioned as successful or in need of remediation, depending on the literacy practices they bring to the institution (Canagarajah, 2002; Lea & Street, 2000; Preece, 2003). These issues of institutional power and student positioning will be explored in greater detail in chapter three. By the 1980s, literacy approaches based on the literacy thesis were undergoing a "social turn" (Gee, 1999) towards poststructuralist reconceptualisations (Mason & Clarke, 2010; Menard-Warwick, 2005; Norton & Toohey, 2011) characterised by a move away from the transformative claims of the Great Divide and a universal, cognitive view of literacy.

The social turn has challenged traditional teaching methods in favour of a constructivist view of learning, and has resulted in changes to approaches in education. Universal concepts such as stable information systems have been replaced by a view of knowledge and identity as partial, provisional and changing over time. Justification for this stems in

part from Derrida's (1967) concept of deconstruction, which abolishes the assumption that words have a fixed and stable meaning. As a result, the ability of language to represent reality has been questioned, allowing for interrogation of literacy norms and practices in education (Freebody, 2008). A further change is that discourses of particular communities have developed their own interpretation and version of social reality (Mason & Clarke, 2010). In addition, engagement with marginalised or minority groups is possible, rather than hiding difference beneath the generalising tendency of universal approaches (Kincheloe & Mclaren, 2002).

Critical theorists have also been influential, drawing on Foucault (1979) to explain the way that power circulates through institutions. Forces that prevent students from exercising autonomy and agency, such as unequal interactions between student and lecturer, are apparent in practices such as assessment, in the categorical nature of feedback on student writing (English, 2011), or through the student representation of self, apparent in linguistic choices when writing (Hyland, 2002a). From a critical literacy perspective, practices around writing and study are legitimised through their depiction as natural and normal, but are often reinforced by tacit rules which produce consent, shape beliefs, and construct identity (Kincheloe & Mclaren, 2002). Broader values, such as independent learning and taking responsibility for learning, are often principles which underlie instructions and writing requirements as implicit assumptions. Tacit models do not take account of identity and power relations embedded in student writing practices (Haggis, 2006; Lea & Street, 1998).

It is clear that challenges to the literacy thesis have raised awareness of the issues that students face when writing for the academy. A better understanding of these issues can challenge the assumption of many academics that those who cannot write in an acceptable academic fashion do not belong in our universities (P. Strauss, 2013). Unfortunately, it is not clear whether there is widespread understanding in higher education circles of how students can feel disempowered by traditional literacy practices. This area will be canvassed in this study using a social view of literacy that moves away from the traditional, skills-based model of academic writing and considers the complexity of literacy practices (Lea, 2006). As one of the movements taking part in this shift, NLS has argued against the autonomous beliefs of the literacy thesis. Instead of an emphasis on individual cognitive skills, NLS has focused on interaction and on literacy as social practice (Lea, 2006).

2.2   New literacy studies (NLS)

NLS describes the body of work originating in the United Kingdom which challenged the assumptions of the literacy thesis. Influenced by anthropological and sociocultural approaches, the conception of literacy as a universal skill was reframed and literacy became viewed as multiple social practices which vary from one context to another (Gee, 1989b; Street, 2006). The orality versus literacy binary has also been challenged. Literacy practices are represented as interdependent, either as a continuum (Hillerich, 1976; Tannen, 1988) or intertwined, according to context (Archer, 2006; Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Street, 1993, 2003a). The affective dimension of literacy is also acknowledged. Literacy is not neutral but involves "values, attitudes, feelings and social relationships" (Barton & Hamilton, 2000, p. 7).

Street (1984) distinguishes between traditional and situated literacy, referring to "autonomous" and "ideological" models. The autonomous model describes the view of literacy as neutral, universal and context-free with transformative consequences. The ideological model aligns with NLS and interprets literacy as socially situated, multiple and varying between contexts (Street, 2006). NLS also takes a critical perspective and makes the central role of power and authority in literacy practices explicit. Since literacy is always embedded in a particular worldview, literacy acts as a vehicle to reproduce or to challenge power structures (Street, 1993). Whoever controls the content of, and access to, literacy shapes the identities of individuals in that context (Collins, 1995).

Influential situated studies which support the claims of NLS include the work of Scribner and Cole (1988), Heath (1998), Scollon and Scollon (1981) and Finnegan (1969). Their findings systematically counteracted the assumptions of the literacy thesis. The authors demonstrated the misleading nature of Great Divide claims about the neutrality of literacy and of cognitive consequences attributed solely to literacy. The research also explored the influence of formal learning and context in determining literacy practice.

Scribner and Cole's (1988) five-year ethnographic study distinguished the effects of literacy from formal schooling. Cognitive abilities were analysed in relation to three different literacies existing in the Vai community in Liberia: Vai indigenous, unschooled literacy; Koranic literacy taught in Muslim schools; and English literacy

taught in formal schools (Besnier & Street, 1994). The findings challenged previous work by Vygotsky and Luria (Wertsch, 1985) and questioned claims about the cognitive consequences of literacy. Scribner and Cole's findings did not demonstrate significant differences in cognitive abilities at either individual or community level between schooled and unschooled subjects. However, they did find that task performance was improved through specific skills practice, such as memory skills in Koranic literacy or letter writing using Vai script. Scribner and Cole (1978) concluded that the literacy effects showed little generalisability.

Further support for literacy as situated practice came from Heath's (1980) ten-year ethnographic study amongst three self-contained communities in the US South. Heath highlighted the varied literacy practices between communities, and the potential for disjunction when home literacy experiences did not provide a foundation to support school-based literacy. For example, in the black working-class community of Trackton, North Carolina, literacy practices involved social, participatory activities. In church, formal prayers recited to the congregation became informal vernacular speech characterised by "spontaneous adjustments", where meaning belonged to the community (S. Heath, 1980). A discontinuity between home and school routines was also demonstrated through questioning patterns. At school, students applied the rules of their community and remained silent (Collins & Blot, 2003). Further differences between home and school expectations were also apparent in the Roadville community of working-class white students. Reading in Roadville was used for moral instruction and related to practical purposes. Findings demonstrated that these children did not practise abstract conceptualisation when reading because their home literacy practices related to needs for real-life purposes. In contrast, children in middle-class white communities tended to have their reading activities scaffolded and modelled, exhibiting practices which aligned with formal schooling.

Heath's (1980) study reinforces the NLS view that the nature of literacy varies according to context (Havelock, 1980). Literacy involves conforming to "ways of using language, of thinking and of acting that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group or social network" (Gee, 1989b, p. 1). The potential for disjunction between cultural expectations and formal education, which supports the argument for socially situated literacy practice, was reinforced by Scollon and Scollon (1981). Their study found that, at home, the cultural norms of the Athabascans, a North

American indigenous people, discouraged overt knowledge displays which are required when engaging with Western academic writing. Consequently, Western-style formal education literacy practices conflicted with the Athabascan students' primary discourse (Gee, 1986). These students, along with others from non-mainstream communities, needed to develop a new set of secondary discourse skills to be able to participate in formal Western study (Gee, 1989a). Other studies have advocated the fostering of inclusive practices (Lillis & Turner, 2001) and draw attention to the interrelationship between language acquisition, identity and education (Brumfit, 2003).

NLS takes situatedness as its point of departure (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Literacy is tied to sociocultural practices which shape the way that people act and interact in their world (Gee, 2010). Central to this world is discourse, which Gee (1996) defines as "a socially accepted association among ways of using language, other symbolic expressions, and artefacts, of thinking, feeling, believing, valuing, and acting that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group" (p. 131).

As discourse communities, academic disciplines have broad domains of shared practice, norms, and ways with language. Members can take on recognised roles and identities (Gee et al., 1996). However, while tradition provides stability to discourse practices, communities also have the potential for innovation, often exhibiting instability and fluidity at the margins (Gee, 2010; Luke, 2012). Literacies, therefore, must be viewed in the context in which they operate. Part of the academic context is the importance placed on students, especially postgraduate students, to demonstrate that they are critically literate.

2.3   Critical literacy

This section explores critical literacy and the influences of critical literacy approaches on teaching and learning. Critical literacy is grounded in social justice claims which aim to bring about social transformation (Cervetti, Pardales, & Damico, 2001). It involves analysis of the relation between power, language and social environments, and the way that literacy practices construct power relations and privilege particular discourses and texts in education (Benesch, 2001; Ellsworth, 1989; Pahl, 2008).

Critical literacy must be distinguished from critical thinking to avoid conflation of the two approaches, since the pedagogies represent separate traditions (Burbules & Berk, 1999).

Critical thinking, which is discussed in more detail in section 2.4, involves the intellectually disciplined process of analysis, synthesis, evaluation of information (Paul & Elder, 2008). It focuses on rational argument, supporting evidence, openness to scrutiny and the challenge of different viewpoints (Burbules & Berk, 1999).

By comparison, critical literacy begins from a different base and analyses the impact of value systems, power structures and their wider implications for groups who are disenfranchised socially, politically or economically (Burbules & Berk, 1999), and who seek change through collective action (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1991). Because ideology is inscribed in language, those in control of economic, cultural and educational systems produce unequal relations of power (ibid).

Inspired by Paulo Freire's (1970) foundational work in Brazil, critical literacy links theory and practice in education to provide an alternative to the traditional banking model of learning. Traditional education takes a banking approach where students are treated as passive, empty vessels to be filled with knowledge (Benesch, 2001).Within the classroom, critical literacy approaches are based on dialogical relations between teacher and students, on reflective practice, and on social transformation (Schugurensky, 2011). Theorists such as Shor (1999), Giroux (1988), Ellsworth (1989), Freebody (2008) and Luke (2012) have sought to transform education and to move the social sciences towards a more egalitarian and democratic view of education (Kincheloe & Mclaren, 2002). Critical literacy takes on "a commitment to reshape literacy education in the interests of marginalised groups of learners who, on the basis of gender, cultural and socioeconomic background have been excluded from access to discourses and texts of dominant economies and cultures" (Luke, 1997 p. 143).

Critical literacy was inspired by Marxism and the Frankfurt school and views academic disciplines as manifestations of capitalist ideology (Freire, 1970). Such approaches aim to reveal the underlying, political aims of texts which can manipulate the reader (Chege, 2009). It is argued that literacy practices in higher education represent the dominant culture (Giroux, 1988) characterised by unequal power relations inherent in literacy practices, the values encoded in disciplinary discourses (Gee, 1989a), and in practices

such as essayist literacy (Farr, 1993). Assumptions based on the homogeneity of the student population and the idealised norm of the white, affluent male are challenged (Freebody, 2008). A critical literacy approach is relevant because of widening participation in higher education globally, along with increasing student mobility (Altbach, Reisberg, & Rumbley, 2009). One consequence of this is a more diverse student population which includes minority groups, the historically marginalised (Archer, 2007; Kalantzis & Cope, 2012), feminists (Ellsworth, 1989), second-language students (Canagarajah, 2002; Norton & Toohey, 2004) and web-based students (Goodfellow, 2004b).

Advocates of critical literacy argue that traditional education inducts successive generations into socioeconomic and cultural practices which are shaped by official institutions and class interests (Freire, 1970; Luke & Freebody, 1999). When information is transmitted without encouraging critical reflection or ownership by students, the implicit values and power relations which exist between educator and student are reinforced (Gee et al., 1996; Hyland, 2009a). Consequently, students are domesticated into compliance and conformity (Dale & Hyslop-Margison, 2010b). Although knowledge is presented as value-free and neutral (Lillis & Turner, 2001), people in authority decide the knowledge which is to be learnt, thereby maintaining ideological control (Freire, 1970). In addition, literacy education is often shaped to provide the skills which sustain the interests of the ruling class in society (Freebody, 2008). Personal lives and culture are disregarded (Luke, 2012) and contemporary learning is driven by economic concerns which permeate the contemporary university system (Dale & Hyslop-Margison, 2010a).

Critical literacy theorists seek to educate people for empowerment. They view educational institutions as venues of hope rather than of subjugation (Giroux, 1988). Luke and Freebody (1999) describe a commitment to engaging with the possibilities that literacy offers for "social change, cultural diversity, economic equity and political enfranchisement" (p. 1). Instead of following managerial, technicist approaches to education, it is also argued that educators should have the opportunity to be transformative practitioners who are willing to raise questions openly about what and how they teach, and about the larger goals of educating students as active, critical participants (Giroux, 2002).

The relation between theory and practical application is a fundamental concern in education (Benesch, 2009). Critical approaches to literacy, derived from Freirean principles, have been subject to scrutiny for reasons which include their difficulty of implementation, use of universal categories, and authoritarianism when applied in the classroom (Schugurensky, 2011). Ellsworth (1989), for example, argues that the use of oppositional binaries such as student-teacher or oppressor-oppressed are too generic and cannot account for all situations. Individuals may simultaneously represent oppressor and oppressed, depending on the particular social situation. Similarly, banking education, placed in opposition to problem solving, attracts censure because of the implication that educationalists should take sides, advocating one approach or the other. Schugurensky (2011) argues that approaches regarded as banking strategies, such as effective lectures, are underestimated. Classroom practitioners also disagree about what constitutes a critically literate teacher or student (Freebody, 2008). A related criticism is that the value of teacher competence is overlooked, an aspect acknowledged by Freire (1970), who saw teachers as having a role where they worked with pupils, in contrast to the banking model. It is also argued that critical literacy has the potential to be just another way to steer students towards foregone conclusions (Burbules & Berk, 1999). Critical literacy, it is claimed, can be authoritative and closed rather than dialogical. This may occur where educators maintain control of the curriculum (Ellsworth, 1989) and where critical literacy is too determinate, for example ignoring gender and race in favour of class (Freebody, 2008). Ellsworth argues that critical pedagogy assumptions, goals, power dynamics, and issues of who produces valid knowledge need to be further theorised; otherwise critical pedagogues will merely perpetuate relations of domination.

2.3.1 Critical literacy and perspectives on student identity

Critical literacy draws attention to the way that literacy practices influence students' sense of self (Luke, 2004; Norton & Toohey, 2011; Pavlenko & Norton, 2007). Burgess and Ivanic (2010) describe writing as "an act of identity" (p. 228); students are given a particular identity though the linguistic choices they make in the act of writing (Ivanic, 1997b). Higher education discourses require the use of particular language conventions which students have to negotiate and which often conflict with students' existing identities. Consequently, academic literacy demands are also identity demands. Traditionally, identity was considered to be fixed (Kouhpaeenejad & Gholaminejad, 2014) and interpreted through analysis of personalities and learning styles, or through

binaries such as "motivated" or "unmotivated" (Norton & Toohey, 2011). Ramanathan and Pennycook (2008) critique the tendency to assign static identities to students on the basis of gender, race or ethnicity, a practice which may silence students who do not fit such stereotypical assumptions. Burgess and Ivanic (2010) argue that in a globalised, poststructuralist world, identity is multiple and often influenced by historical and migration experiences. Canagarajah (2004) concurs, describing identity as "multiple, conflicted, negotiated and evolving" (p. 117). Therefore identity is always in process (Lave & Wenger, 1991), and is fluid.

Learning and social identity are perceived to be intertwined and established through language as a function of community participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Weedon (1987) uses the concept of subjectivity to describe the sense of self in relation to the world. Since identity in higher education is often negotiated through unequal teacher-student relationships, identity is also perceived as contradictory and a site of struggle (Norton & Toohey, 2011). However, post structural conceptions of identity as multiple and dynamic also suggest that individuals can, through language and pedagogical practices, exercise agency and claim more favourable identities than those already assigned (Menard-Warwick, 2005; Norton & Toohey, 2011).

Pavlenko and Norton (2007) draw on two concepts: "imagined communities" (B. Anderson, 1991, p. 6) and "possible selves" (Markus & Nurius, 1986, p. 954) to describe learners who can go beyond their immediate face-to-face situation to envisage future identities in an imagined community (Norton & Toohey, 2011; Pavlenko & Norton, 2007). An imagined community is a socially constructed community imagined by people who are part of, or wish to become part of, that community; possible selves refers to an individual's conceptualisation of the person they would like to become (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Students may envisage possible selves as members of imagined communities, based around their language learning. A critical perspective involves the tension between practices in higher education and the promise of imagined communities and possible selves.

Pavlenko and Norton (2007) note that English-language students have invested in English-language learning to gain the required cultural capital, knowledge and skills (Bourdieu, 1991) for entry into the global marketplace. They argue that the dominant discourse situates English-language learners within a negative framing of Standard

English, monolingualism and monoculturalism, rather than the more positive discourse of multilingualism (Pavlenko & Norton, 2007). In contrast, recognition of the imagined communities of possible selves, and provision for spaces to explore possible identities, allow students to dare to hope for the future. However, offsetting these notions are the dilemmas encountered when writing in the academy (Thesen, 2013). It is important that these tensions between practices in higher education and students' sense of identity are kept in mind during an exploration of teaching and learning.

2.3.2   Critical literacy practices in higher education

Critical literacy in higher education involves "the ongoing negotiation of meaning in continuously contested sites of meaning construction" (De Souza, 2007, p. 4). Pennycook (1997) supports a critical approach to English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and argues against the practice of using normative approaches in the EAP context. Pennycook claims that this discourse of neutrality, described as "vulgar pragmatism" (p. 253), is followed because English-language teaching is constructed as a global commodity and is often taught in a way which is disconnected from cultural contexts. Along with Benesch (1993), Pennycook argues that the narrow focus on academic-linguistic skills should be replaced by a discourse of social practice, and that all forms of knowledge should be open to critical analysis. For those who take a critical perspective, truth claims are interrogated, the uncertainty of definitive text interpretations acknowledged (Lawlor, 2014), and the embodied nature of power emphasised (Freire, 1970). Kress (2003) also argues for the increased uptake of digital communication systems with their transformative potential. The issues of over-riding students' marginalised, local literacies (Freebody, 2008) and the conflicting norms involved in simultaneous membership of different professional and ethnic communities (Hyland, 2006) are further dimensions in this complex environment. However, while this study discusses students' marginalised literacy practices, their membership of different professional and ethnic communities is beyond its scope.

2.3.3   Applying critical literacy

Critical literacy draws attention to challenges involved in teaching a standardised programme to diverse student populations (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000) because, as Freebody (2008) explains, critical literacy has developed as a loose affiliation of research methods, practices and dispositions. A central concern is to consider how

education practices in local contexts might be altered to support student learning amidst widening participation and social change (Norton & Toohey, 2004, 2011). Where critical approaches are embedded in instruction, students are encouraged to look below the surface meanings of texts, to independently examine author bias, and to critically interrogate claims of the particular practices of their discourse community (Turner, 2011).

Power relations can be made explicit through deconstruction of texts and articulation of dominant practices. Questions asked about texts include: Whose interests are served by the way language is used? Who benefits? And who is disadvantaged? (Janks, 2008). The focus is on the ways words and grammatical conventions establish particular values and viewpoints (Luke, 2000). Genre acquisition is one area where fostering critical awareness of existing power structures through praxis (reflection and action) provides an opportunity to empower students. Whereas uncritical adoption reinforces the underlying ideology, a critical understanding of genres encourages reflection and potential for adaptation to a particular purpose and situation (Devitt, 2009). Students are encouraged to step beyond assumptions that literacy practices are neutral and common sense, and to appreciate the way that academic language acts to gate-keep and determine who has access to knowledge, skills, tools and resources (Zepke & Leach, 2002).

 A first step in critical literacy practice often involves raising consciousness through problem solving, as opposed to passive, banking approaches to literacy. The creation of intercultural spaces amongst second-language students and their lecturers promotes interaction and dialogue where students can wrestle with different language and discourse demands. These spaces have different names, such as "nurseries for change" (Tusting, 2005), "contact zones" (M. L. Pratt, 1999), or "safe houses" (Canagarajah, 2004). Students develop multivocal literacies, grapple with multiple meanings, and move across discourse boundaries (Canagarajah, 2004) in a form of border pedagogy (Giroux, 1988). Zamel and Spack (1998) reinforce the concept of spaces and dialogue, arguing that discussion of different discourses results in growth. In turn, Lillis (2003) advocates a design space to promote dialogue as an alternative to the dominant, monologic-dialectic (using logic to get the truth) approach of official discourses. Following Bakhtin (1981), Lillis (2003) explains that dialogue involves challenge as well as acknowledging multiple truths and identities where difference "is always in play" (p. 198). Placing student interests at the centre utilises dialogue and talkback, so

participants can articulate perspectives which may be integrated into their writing. This approach involves a move from critique to design, which is forward-looking and which focuses on future possibilities in academic writing. Such critical approaches may, potentially, become agents of change, since voicing tensions about literacy requirements promotes exploration and development of personal voice (Benesch, 2009), a characteristic discussed in Chapter 3. However, it is difficult to assess how often critical approaches are actually promoted in practice.

Critical literacy approaches acknowledge the influence of unequal power relations and the possibility of student resistance to literacy requirements. Turner (2011), for example, describes an instance of resistance to the Western convention of Socratic questioning by Japanese students during tutorial sessions. Intercultural encounters generate transformative potential and encourage the exercise of agency (Giroux, 2004; Weedon, 1987). In spite of embedded power relations between lecturer and student, resistance can result in reversal of roles. This can also occur in the online environment when students resist socialisation into online asynchronous communications (Goodfellow, 2004b), which is one of the issues that will be explored in this thesis.

Students may take an assertive stance, critique reading and writing expectations, recognise the implications, and exercise choice by applying new strategies (Canagarajah, 2004). Such approaches have the capacity to reshape the discourses of their academic community and demonstrate that disciplinary practices are not static (Bruce, 2008; Threadgold, 1997). Kramer-Dahl (2001) demonstrated a critical approach by setting up a class to interrogate alternative texts. Students were positioned as researchers, their resistance to academic writing conventions respected, and the class texts problematised. In the related area of contrastive rhetoric, critical approaches also offer a forum for second-language researchers to explore Standard English concerns. World English speakers, who are now in the majority, may take a critical literacy perspective where they clash with Anglophone attitudes which expect and require Standard English conventions to be observed (Canagarajah, 2006). Phan Le Ha (2005), for example, has challenged Anglophone claims to ownership of English, and the positioning of English as an International Language (EIL) as an "inferior other" based on native-speaker norms.

2.3.4   Critical literacy in relation to digital literacy

Contemporary discourse practices operate amidst expanding university systems which are under pressure to change from being print-based and monocultural to utilising multicultural, multilingual, and multimodal approaches (Cazden et al., 1996). One critical standpoint involves exploring how far curricular practices embrace multimedia texts to enable diverse students to have a greater stake in literacy practice (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009). Mills (2009) argues that the sharp distinctions between traditional and digital texts are becoming blurred, and that multimodal approaches provide wider access for diverse cultural traditions. Relevance is questioned where attitudes continue to be shaped predominantly by using written forms of knowledge which reflect European enlightenment values (Turner, 2011) and where narrow print-based practices ignore the nature of current practices outside education (K. Mills, 2009). Rowsell (2013), for example, argues against the "strident belief that competence with words has the most value in preparing students for the future" (p. 146), and suggests development of revised pedagogical frameworks. New genres and digital communication forms also suggest the need for ongoing reappraisal and incorporation of fresh pedagogical approaches (Cope & Kalantzis; K. Mills, 2009). Gee, Kalantzis and Cope (2012) argue that multiple modes create opportunities for student expression in the form of blog sites, wikis, podcasts, videos. Similarly, Gee's (2001) analysis regards video games as problem-solving spaces which support active participation. The claim is that bringing texts which students use into teaching spaces creates links with academic forms of meaning making (Kalantzis & Cope, 2012). The New London Group (Cazden et al., 1996) has already fostered development of new literacies in educational settings by applying a critical framing to multiliteracies pedagogy (K. Mills, 2006). A multimodal conception broadens the concept of literacy and identifies the potential advantages of linguistic and cultural diversity in a global economy.

The challenge for education is therefore to move beyond traditional approaches to engage with systems which can embrace ongoing change, diversity and multiliteracies. There is a call for recognition of literacies as multiple, emergent and situated in particular contexts (Barton & Hamilton, 2000). Kress (2003) contends that new media practices are producing a profound shift in communication. Postgraduate students operate in this intertextual and connected world and engage with a range of written, visual and multimodal texts (Lea & Jones, 2011). Literacy within the university needs to

be redefined in terms of supporting students in a digital age (Archer, 2012b; Lea & Jones, 2011). However, Goodfellow (2011) cautions that transformative approaches in school learning may not align with higher education academic literacy values. One reason is that orientations to knowledge, which shape university practices, rest on critical analysis and traditionally use written argument rather than digital practices (p. 138). Consequently, the relation between digital literacies and critique remains undetermined.

A critical literacy perspective, which encourages greater student agency, enriches understanding of the way texts can position both reader and writer and is another dimension of discourse acquisition. Critical literacy, along with academic literacies, is concerned with ethnocentric assumptions; emphasising the need for inclusive approaches reinforces a socially situated view of learning. Critical literacy draws attention to issues related to minority groups, identity issues and student resistance. Students are not necessarily passive recipients of transmission models of learning and they appreciate opportunities for genuine interaction and dialogue. Goodfellow's (2011) concerns need to be addressed, however. The question remains as to whether new media practices in the online environment are empowering students or whether traditional pedagogies are merely being presented in a different format.

2.4   Critical thinking

Critical thinking, sometimes referred to as higher-order thinking, is grounded in rational thought and an ability to make inferences and evaluative judgements (Cervetti et al., 2001). As discussed in section 2.3, critical thinking is distinguished from critical literacy by its focus on the intellectually disciplined process of rational argument, analysis, synthesis and evaluation of information and evidence (Paul & Elder, 2008). The critical thinking movement has emphasised that specific reasoning skills should permeate the curriculum (Burbules & Berk, 1999). However, there is uncertainty about how critical thinking is understood and practised in teaching in the disciplines (T. Moore, 2013).

2.4.1   The nature of critical thinking

Debate centres on whether critical thinking is discipline-based or should be regarded as a universal skill (T. Moore, 2004). McPeck (1990), for example, argues that more

general critical-thinking attributes, such as not contradicting oneself, tend to be obvious and lower-level skills. Ennis (2013), however, considers that critical-thinking skills exist as independent cognitive abilities. They can be taught separately from subject content, cited as generic graduate qualities, or taught in standalone contexts.

The notion that critical-thinking skills are generic and transferable underlies many critical-thinking texts (Cottrell, 2005). Wallace and Wray (2011), for example, provide a set of seven tools to enable transfer of critical-thinking perspectives, theories, assumptions and ideologies. The tools are intended to alert students to the importance of key concepts and the way they are used in academic writing. The argument component of critical thinking is also explained so that students can more readily recognise both certainty and generalisation when reading authorial claims, and determine how well such assertions match with evidence. These skills still need to be applied to a context of use, but arguably provide a useful starting point for the novice academic.

Specifists such as McPeck (1990) and Glaser (1984) assert that truly useful sets of critical-thinking skills pertain to particular subject areas and do not transfer across different contexts. Researchers such as Elander, Harrington, Norton, Robinson and Reddy (2006), who identify critical thinking as one of four core complex skills for assessment, also support the development of critical-thinking elements within a discipline area. They make particular reference to writing, where thinking skills become more closely connected to disciplinary knowledge. Similarly, Burbules (1999) argues that studying critical thinking in isolation creates limits because the object of study is removed from its usual network of relations.

Halpern (1999) provides another perspective, arguing that thinking skills can be explicitly taught. Teaching successful transfer involves using examples from across different disciplines and consciously employing strategies. Halpern describes a four-part model which begins with skills instruction followed by having a predisposition to evaluate the outcomes of one's thinking processes. The third strategy is to recognise structural aspects of an argument, such as problem solving, or reasoning, which then become cues to alert students to the particular skills needed. Finally, students use metacognitive monitoring, and consciously examine their own thinking progress.

Explicit teaching strategies for critical thinking are practices which are generally supported for a range of reasons (Cottrell, 2005; Elder & Paul, 2008; Turner, 2011).

Domestic students, for example, may find critical thinking differs from every day, informal thinking (Cervetti et al.). Postgraduate students whose enrolment is approved through alternative entry may have limited prior experience of critical-thinking requirements, while international students may have experienced different knowledge traditions. Students who have prior experience of Asian/Confucian epistemologies may need to adjust to Anglophone versions of critical thinking (Turner, 2011). Analysis of student experiences and exploration of critical thinking in connection with literacy activities are part of this research project.

Moore's (2013) study suggests that critical thinking remains difficult to define, even after extensive debate. He sought a definition of critical thinking from 17 practising academics across three discipline areas. All participants described critical theory as central to teaching and identified a wide range of critical-thinking characteristics. Moore classified these qualities into seven broad strands. Drawing from Wittgenstein's argument that the meaning of words relates to their use and the way that words are applied in practice (Biletzki & Matar, 2014), Moore concludes that variations in the definition of critical thinking are not a problem. He argues that clarification of critical thinking will not come from lists of generic meanings, but from usage, and from opportunities to identify with requirements through interaction and activities around assignments.

Different features of critical thinking include the skills of assessing reason, having a sceptical, reasonable and reflective approach, and being able to ask probing questions. Scriven and Richard (1987) have integrated multiple aspects and differing perspectives to define critical thinking as:

> The intellectually disciplined process of actively and skilfully conceptualizing, applying, analysing, synthesizing, and/or evaluating information that is generated by observation, experience, reflection, reasoning or communication, in order to guide belief and action. In its exemplary form, it is based on universal intellectual values that transcend subject matter divisions: clarity, accuracy, precision, consistency, relevance, sound evidence, good reasons, depth, breadth, and fairness. (1987, p. 11)

Critical-thinking skills at university are intimately connected to critical reading and writing (Wallace & Wray, 2011). For the purposes of this study it is useful to consider critical reading and writing as separate components of critical thinking. Students read and write to demonstrate critical understanding (Spack, 1997). They are called on to

identify and evaluate opposing arguments, read between the lines, recognise persuasive strategies, and present a convincing point of view (Cottrell, 2005). From a socially situated perspective, students actively engage with the reading and writing practices and assumptions which constitute knowledge in a disciplinary community (Hyland, 2011; Wingate, Andon, & Cogo, 2011), as well as being influenced by their cultural, personal and social history (Rosenblatt, 2004).

2.5   Critical reading and critical writing

2.5.1   Critical reading

Critical reading involves evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of an argument, appraisal of information sources, the nature of the evidence, and consideration of any limitations (Massey University, 2013b). Depending on the discipline, critical reading encompasses different genres, and includes multimodal texts with specialist language (Archer, 2010), and different digital textual practices which students bring to their study (Lea & Jones, 2011). There are expectations that postgraduate students will demonstrate an ability to evaluate and interpret texts against assumed values (Wallace & Wray, 2011). Grix (2002) adds a further consideration when he argues that students should also learn the terminology of the discipline in preparation for research study.

It cannot be assumed, however, that all transitioning postgraduate students arrive with a repertoire of critical reading strategies to employ when analysing academic texts. Yet the literature which focuses exclusively on critical reading at post graduate level appears to be sparse. McCulloch (2013) argues that critical reading is situated at the lower end of the reading- writing continuum, and identifies a tendency for the literature to focus on reading issues in terms of writing. McCulloch contends that a greater focus on development of critical reading skills and use of higher order strategies during the reading stage could help to avoid potential pitfalls in student writing, citing examples such as a lack of critical evaluation or a failure to take a sufficiently authoritative stance. Similarly, Wingate (2012) considers that analysis of discipline-specific texts is a good starting point for instruction. The issues which transitioning students face in the online environment with regard to acquiring critical reading skills are also a focus of this study.

2.5.2   Critical writing

The literature characterises reading and writing as an interrelated process (Ackerman, 1991). Students engage in "hybrid acts of literacy" (Bracewell, Frederiksen, & Frederiksen, 1982). Critical writing involves demonstration of the ability to evaluate the arguments and evidence of other writers. As a writer there is the further requirement to present one's own evidence and arguments along with recognition of the limitations of one's text. Wallace and Wray (2011) contend that the skill in critical writing lies in convincing one's readers to accept one's arguments "through the effective communication of adequate reasons and evidence for these claims" (p. 7).

Wingate and Tribble (2012) observe that all students need support with academic writing. Duff (2007) also argues that, regardless of their linguistic ability, all newcomers undergo a process of socialisation into academic culture. A step up to postgraduate expectations and the use of a wider range of genres is part of the postgraduate transition. It follows that participant perceptions of the process of learning the skill of critical writing is another focus of this study.   Since writing remains a key to disciplinary knowledge production (Aitchison & Lee, 2006) there is a continuing focus on the nature of student writing, institutional practices, new genres (Lea, 2012) and different approaches to student writing development (Lea & Street, 1998). Genres demonstrate academic requirements and abilities. The acquisition of genres and the ability to negotiate these different text types as part of academic literacy development are discussed in the next section.

2.6   Genres as frameworks for developing academic literacy

Genres are "abstract, socially recognised ways of using language" (Hyland, 2007a, p. 114). Genre studies provide structures to frame the language which people use as members of a community (Hyland, 2008; Paltridge, 2000). Learning about genres prepares students for the communicative demands they will encounter through a focus on textual features and their functions (Bhatia, 2002; Tribble & Wingate, 2013). Genre studies, along with academic literacies, share a situated view of literacy, since both are informed by NLS (K. Anderson, 2013).

Genre approaches focus strongly on explicit teaching of text types to provide students with access to the valued practices of their discourse community (Burgess & Ivanic,

2010; Gee et al., 1996; Hyland, 2002b), a process which is often referred to as apprenticeship (Lave & Wenger, 1991). By comparison, academic literacies approaches focus on theory and research. They regard genres as central to their three-stage model but focus on the different orientations to genres depending whether they are viewed at the skills, socialisation or academic literacies level (Russell, Lea, Parker, Street, & Donahue, 2009). Academic literacies researchers have also analysed genre variation in terms of individual lecturers, assignments (Lea & Street, 2006) and broader social interactions, including aspects such as the changing identity of participants as they engage with new forms of literacy (Lillis & Scott, 2007). In the web-based environment genre analysis has included the role of genres in developing disciplinary knowledge (Goodfellow, 2004b; Goodfellow & Lea, 2005). By using a non-judgemental, ethnographic approach, academic literacies researchers identify ways to support student writing (Russell et al., 2009).

Genres provide a framework to organise knowledge and package beliefs, values and ideologies (Johns, 2008). They include shared practices such as vocabulary, grammar, and use of devices such as hedges, boosters, self-mention and citation and references (Hyland, 2008). This explicit pedagogical approach is sometimes criticised for being too text-oriented. Bhatia (2002), however, argues that there is a need to distinguish between genres as stable models and genres as resources with generic potential. In this vein, Johns (2008) describes genres in terms of both acquisition and awareness. Acquisition refers to the ability to produce a text type, whereas genre awareness covers development of flexibility so that genre knowledge can be adapted to changing contexts. From this perspective genres are considered to be dynamic and open to change (Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1995; Paltridge, 2000). It is claimed that they can be used differently in a variety of contexts, and regarded as a creative resource rather than formulaic, static literacy devices (Bawarshi, 2000). Genres may also function as genre sets according to the situation, and may be hybrid or mixed (Hyland, 2002b). In this way, genres both constitute and regulate an event (Bawarshi, 2000).

Compared with the academic literacies model, genre approaches focus on action rather than theory. Paltridge (2000) describes genres as ways for students to show what they have learned. Appropriate use requires mastery of form, appreciation of the anticipated audience, and knowledge of how genres are likely to be used and interpreted in the sociocultural context (Bhatia, 2002). Acquisition takes time. The challenge for novice

students and those returning to education at postgraduate level is often one of developing appropriate academic schemas to cope with variable situations. Students also have to decide how far to exercise individual agency (Flowerdew & Miller, 2008) or even decide whether it is possible in tightly controlled professional programmes (Pare, 2014). Teaching genres in class-based situations varies from explicit, systematic methods to approaches where requirements are implicit and assimilated (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Lillis, 1999). While there are overlaps and complementary approaches, three broad genres traditions are systemic functional linguistics (SFL), English for specific purposes (ESP) and new rhetoric studies (NRS) (Hyon, 1996; Johns et al., 2006).

2.6.1 Approaches to teaching genres

SFL operates on the assumption that genre can be explicitly taught (Bhatia, 1999). The focus is on textual features and patterns of meaning for particular purposes (Kalantzis & Cope, 2012). Developed from the Sydney school and Hallidayan functional linguistics, SFL was originally designed for school and adult immigrant students in the workplace (Johns, 2008). A combination of genre and register allows for flexible language choices depending on the situation. Genres underpin the teaching and learning pedagogy, while register describes the three dimensions of field, tenor and mode. Field refers to the subject; tenor to the nature of interpersonal relationships, and mode describes the rhetorical type of genre (Kalantzis & Cope, 2012; Macken-Horarik, 2005). While the SFL environment considers social context, the focus is primarily textual, with an emphasis on "general principles relating to the use of language" (Halliday, 1973, p. 22).

Johns (2008) considers that SFL is accessible to students because of the way learning is scaffolded. Defined as a "staged, goal-oriented social process" (Martin, 2009, p. 13), SFL uses register and language within a teaching and learning cycle. Typically the cycle involves guided, staged approaches beginning with setting the context and then deconstructing or unpacking examples. Modelling and joint negotiation of text construction follow, before the student independently constructs a text conforming to the genre. Feedback and a process of comparing what has been learnt with other genres and contexts are part of this cycle of learning (Hyland, 2007a; Martin, 2009).

SFL has influenced theory and practice and has developed a shared metalanguage (Hyland, 2007b) in a mid-level, situated application (Gee, 2000). Explicit performance

criteria and teacher guidance align student work with assessment outcomes (Hyland, 2007b). SFL can also be said to reflect Vygotskian sociocultural theory, since the approach utilises the concepts of scaffolding and Vygotsky's zone of proximal development (Martin, 2009). There are also parallels with the second model of academic literacies, academic socialisation, which focuses on acquisition of the ground rules of disciplinary discourses and genres (Lea & Street, 1998, 2006). The problem is that the complexities involved in acquiring the appropriate literacies – including questions of power, identity (Lea & Street, 2006) and assumptions that practices are common sense – are not acknowledged (Lillis, 1999).

Traditionally, ESP has also taken an explicit approach to teaching genres (Paltridge, 2001) to assist second-language speakers. ESP is characterised by needs analysis based on target situation demands (Benesch, 2001) and the particular conventions for spoken and written language required in professional and occupational activities. The focus has been on formal texts rather than the immediate social context (Hyon, 1996). Paltridge (2007) notes that ESP has had a strong influence on teaching writing to graduate students in areas such as introductions and conclusions to research articles, and on oral genres such as graduate seminars and poster discussions for conferences. The emphasis is on grammatical and discourse features of texts and their pedagogical application, rather than the mediating influence of social context.

ESP utilises needs analysis of student requirements in relation to linguistic forms, communicative practices and texts, demonstrating a focus on socialising students into the discipline. These requirements guide course content along with the sequencing of writing (Hyland, 2006), which is often grouped as spoken and written clusters of genres (Benesch, 2001). The emphasis is on global discourse stages, a key example being Swales' (1990) Create a Research Space (CARS) model, which involves three "moves": establishing a territory by summarising previous research; creating a niche by identifying the problem; and occupying the niche by identifying the contribution to research. CARS is an example of genre analysis turned into a heuristic for teaching (Bawarshi & Reif, 2010).

Both Hyland (2007a) and Benesch (2001) refer to challenges and tensions associated with the accommodationist approach of needs analysis where institutional demands are conflated with student needs instead of distinguished. ESP, therefore, has parallels with

academic literacies, since both include a critical orientation which challenges the unquestioning discourse of neutrality and consensus in terms of the dominant literacy. In ESP a change of approach is referred to as "rights analysis" and involves engaging with student perspectives in decision making and keeping open the possibility of change (Benesch, 2001).

A third approach to teaching genres is rhetorical genre studies (RGS). Also known as North American genre theory, RGS moves beyond the textual features of genres to include analysis of the social context which gives shape to genres (Artemeva & Freedman, 2006). The approach is based on Miller's (1984) understanding of genre as social action, described as "a typified response to an often-repeated social situation" (p. 393). Genres are constructed in response to community needs, goals and contexts (Artemeva & Freedman, 2006). Students can participate effectively in academic situations by identifying the assumptions and expectations regarding subject matter, the roles of writers and readers, and the purposes for writing.

Genres explained in a particular social context are considered to appear less obscure and arbitrary (Bawarshi & Reif, 2010). The focus is less on acquisition of a particular genre as development of rhetorical awareness and knowledge of skills and strategies (Hyon, 1996; C. Miller, 1984). Freedman (1987) proposes a four-stage immersive model beginning with a "dimly felt sense of the genre" (p. 101), followed by composing, processing, modifying and receiving feedback, before further modification and finally revision. Rather than explicit teaching, development is guided by assignment, class discussion and feedback. Students gain familiarity through writing in an authentic context such as a discipline-based course (Russell et al., 2009). The aim is to develop the potential for knowledge transfer to other contexts (Devitt, 2009). In North America, learning disciplinary genres as both socialisation and cognitive apprenticeship could assist transfer from writing across the curriculum (WAC) to writing in the disciplines (WID) or to workplace contexts (Bawarshi & Reif, 2010).

2.6.2   The effectiveness of genre acquisition

The three approaches to development of academic literacy through genre acquisition outlined above vary between contexts, disciplines and individual academic staff. A related and ongoing concern is whether genres taught in separate classes transfer readily to the selected disciplinary context. To add to the complexity, Russell et al (2009)

argue, with some justification, that disciplines are not uniform in their requirements. Concerns centre around whether teaching genres leads to the uncritical representation of the status quo, and whether second-language learners have the same level of implicit knowledge as home students (Paltridge & Starfield, 2007). Tribble and Wingate (2013), however, claim that their approach, which entails teaching high-stakes genres within the particular discipline, caters for all students, including home students who otherwise may have to resort to generic study skills courses with their deficit framing. Other concerns relate to process approaches which encourage individual expression, whereas more specific, genre-based approaches focus on audience and discourse-community expectations. There is a need for better understanding of multiliteracies (Paltridge & Starfield, 2007; Russell et al., 2009) and an acknowledgement that it is necessary to expand genre study beyond its use for assessment (Russell et al., 2009). However, student understanding of the use of genres will serve little purpose if they are not able to put this knowledge into practice.

2.7   Transfer of learning

Although previous learning is the building block of future learning, there is little agreement amongst scholars about the nature of learning transfer, the extent to which transfer of learning occurs, and its underlying mechanisms (Lobato, 2006). Even so, learning transfer is expected for intellectual activities such as thinking, reasoning, planning, problem solving and metacognition (Leberman, McDonald, & Doyle, 2006). Scholars such as Ennis (1989), Hyon (2002) and Devitt (2009) argue that instruction for transfer of learning is effective. The process involves linking past learning to current and future experiences, and applying that learning to both new and similar situations: "Old knowledge is always revised, reorganised and even reinterpreted in order to reconcile it with new input" (Cust, 1995, p. 280).

An understanding of the different underpinning approaches provides insight into the transfer of learning process. Debate centres on whether transfer happens from general writing instruction to a relevant discipline area (Hyland, 2002d; Spack, 1997) or from one discipline to another. Ennis (1989) argues that transfer requires practice and specific instruction. He observes that there are overarching principles between disciplines, but disagreement occurs about whether there is broad transfer between academic disciplines, different tasks, or the academic and non-academic world.

2.7.1 Approaches to transfer of learning

One model of learning transfer is Thorndike's (1901) theory of identical elements, where the focus is on acquisition, reinforcement and application of learning (B. Cox, 1997; Haskell, 2001). Transfer depends on having identical elements between the training and the transfer situation. This model, still influential in contemporary education, allows for simple or near transfer of information, reinforced by appropriate systems of reward and feedback (Cree & Macaulay, 2000). However, academic requirements in higher education also demand synthesis, integration of information and learning across disciplines, prompting an interest in "high-road transfer" involving higher-level metacognition processes. Cox (1997) refers to this level of transfer as deliberate "mindful abstractions" (p. 46) between dissimilar situations. Judd (1908) subsequently proposed a general-principles model of high-road transfer. Knowledge is re-represented in more abstract or general forms such as rules, categories or labels to enable learning to be applied to new contexts (Haskell, 2001). Thorndike's and Judd's approaches, which focus on acquisition and transfer, have been criticised on the grounds that learning is decontextualised and relegated to skills, abilities and capacities rather than engagement with an ongoing process involving understanding (Hager & Hodkinson, 2009).

Cognitive psychology models shift away from a behaviourist focus on skills to a focus on learning as a way of thinking. The emphasis is on the way the brain reorganises information as mental models or schema available for use in new contexts (Cree & Macaulay, 2000). Haskell (2001) identifies 11 principles for transfer of learning. They include acquisition of a primary knowledge base in the content area, understanding the process, and being able to interpret information across different contexts. Other principles include understanding the theory underlying the content area, developing an ability to encode learning in transfer terms, allowing time for learning to incubate, and using models and examples of experts. The emphasis on metacognitive awareness provides a guide for practitioners. Such strategies stress deliberate instruction and active student involvement in planning and evaluation. This is to enhance organisation of knowledge for recall and retrieval (Cree & Macaulay, 2000).

Another approach to learning transfer takes an embedded, social view of learning. Participation and interaction within a community or discipline occurs through a process of "legitimate peripheral participation" (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Students begin as

newcomers before gradually becoming full participants. Explicit and implicit norms and the values and practices of the discipline are acquired through active involvement and access to shared knowledge (Gee, 2010). Change within the discipline is passed on to its members so that learning comprises an evolving process of acquiring the cultural capital or know-how to succeed (Henderson & Hirst, 2007). Brown, Collins and Duguid (1989) further develop the concept of situated learning, using the term "cognitive apprenticeship" (p. 32) to describe the focus on cognitive and metacognitive processes. Learning is situated and progressively developed as students acquire the academic tools and norms of the discipline. In this theory lecturers or facilitators have the role of supporting and guiding students by modelling, coaching, and developing students' independence as scaffolded support is gradually removed.

A situated viewpoint argues that academic knowledge cannot be fully understood without contextualisation within institutional, department, course, and facilitator levels (Lea & Street, 1999). Variations between different facilitators, courses or disciplines may also impede learning transfer, so that students struggle to unpack demands across the university. This is important in the context of returning online students who may need to unravel differing academic requirements (Hyland, 2009b). Students often enrol with differing rates of prior experience in academic literacy and vary in the length of time since they last studied. When face-to-face support programmes are available they are more likely to be standalone general sessions or English as a second language (ESL) courses than they are to be discipline-specific. In contrast to the academic literacies assertion that writing cannot be taught outside the discipline (Wingate & Tribble, 2012), it is assumed that the principles covered will transfer into a disciplinary context.

2.7.2   The ongoing search for effective transfer of learning

Research into effective transfer of learning is relevant because of the heterogeneous nature of the student body and their differing prior experiences and level of readiness. James (2008, 2009, 2010) conducted a series of studies with different groups of students which demonstrated the complex nature of learning transfer. James (2008) sought to discover whether learning outcomes from an ESL writing course would transfer to different kinds of writing in other academic courses. He asked students to identify similarities between different kinds of writing. Of the 42 participants, half were given an activity chosen for its similarity to the writing task on the ESL course and half were provided with an unrelated activity. Categories included vocabulary, organisation, and

mechanics such as paragraphing. Student perspectives of similarities and differences, however, did not match with those of the researcher. James concluded that students were influenced by their own perceptions rather than viewpoints imposed by others. Significantly, 79% reported using learning outcomes from their course, regardless of perceptions of task similarity or difference (p. 94). However, perceptions of task difference in terms of difficulty had a negative impact on scores for the writing task. Students who reported task similarity had higher scores and were more likely to report learning transfer. The results of this study suggest that students do not automatically apply writing skills from one context to another and that transfer of skills can be influenced by task-related factors. James also suggests that students should be encouraged to compare writing tasks in an ESL course with the intended area of academic study.

The following year, James (2009) researched transfer of writing outcomes between an ESL course and an academic course. He sought to discover whether learning transfer would be promoted by encouraging students to seek similarities between the two types of courses. James concluded that amongst the 30 participants there was almost no difference between those who were asked to identify task similarities and those who were not (p. 77). However, learning transfer was hindered by the difference between writing tasks. Some learning outcomes did transfer but they were constrained. James (2010) then conducted another study with a group of 11 English for general academic purposes (EGAP) students. This ten-month-long study focused on learning transfer from an EAGP course to other academic courses in an institution where EAGP courses were designed so that strategies learnt would transfer to university classes. Data sourced from analysis of writing samples and interviews indicated that transfer occurred in categories such as content organisation, language use, and planning for writing, but that transfer was inconsistent between categories and different disciplines.

The results of these studies indicate that transfer of learning is still not fully understood. James (2010) concludes that transfer is possible but not inevitable, and that instruction should emphasise teaching for transfer as well as coincide with and target students' specific needs.

Much of the above research emphasises knowledge transfer from literacy classes designed to prepare students for their particular course of study. However, the question

of transfer also occurs in other higher education contexts. At graduate level it is anticipated that students will be able to apply existing knowledge to new situations (NZQA, 2013b) and that graduate skills will transfer into society and the economy (Lock, 2010). New Zealand's Tertiary Education Strategy (2014 - 2019) advocates a greater focus on developing transferable skills in tertiary education, which include the ability to "communicate well, process information effectively, think logically and critically, and adapt to future changes" (p. 10). Once again, transfer should not be assumed. Eraut (2004) describes transfer as a process over time rather than an event, and suggests that the reasons behind knowledge or skills learning should be explained, since students may not appreciate their relevance in a new context.

The issue of transfer in relation to general support versus discipline-specific needs also needs to be considered. Students often seek professional qualifications requiring specific oral, written and technical language skills associated with professional genres. Nursing care plans, for example, require discipline-specific terminology (Leki, 2003). In such instances students may have difficulty if the course design does not provide sufficient support for their needs, and this difficulty can be aggravated by students' personal commitments between full-time study, home commitments and extra requirements such as work placements and being a second-language student.

Hansen (2008) has provided evidence of successful transfer of applied learning in the online situation in a study involving 143 participants. Online students outperformed traditional students across three separate studies in a Principles of Marketing course. Students were asked to set up a three-step marketing plan for a start-up company. Online students demonstrated greater levels of transfer in both their presentation and written plans. Hansen attributes this result to increased interaction with their lecturer, greater ownership of course material required by the independence of the online setting, sense of community, and increased motivation to apply course learning in a real-world setting.

Hansen (2008) concludes that the process of knowledge transfer in the online environment is a potentially rich area of investigation. Unlike the extensive research that has been conducted on knowledge transfer amongst international students, a direct focus on knowledge transfer in the online learning environment appears to be a gap in the literature. Since online learning is increasing in the contemporary environment, the

degree and manner of knowledge transfer in that mode are pertinent to literacy development. This has direct relevance to this study because of the differing levels of student readiness, whether home students or second-language students (James, 2008), the step up involved in the transition to postgraduate study which involves learning text types, and the potential difficulties when generic transfer is constrained by differences between different communities (Bazerman et al., 2005). Students' own perceptions of transfer in student writing in the web-based environment are also relevant and contribute to the different characteristics of academic literacy. The nature of academic literacy in higher education is a further aspect of literacy development, which is discussed in the next section.

2.8   Academic literacy: A singular view

The term literacy in the higher education context refers to a singular approach to literacy (Collins & Blot, 2003). Goody and Watt, in their classic essay, *The Consequences of Literacy (*1968), argued that literacy acquisition is "a thing in itself" (p. 81) causing cultural and cognitive development regardless of context, which was discussed in section 2.1.2 above. The singular model of literacy perceives literacy as the acquisition of a set of autonomous skills, and of literacy learning as an individual, cognitive process (Lillis & Turner, 2001). Communication skills, including writing, are perceived as transparent and rational, and generic conventions for a homogeneous community are assumed (Fairclough, 1995, p. 243). As a culturally specific form of communication the singular view of literacy follows the Western traditions of logic, rationalisation and fictionalisation of both reader and writer (Gee, 1989b; Lillis & Turner, 2001). Written text is enshrined in the pedagogic practice of essayist literacy and portrayed as standalone, self-explanatory and complete in itself (Scollon & Scollon, 1981).

Lillis (1999) argues that this singular view of literacy silences existing tensions amongst lecturers, students and disciplines in an institutional practice of mystery. Contexts and audiences are portrayed as fixed and homogeneous (Lillis, 2001, p. 24). The perspective is also underpinned by a "cognitive deficit" approach to student writing where problems are located in the student (Lea & Street, 1998; Rose, 1998). A different perspective, however, is that of writing across the curriculum (WAC), an integrated approach which initially developed in the United States (Russell et al., 2009).

2.9 The significance of writing across the curriculum (WAC)

In the United States, a shift towards a situated view of student writing had taken place by the 1980s. Bartholemae (1985) called for a social practice view of writing, while Bizzell (1982) argued that writing involved initiation into the discourse practices of communities. At this time also, the struggle to cater for increasingly diverse student enrolments led to the development of WAC alongside freshman composition courses (Thaiss & Porter, 2010), establishing an infrastructure for integrated North American writing programmes. By 2010, 65% of PhD granting institutions in the United States reported having a WAC programme in place (p. 541). The onus for teaching writing has moved from being the sole responsibility of the English Department, and support for writing is now provided across all classes (Bazerman et al., 2005).

WAC has been defined as "an initiative in an institution to assist teachers across disciplines in using student writing as an instructional tool in their teaching" (Thaiss & Porter, 2010, p. 538). WAC emerged in response to a range of influences in higher education which, by the 1970s, contributed to institutional dissatisfaction with student writing. Alongside the rapid growth of diverse student enrolments (McLeod, 2002), lecturers often diverted time to engage in research and publishing as a priority over teaching (McLeod, 2002; Russell, 1987). Within teaching there was a reliance on multiple choice or true/false testing for evaluating students' work, so that students at university did limited extended writing practice (McLeod, 2002). While freshman composition classes were compulsory, the courses were typically based in the English Department and isolated from the disciplines. Composition courses provided an introduction to rhetorical conventions, thinking skills, information literacy and general academic writing (Council of Writing Program Administrators CWPA, 2014). However, along with other basic writing courses established to assist students, composition classes were also characterised by their remedial, fix-it character (Bazerman et al., 2005). The approach often did not acknowledge the specialised discourses of different disciplines, instead regarding writing as a transparent, generalisable skill to be learnt outside disciplines (Carter, 2007), a view Rose (1998) refers to as "the myth of transience" (p. 355). By comparison, WAC approaches viewed writing as a developmental process and a product of maturing thought (Russell, 1987). WAC pedagogy has therefore challenged the pervasive, skills-based and deficit perceptions of writing (Carter, 2007).

The WAC movement gained its impetus from Janet Emig and James Britton, who both advocated writing across all areas of the curriculum. At a time when curricula consisted mainly of reading and listening, Emig (1977) argued that writing needed to be established and supported as a unique mode of learning which generated both process and product. Britton, Burgess, Martin, McLeod, & Rosen (1975) contributed their researched perspectives, which were based on secondary school writing in the United Kingdom. Britton et al identified three strands of writing: expressive, transactional, and poetic. Expressive use of writing in particular was advocated as a tool for learning and part of a continuum of development where students would gradually move into more formal transactional written forms. The expressivist, more personal strand was soon to become incorporated as writing to learn (WTL), while the more purposeful transactional writing strand became writing in the disciplines (WID) (Craig, 2013). In practice, faculty have often used the acronyms interchangeably (Thaiss & Porter, 2010), or combined the two approaches under the same banner.

Today WAC provides support and knowledge with the aim of improving and integrating writing across departmental boundaries at all levels of instruction. Thaiss and Porter (2010) report that WAC programmes grew in the United States by one-third between 1987 and 2008, with 65% of PhD-granting institutions offering one. Universities display variability in the way they organise their WAC programmes, with 36% of writing-intensive courses focusing on disciplines taught by the English Department (p. 549) and 70% of WAC courses working in collaboration with a writing centre (p. 552).

In the United States, faculty workshops on developing writing emphasise the role of writing in learning (Thaiss & Porter, 2010), the importance of process over product, and demonstration of different strategies and practices which lecturers can adapt to their own situation (Fulwiler & Young, 1984). Classroom practice is promoted along with active learning, peer review and opportunities for collaboration and collegiality. In class, activities often follow a cycle of instruction, practice, feedback and revision as part of the process of building knowledge (Craig, 2013).

WTL includes short or informal activities which encourage students to think critically and to understand concepts. Writing, along with interaction between lecturer and students, becomes a primary method of learning, allowing students to engage with

course materials, integrate new knowledge with their existing experiences, and consolidate ideas (Craig, 2013). Informal activities include brainstorming, vocabulary development, concept mapping, note taking, journal entries and rough drafts. During these activities lecturers can also identify issues and respond with appropriate strategies.

WID courses generally focus on specific learning outcomes (Thaiss & Goodman, 2012) and on disciplinary conventions, which Hyland (2007a) argues are vital for individual identity, social relations and community membership. From a critical perspective, WID specialists still need to find ways to reconcile their aims and those of academic staff who see writing as a skill learnt outside the discipline or written conventions as sets of static, socially reproductive norms (Carter, 2007). One approach is the use of genres as frames for social action (Bazerman, 1997; C. Miller, 1984). By determining expectations for students, faculty themselves establish the link between disciplinary ways of knowing and WID (Carter, 2007). More nuanced approaches move beyond established formats to analyse the way that genres are used within disciplines as "forms of life" and "ways of being" (Bazerman, 1997, p. 19). This active approach to WID allows for creativity as well as stability. A critical alternative to staying within established disciplinary conventions involves "problematising practice", where existing frameworks are evaluated (Hyland, 2001, p. 3).

In-depth exploration uncovers available options and assists students to become more confident writers (Hyland, 2001). Hyland (2009b) emphasises the importance of developing a "co-construction of coherence" (p. 5), where the writer constructs a logical and balanced text to convince readers from that discipline. Conventions which establish credibility and persuade the audience include use of appropriate terminology, practices surrounding self-mention, citation practices and choice of language. Students consider alternatives and whether to accept or to challenge them (Benesch, 2001). By participating in situated writing and communication activities, the student is apprenticed to the discipline (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Mcleod (2002) asserts that the two basic principles of WAC, which are embodied in WTL and WID, are readily translatable into other cultural contexts. Cross-border interactions have increased because of events such as international conferences, the accessibility of internet resources for teaching writing, and the international flow of students, staff and research (Thaiss, 2012). The US National Network of WAC

Programs, established in 1979, demonstrates this trend; it became international in 2005 and is now partnered with the WAC Clearinghouse, illustrating the influence of the internet and the immediacy of global, social and economic networks (Thaiss, 2012).

2.9.1   WAC: A New Zealand experience

Within New Zealand, a "Kiwi" WAC programme has been developed at Massey University. Emerson (2012) describes the development of the programme, which is shaped to local circumstances and was inspired by a colleague's 1989 experience of a WAC writing centre in the United States. The 1990s saw the establishment of a WAC approach at Massey which utilised both WTL and WID, and was characterised by collaboration between the Science Faculty and a writing specialist. A developmental approach saw integration of writing into a College of Science writing programme in 2000, and inclusion of a writing course as the core component for all first-year science students. In 2009 a further development was the addition of a compulsory writing course for first-year students in both the College of Humanities and the Social Sciences. The establishment of the Student Learning Centre (SLC) in 1996 and the development of the Online Writing and Learning Link (OWLL) resource available to both distance and on-campus students (Ellis, 2012b), provided additional supporting resources which have expanded greatly over time. Contemporary services include an online pre-reading service, face-to-face tutoring, and an extensive portfolio of workshops across all levels of the curriculum. A further WAC strand is the Peer-Assisted Writing Programme led by trained senior students who assist first-year students on campus.

Despite these developments, Emerson (2012) notes that a university-wide WAC approach has not been achieved. Since 2000, developments have been ad hoc and fragmented with writing initiatives dispersed across different colleges and the SLC. A pre-tertiary preparatory academic writing course has also been positioned within the Centre for University Preparation and English Language Studies. A Writing Centre, framed as a peer tutoring service operated by high-achieving students was established in 2011 and continues to operate at the time of writing. However, the two 15-point course papers targeting peer tutoring appear to have been replaced by two-day training sessions (Manager CTL, 2015). In addition, Emerson cites the apparent lack of focus by staff within her institution on the theory of writing, learning, and thinking as part of a developmental process.

Emerson and Pittaway (2013) acknowledge the infrastructure found in many North American universities is lacking in New Zealand. There are, as yet, no compulsory writing courses in New Zealand universities. The view that writing competency should be developed prior to enrolment remains pervasive. Writing continues to be positioned as a remedial support service and writing advisors find their positions are often uncertain (P. Strauss, 2013). The issue of funding is ongoing, with recent government policies based on student outcomes potentially leading to the possibility of pre-entry course requirements (Emerson, 2012).

Despite these perceived shortcomings, acknowledgement of the value of embedding academic literacy and writing is present in the New Zealand literature in contrast to pragmatic and institutional pressures which favour a standalone, generic model of delivery (Feekery & Emerson, 2013; McWilliams & Allan, 2014). Embedded practices do occur, breaking down silos between subject lecturers and literacy specialists (P. Strauss, 2013). Gunn, Hearne and Sibthorpe (2011), for example, describe an online initiative involving collaboration between library staff, lecturers and e-learning services. Information literacy skills were embedded utilising an online approach. Six modules, trialled by first-year management students, provided flexible tutorials to large classes of students and yielded encouraging results. Of the 125 participants, 81% stated they had learnt useful skills (p. 7). P. Strauss and Mooney (2011) contribute an example of contextualised academic writing instruction which combines disciplinary and linguistic expertise in postgraduate hospitality courses. McWilliams and Allan (2014), meanwhile, demonstrate that cooperation between learning advisors, faculty heads and lecturers enables the embedding of academic literacy. Literacy advisors are available to respond to faculty requests, ranging from one-off sessions to full-semester interventions. McWilliams and Allan describe a semester-long embedded literacy programme based around a literature-review learning outcome. The writers systematically outline the complex processes, which begin with clarifying the nature of the genre before moving through stages such as resource selection, refining a review question, group work on patterns of usage, analysis of exemplars, and provision of feedback. Their best practice model also includes review processes which can inform future sessions.

The New Zealand experience of a tension between integration of writing and standalone writing support reflects similar themes to other Anglophone countries outside the

United States, where standalone support centres for academic literacy needs often follow autonomous assumptions. The response to widening student enrolments in the United Kingdom during the 1990s, for example, was accompanied by dissatisfaction with standalone approaches to student difficulties with writing (Lea & Street, 1998). In Australia, Ballard and Clanchy (1988) advocate literacy as a process where students need to learn to read and write the culture, a perspective also endorsed by Hounsell (1984) in the United Kingdom. In South Africa, Archer (2012a) argues for the need to critically engage with the decontextualised model of academic support centres and to focus on contextualised practices. Back in the United Kingdom, Lea (2008) reiterates that isolated, remedial approaches do not consider the critical aspects of writing or the way that language constructs disciplinary knowledge.

2.10   Academic literacy amidst changing contexts

The use of "literacies" in the plural can be traced back to the NLS movement (Street, 2003b) discussed earlier in the chapter. The singular approach to literacy was reformulated to view academic literacies as multiple and situated (Lea & Street, 1999). The focus shifted from texts to practices, and the way they are embedded in particular disciplinary contexts (Barton & Hamilton, 2000). These practices differ between communities (Lea & Street, 2006) as a result of shaping by social, institutional and historical influences (Starfield, 2007).

In contemporary education, widening participation of students drawn from non-traditional communities is ongoing. This is characterised by increasing internationalisation (OECD, 2011), enrolment of minority students from working-class backgrounds, students who are older, and students who have different cultural, religious and language backgrounds (Lillis, 1997). Alongside the dissatisfaction amongst literacy advisors with the limitations of official, traditional approaches to academic literacy (Lillis & Scott, 2007), there are other constraints which have disrupted established practices. These include the permeability of boundaries between disciplines, the growth of professional qualifications, and, increasingly, modular and interdisciplinary courses (Goodfellow, 2005; Trow, 2007). Ongoing digital technology development also signals a move away from the exclusive practices of traditional education towards inclusion of digital text types (Lea & Jones, 2011). One response to these tensions is academic

literacies, a field of study which has developed amongst practitioners working at the interface of research and practice in the United Kingdom (Lillis & Scott, 2007).

2.10.1   Academic literacies as a field of enquiry

Academic literacies is a specific, epistemological approach which views literacies as social practice and developed from dissatisfaction with official approaches to literacy amidst widening participation in higher education in the United Kingdom (Hyland & Hamp-Lyons, 2002). The field is complementary to genre studies in that both offer an alternative to deficit approaches and both recognise that students may arrive at university without adequate literacy skills (Tribble & Wingate, 2013). However, academic literacies differs by taking a broader approach than genre studies and is also distinguished by a focus on theoretical framings at institutional, discipline and subject levels (Street, 2009a).

Academic literacies is transformational in nature. Practitioners in the field challenge the deficit approach to student writing, the tendency to judge writing in terms of traditional binaries of good or bad (Lea & Street, 2000), the relations of power and authority implicit in student writing, and the way identity is implicated in writing (Ivanic, 1997b). The field has also challenged assumptions associated with overarching, homogeneous literacy practices, often referred to as essayist literacy (Lillis). Drawing on NLS and sociocultural approaches, academic practitioners view writing as social practice with discipline-specific ways of communicating knowledge (Gee, 2000; Lea & Street, 2006). Academic literacies has also widened from an early focus on student writing to an exploration of the use of digital literacies in higher education (Goodfellow, 2011; Lea & Jones, 2011).

A seminal article by Lea and Street (1998) describes their research on literacy practices. This ethnographic study of postgraduate student writing in the United Kingdom involved analysis of written documentation, participant observations, and interviews with academic staff and students from two universities. Lea and Street argue that implicit models, and the requirement for students to adapt to institutional demands, did not take account of the contested and conflicting practices and issues of identity surrounding unequal relations of power. Their research therefore attempted to move away from the deficit model of student writing by considering the complexity of writing practices. Lea and Street investigated staff and student understanding and interpretations

of literacy practices and what was involved. They utilised an inductive, case study approach to gain a comprehensive range of perspectives as empirical evidence for their three-level model of academic literacies. As well as taking advantage of their own knowledge of situated writing practices, the authors sought to analyse and to uncover differences between student and lecturer understandings at the level of epistemology, authority and contestation.

The findings of the study demonstrate the complexities surrounding requirements for writing. Traditional discipline boundaries no longer applied. Students switched between different units and modules, and faced different assumptions about writing and academic knowledge in each context. They met conflicting and contrasting requirements across different courses, and found requirements were often implicit. As one participant commented:

> The thing I'm finding most difficult in my first term here is moving from subject to subject and knowing how you're meant to write in each one. I'm really aware of writing for a particular tutor as well as for a particular subject. Everybody seems to want something different. (Lea & Street, 1998, p. 164)

Students talked about gaps in their understanding and the difficulty of obtaining specific writing requirements from handouts or general statements. They found that feedback sometimes came at the end of modules, when they had already moved on in their study.

Findings also demonstrated student struggles with writing and gaps between tutor and student expectations of what was expected. Lea and Street (1998) found that feedback comments on student assignments often related to surface features, such as spelling and grammar, making it difficult for students to discern meanings, especially where students were unfamiliar with disciplinary requirements which underpinned feedback. Lecturers often responded in terms of their discipline area, even when courses were interdisciplinary and where different writing modes were introduced alongside traditional essays. Some lecturers articulated requirements, using words like "structure" and "argument", but did not always expand on these potentially elusive terms, regarding their interpretation as common sense. Through a comparison between essay assessments in history and anthropology, Lea and Street demonstrated the way that linguistic features associated with these terms could differ between disciplines. They also emphasised the importance of determining what was involved in a particular discipline

and of an awareness that actual requirements were often hidden beneath technical or generic descriptions of academic writing. In terms of feedback genre, comments tended to be authoritarian and to take the form of categorical modalities such as imperatives or question marks with no comment, demonstrating tutor authority. Lecturers held a particular view of the kind of discipline-specific writing required, which often varied from the generalised, skills-based approach.

Lea and Street (1998) found that students who arrived in higher education without basic academic literacy skills were referred to a learning support unit, an approach that assumed knowledge is readily transferred rather than constructed by disciplinary writing practices. The authors also identified a gap between lecturer and student expectations and assumptions, since students found they had difficulty in understanding assignment titles or feedback comments on their work. Along with skills acquisition, Lea and Street asserted the importance of student identity as writers. Institutional practices of modularity, assessment, procedures, and changing fields of study influenced student writing, since these practices were all located in conditions of power and authority. To account for the contested nature of literacy practices, the authors suggested an alternative to the traditional approach to literacy acquisition, which is now discussed.

2.10.2   The academic literacies model

The academic literacies model, developed in conjunction with the Lea and Street's (1998) findings, provides a tool to frame writing in higher education as three overlapping levels. The levels are non-linear and are not mutually exclusive, so that each encapsulates the other (Russell et al., 2009).

The first level, study skills, approaches writing as a technical skill and focuses on mastery of surface features such as grammar, spelling and punctuation. Study skills are regarded as a set of atomised conventions which transfer across contexts (Lea, 2008), although the skills may be approached within the context of a discipline's requirements (Lea & Street, 1998). When the experience is decontextualised however, the study skills level represents the traditional, autonomous perspective with a deficit focus on fixing the student problem.

The second level, academic socialisation, focuses on student acculturation into the discourses and genres of particular disciplines (Lea, 2008; Russell et al., 2009).

Academic socialisation draws on constructivist principles (Lea & Street, 1998) and assumes that making discourse and genre requirements explicit will result in successful writing (Russell et al., 2009). In practice, however, requirements may be left implicit and treated as transparent (Lillis, 2003). In addition, wider institutional practices, such as plagiarism and feedback policies (Lea & Street, 2006), involve power relations which may not be acknowledged (Lea & Street, 1998).

The third level, academic literacies, conforms closely to NLS (Lea, 2008; Russell et al., 2009). Academic literacies is distinguished from academic socialisation because of the additional focus on meaning making, identity, power and authority (Gee, 1989b; Lea & Street, 2006; Street, 2003b). Academic literacies also supports transformative ideology (Lillis & Scott, 2007; Street, 2009a). The traditional assumptions of a homogeneous student population, disciplinary stability, and alignment of student and lecturer expectations are challenged. A transformative approach analyses the contested nature of conventions in constructing knowledge, obtains writer perspectives, and explores alternatives to knowledge construction such as student writers' own resources (Street, 2009a). Practices are viewed as socially situated and ideologically inscribed (Lea & Street, 2006; Lillis, 2003). Knowledge is considered in terms of the effect of power relations between student and tutor on student writing, on values (Graff & Duffy, 2008) and on identity (Ivanic, 1997a; Lea, 2008; Street, 2006). Students may therefore feel challenged and threatened when required to use unfamiliar academic writing conventions (Lea, 2004; Street, 2009a). Wider institutional skills such as mastery of library information resources and technology usage are included as dimensions of academic literacies (Russell et al., 2009). An appreciation that literacy practices are influenced by economic, social and local ideologies is a further dimension (Street, 2006).

2.10.3   Application of the academic literacies model

Lillis (2006) suggests that in the United Kingdom the dominant pedagogy for literacy comprises a mixture of study skills and academic socialisation. The default pedagogical model is implicit in academic socialisation, where initially students are expected just to "pick up" writing. When students are not successful, Lillis claims that the study skills level is activated, usually in the form of feedback on written assignments. At that point socialisation at a second, explicit level comes into play, with a focus on discourse features.

Since its publication, the academic literacies model has been used as a tool to explore academic literacy practices in countries which include New Zealand (P. Strauss & Mooney, 2011) the United States (Russell et al., 2009), the United Kingdom (Lillis, 2003) and South Africa (Thesen & Van Pletzen, 2006). As academic literacies is a relatively new field, and has primarily focused on theory and research rather than pedagogy (Russell et al., 2009), there are relatively few studies on how it works in practice (Lillis, 2006). Both Lillis (2003) and Lea (2004) agree, however, on the need to link the academic literacies model to pedagogical examples.

One example of a practical academic literacies approach involved a case study of an online masters course (Lea, 2004). Lea embedded academic literacy principles into course design, such as fostering explicit awareness and the unpacking of concepts such as structure and argument. Attention was given to possible difficulties with course-specific texts where students came from a different discipline. Online forums were used to encourage active critique and use of multimodal texts. In addition, a more proactive use of feedback forms required by the institution was enacted. Their use for talkback illustrates an aspect which links to other researchers who advocate student engagement through dialogue (Lillis, 2003; Turner, 2011). Lea suggests that the approach should be applied to all mainstream courses. At the same time, however, she acknowledges the final authority of the lecturer and constraints such as institutional requirements for documentation.

In a second example using academic literacies principles, Lea and Street (2006) recorded the processes used when working with a group of ESL pre-university students who were attending a widening participation programme designed to enhance their opportunities for attending university in two years' time. The interactive collaborative sessions focused on making students more aware of different language practices and the use of spoken, written and visual genre within sessions. Explicit discussion centred on language features, speech patterns and the different qualities of group work, speeches, note taking, writing, and use of an overhead projector. During group discussion specific language factors and speech patterns were defined. Note taking involved use of headings, structure and attention to layout. The features of overhead transparencies were made explicit. Lea and Street suggest that this explicit approach, and involvement of the students as collaborators, enables the students to construct an understanding of academic requirements. They argue that the academic literacies approach is more

supportive than the study skills and academic socialisation levels of the academic literacies model. This example of pedagogy in practice focused on dialogue and interaction between students and staff. From this perspective the study demonstrates what Lillis and Scott (2007) describe as a commitment to staying grounded "in people's lived experiences" (p. 13).

The academic literacies approach also encompasses more critical aspects. Lillis and Scott (2007) argue for a transformative, threefold approach to academic literacy development: identification of conventions in relation to contested traditions; dialogue with writers about their issues; and ways to utilise and make meaning of the academic resources which writers bring with them. These three considerations acknowledge identity issues in response to increasing linguistic and cultural diversity, where identity interfaces with the process of developing academic literacies.

This study adopted an academic literacies lens to analyse challenges in literacy development and discourse in the web-based environment. The focus on literacy as social practice accommodates both traditional and contemporary approaches and allows for the unpacking of micro-social practices (Russell et al., 2009) in order to enhance understanding of student experiences.

Lillis and Scott (2007) acknowledge that technology is increasingly involved in academic reading, communication and teaching at different institutional levels, and the next section describes a pedagogical response to an environment characterised by ongoing change (Cazden et al., 1996).

2.11   A pedagogy of multiliteracies

The last two decades have witnessed the rise of the internet amidst rapidly changing social contexts (Leu et al., 2004). In higher education changes include more professional courses, the globalisation of tertiary student study, and the ongoing development of online study. Learning and assessment in education continues to emphasise writing and reading but use of multiple modes has also become important (Iyer & Luke, 2009). Texts often integrate verbal, visual and written modes. A range of digital genres such as email, online chat, video, and social media platforms have become part of many higher education courses (Lea & Jones, 2011). The ability to

access electronic journals is another aspect of contemporary study. These activities encompass a broader scope than traditional print literacy. According to Leu et al (2004):

> The new literacies of the Internet and other ICTs include the skills, strategies, and dispositions necessary to successfully use and adapt to the rapidly changing information and communication technologies and contexts that continuously emerge in our world and influence all areas of our personal and professional lives. (p. 1572)

Contemporary requirements involve negotiating a multimodal environment (Baguley, Pullen, & Short, 2009; Lea & Jones, 2011) and development of skills in a range of communication technologies (Leu et al., 2004), although students still need to master academic writing. Goodfellow (2011) argues that higher education has been slow to engage with new literacies, claiming that the focus in higher education is on critical analysis rather than creative design. While students engage in a variety of text genres using technology, they are still guided by their lecturers during study and assessment (Lea & Jones, 2011). Digital changes in higher education and global influences such as the internationalisation of education suggest that a revised pedagogy may be required.

The term "multiliteracies" was coined by a group of 10 academics known as the New London Group (NLG). The NLG advocates a shift in pedagogy in order to negotiate new digital texts amongst increasing linguistic and cultural diversity. In a manifesto entitled "A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies" (Cazden et al., 1996), the NLG captures the multiple considerations involved when designing an inclusive approach to the ongoing and increasing influence of technology. The NLG argues that teaching and learning should respond to rapidly changing literacy needs in a dynamic, economically competitive workplace.

The multiliteracies concept considers two aspects of language use: multimodal forms of meaning making and the increasing cultural and linguistic diversity in society (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000). The NLG argues that traditional literacy pedagogy based on alphabetical literacy should be supplemented with oral, visual, gestural, tactile and spatial modes (Cazden et al., 1996). The group also suggests four pedagogical principles for engaging with this revised pedagogy. The first principle, immersion in situated practice, draws on students' own experiences. The second, overt instruction, involves scaffolding, collaboration and student agency. Critical framing, the third principle, refers to constructive critique and interpretation of the social and cultural contexts

(Cope & Kalantzis, 2000), while transformed practice, the fourth principle, involves reapplying meaning between contexts.

This pedagogy advocates, as part of social futures, that students as well as educators should be active and critical participants in the working, civic and private aspects of their lives (Cazden et al., 1996; Leu et al., 2004). "The logic of multiliteracies is one that recognizes that meaning making is an active, transformative process, and a pedagogy which assumes that recognition is more likely to open up viable life courses for a world of change and diversity" (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009, p. 175).

2.11.1 Academic literacy in a multiliterate, multimodal world

"A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies" (Cazden et al., 1996) advocates transformed practice in response to new contexts for writing. While recent literature debates the place of new literacies or communicative practices emerging from the internet (Leu et al., 2004), participation in technology and engagement with multimodalities is widely regarded as a contemporary requirement for effective communication and critical literacy awareness (Kalantzis & Cope, 2008; Lankshear & Knobel, 2003, 2007; Leu, O'Byrne, Zawilinski, McVerry, & Everett-Cacopardo, 2009).

New technologies have a marked influence on teaching and learning. Beetham et al (2010) argue that the trend towards networked communities, digital citizenship and distributed work patterns makes digital capabilities central to education. Their 2009 study involved 13 universities and two further education providers in the United Kingdom. They analysed relevant literature, competence frameworks, examples of support provision, and data from 16 audits on digital literacy. However, in spite of the ongoing development of digital technology, the authors found that there was a failure to develop students' capacities within a technology-rich environment. Students' information and communication technology (ICT) skills were rarely integrated with their study.

Beetham et al (2010) suggest that digital literacy, as a situated practice, should be treated as a foundation skill alongside reading, writing and numeracy. Leu et al (2009) also support ICT being viewed as a literacy issue, along with integration of technology into subject areas. They argue that teachers should take responsibility so that online study becomes part of subject assessment. In an earlier study, Leu et al (2004) describe

the varied strands of activity associated with new literacies and the internet. They see the internet as a space for collaborative theory building for new discourses (Gee, 2005), for new semiotic contexts (Kress, 2005), and for differentiation into multiliteracies (Cazden et al., 1996).

The theme of ongoing change is further explored by Leu et al (2004), who argue that reading, writing and other forms of literacy instruction are defined by changing social contexts. Today's workers must be able to identify problems, locate useful information on the internet, and synthesise and communicate this information to work colleagues. The authors also argue that definitions of literacy must encompass the rapid changes wrought by continually emerging new ICTs. Lea and Jones (2011) also assert that literacies in higher education need to be viewed in a wider context because of changing, permeable boundaries. Their study of 38 United Kingdom graduates demonstrated that students were integrating a wide range of written, visual and multimodal practices for assessment purposes.

Gee (2004) asserts that academic language is "a necessary but not sufficient condition for success in society" (p. 94) since the contemporary world regards acquisition of technological skills as a component of knowledge and success. Archer (2006) reinforces this viewpoint, criticising the "overemphasis on the teaching and analysis of the mode of writing at the expense of other modes in academic literacies studies" (p. 449). Nevertheless, attitudes assuming the superiority of written text continue to be pervasive in official educational policy (Lillis, 2008). Goodfellow (2005), for example, confirms the centrality of writing, including in online communication. While acknowledging the place of technology, he argues for writing to be considered separately, cautioning that the context-specific nature of written texts is obscured when academic literacy is described as one among a number of communicative competencies. The ongoing importance of writing has also been supported by Kress (2003) and Street (2004).

2.11.2   Exploring the integration of digital and traditional literacies

Lea (2007) argues that online interactions should be regarded as another dimension of academic writing and that student collaboration is an emerging literacy in the field of online learning. There are, however, a number of differences, which should not be minimised. Goodfellow and Lea (2005), for example, investigated student perspectives about online participation where e-learning discussions were part of assessment.

Participants, who were masters students from a range professional backgrounds and countries, found that online exchanges were demanding for a range of reasons, including the time taken to compose responses, the need for timeliness since discussions could quickly move on, a sense of inadequacy in cases where responses were misunderstood, and concerns about conventions for assessment such as word limits and referencing. Whilst anxiety receded over time, an academic literacies perspective highlights the different prior experiences students bring to their online experience, their struggle to unpack implicit and explicit expectations, and the way that writing is integral to the construction of knowledge. Goodfellow and Lea also question how far university literacy practices are responding to change in the online environment and note tensions between competing purposes for writing, between the collaborative aims of DFs and the prescribed demands of an individualised assignment. Other research supports the view that the selection of literacy activities should be suitable for the purpose (A. Herrington, Herrington, Oliver, Stoney, & Willis, 2001). A further consideration is individual student responses to innovation in the online environment. Familiar literacy patterns, rather than constant changes, may be preferred by busy students when offered alternatives. Even so, Lea and Jones (2011) found that students are still guided by their lecturers and institutional demands.

Debate surrounding academic literacy innovations is especially relevant to online learning. Amidst the different course design approaches, the introduction of multimodalities and communicative technologies is ongoing (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009; Lankshear, 2007; Tusting, 2008). Technology innovations include multimedia, DFs, wikis and blogs, and use of personal digital assistants. Many of these artefacts present familiar interactive opportunities which are useful for the co-construction of knowledge (S. Alexander & Golja, 2007). Other literacy practices, such as instant messaging (Weller, Pegler, & Mason, 2005), may be expected as part of web-based study. The literature on integration of emerging technologies into course design confirms the uptake of less formal mediums including social networking tools such as Facebook and YouTube (Aldrich, 2009). The dialogue about the integration of these tools, along with simulated, immersive teaching environments such as Second Life, has taken place through peer-reviewed journals, conference presentations and personal websites. Proposing the theory of connectivism, Siemen (2004) discusses the possibility of revising e-learning pedagogy. He argues that, because learning is distributed across

information sets such as databases, it involves the ability to connect relevant information. This process epitomises the mixing of formal and informal technologies. Synchronous chat has become more available as bandwidth capabilities have increased (G. Cox, Carr, & Hall, 2004). Videoconferencing and opportunities for students to ask questions in real time are useful strategies which can assist with students' literacy challenges (Hrastinski, 2008).

These technology tools have signalled a more collaborative pedagogy (Dede, 2005). However, aspirations may be subverted by curriculum, resourcing, administrative and assessment systems (Bohemia et al., 2009). Lankshear and Knobel (2003) consider that where new literacies are introduced, they are often forged in old mind-sets. New technologies may be colonised and redefined as "skills" to fit conservative pedagogical approaches, rather than embraced as dynamic and changing social practices (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003; Tusting, 2008).

Until recently it has been generally assumed that mature, returning students will struggle with technology demands. Prensky (2001), for example, considers that older people, as digital immigrants, have one foot in the past even as they adapt to technological change. This review found little exploration in the literature of the perspectives of mature students who are familiar with new technologies. These students might expect their learning experience to include learning about, and utilisation of, such technologies, a perspective which is discussed further in Chapter 3. Although the intersection between e-learning and contemporary higher education has been part of contemporary discussion (Crook, 2005; Goodfellow & Lea, 2007; Lea, 2004; Lea & Jones, 2011), practical research on technology in conjunction with academic literacy remains sparse (Goodfellow, 2011), suggesting an area for future research.

2.12   Summary

This chapter has reviewed the theoretical literature about the nature of literacy, background influences, societal changes and competing approaches to academic literacy development. The influence of NLS as a counterweight to the principles behind the literacy thesis has been discussed. The standalone approach to academic student support and the development of the integrated WAC method provide examples of the different ways that academic literacy development is shaped by institutions and influenced by teaching strategies such as genre acquisition and learning transfer. Tensions are ongoing

as issues emerge from the effects of widened participation and diverse student intakes during a time of social, economic and technological change.

Critical literacy, as distinct from critical thinking, has been considered in relation to questions of power, identity and teaching. Multiliteracies have been discussed as part of this change. The interplay between these different perspectives is played out in the web-based environment where a conservative pedagogy is often maintained. While there is extensive coverage in the literature on developments in the online environment and on pedagogical strategies for academics (Bocchia, Eastman, & Owens, 2004; R. Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007; Salmon, 2012), there appears to be little exploration of the challenges facing mature students who return to study online (Goodfellow, 2011). The particular characteristics of this cohort, which is the focus of this study's investigation, will be explored in the next chapter. Particular issues that will be discussed include the responses of students who seek to learn more about emerging technologies as part of their learning experiences (Dede, 2005); the nature of the online environment in relation to students' perceptions of academic literacy; the extent to which academic literacy practices are conceptualised as socially situated or individual; perceptions about the effectiveness of teaching strategies such as genre frameworks in relation to transfer of knowledge; and perceptions about the process of academic writing acquisition.

Chapter 3 The postgraduate student's web-based experience

In Chapter 1 the broad scope of this study was outlined and a brief description of higher education in the Western world in the 21st century was given. In this chapter I focus on the students enrolling in these institutions. Changes in higher education in New Zealand will be explored, particularly with regard to mature, postgraduate students and web-based courses. Academic literacy expectations, including writing as a core requirement, are discussed in terms of the complexity surrounding the process of academic literacy acquisition. These aspects are considered in relation to pedagogical approaches and online communication in the web-based environment. Supporting features which assist students in the transition phase of their academic journey are explored, with a focus on induction, academic student support, and information literacy development. The chapter concludes with an identification of areas for future investigation.

3.1   The heterogeneity of students

Widening participation in higher education means the so-called non-traditional student is now often the norm (Chanock, 2003). The term "traditional student" refers to students who, prior to the massification of education, enjoyed discipline-specific preparation at school in anticipation of entry to university (Ivanic & Lea, 2006). Students would transition to university already prepared to meet academic requirements. These students belonged to a small, homogeneous social group and were expected to be residential, full-time, and focused on scholarly life (Trow, 2007). Traditional university courses would provide them with specialised knowledge in established disciplinary areas as preparation for a variety of leadership roles.

The rapid expansion of student numbers in recent decades has led to the enrolment of so-called non-traditional students. In the United Kingdom this has been taking place since the 1960s (Trow, 2007). Increased participation means these students come from a broad spectrum of society and represent a range of cultural, religious and linguistic backgrounds (Lillis & Scott, 2007). Local students are likely to come from families who have previously been under-represented at university or who are from lower socioeconomic groups. In addition, their home language may not be English (Ivanic & Lea, 2006). There is also the influence of a growing international student presence,

especially in English-speaking nations (Altbach et al., 2009). Although these students will have met entry requirements, they will still have to negotiate different cultural expectations, academic requirements and teacher-student interactions once they arrive at university (Phan Le Ha, 2005).

Mature students are another significant non-traditional group. Their numbers have increased rapidly over the past few decades. In the United Kingdom, for example, mature students represent 54% of all undergraduate enrolments (Kadi & Giriffiths, 2013). The term "mature" is usually applied to students over 23 (Richardson, 1995) or 25 (Tones, Fraser, Elder, & White, 2009) years of age whose education has been interrupted. Swain and Hammond (2011) note that learning careers are not necessarily linear: "People tend to learn a bit in one area, move on to others, return to what they have learned before, and revise and develop this" (p. 593). Students might also delay university study, electing to enter paid employment first. Many mature students cope with competing life commitments such as family and financial obligations (Larsen & Vincent-Lancrin, 2005) in order to pursue a higher qualification in their field (Lim & Honey, 2003). For students who work and manage families, the commitments of study, work and home are often challenging. Time pressures can influence student learning (Chickering & Ehrmann, 1996), so much so that a review focusing on women described study as a "third shift" (Kramarae, 2001; Willems, 2011). This begins after completion of the first two shifts, work and family obligations.

For these students the decision to engage in university-level study often involves major adjustments. Some rely on alternative entry to university which is based on professional experience (Lea & Stierer, 2000). Others will already have prior experience of university but face a skill drop, where once familiar practices need to be relearnt (O'Donnell et al., 2009). Postgraduate students, then, are characterised by "multiple, classed, ethnicised, gendered and geographically located subjectivities" (Eijkman, 2004, p. 2). Many fit the mature student profile. In addition, these students often reflect the market-driven environment where they are expected to continue learning in a rapidly changing professional environment. Study is often undertaken to maintain currency in the workplace, as preparation for a career change, as part of employment contract expectations, or for career advancement. On this basis, some students may select an individual paper rather than a complete qualification, or begin a course of study full time but finish the qualification on a part-time basis. Often courses are specifically

designed for part-time study to allow students to upskill while they continue working (Wensvoort, 2011).

In spite of the challenges they face, mature students are depicted as purposeful, self-motivated and self-directed (Darden, 2014; Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2005). They seize opportunities to learn, even in adverse circumstances (S. Wilkinson & Folley, 2014), and have the benefit of prior knowledge (S. Merriam, 2004). Darden (2014) argues that such characteristics imply particular teaching and learning styles where teachers take the role of facilitators, while students take responsibility for learning and move towards independence (Knowles et al., 2005). However, these generalised characteristics, based on models of adult learning (Haggis, 2006; S. Wilkinson & Folley, 2014), assume the homogeneity of adult students. Pratt (1988) questions the assumption that all adults are self-directed and collaborative. He argues that teaching styles are situational and based on the relationship between the teacher and learner. Consequently, characteristics such as self-directedness and independence may not apply to all learners, especially if they do not embrace these ideals (Darden, 2014).

The assumption that all mature students are self-directed is more problematic, perhaps, in a web-based environment. For many, web-based learning appears to offer the ideal solution to the extracurricular challenges they face because of the flexibility of the off-campus, anywhere, anytime option (Cercone, 2008; Redd, 2008). Students may be distance learners (Larsen & Vincent-Lancrin, 2006; Owens, Hardcastle, & Richardson, 2009) or need to meet family obligations alongside study. Web-based learning is also a cheaper option than on-campus study for some because of travel or child care expenses. Other students prefer the web-based style of learning over traditional delivery methods. Arbaugh (2010), for example, asserts that masters-level students prefer online participation which involves student-to-student interactions and instructor-led discussions, suggesting that these preferences are attributable to their age, maturity, self-discipline, and work experiences. Palloff and Pratt (2007) agree, arguing that building a community, with the facilitator as an equal member, promotes collaborative learning, opportunities for reflection, and the empowerment of participants (p. xvii).

However, the challenges of web-based study should not be underestimated. These challenges will be explored in greater depth later in the chapter but first it is necessary to consider the situation in New Zealand.

3.2 Higher education in New Zealand in the 21st century

New Zealand higher education has experienced many of the changes reported in other OECD countries resulting from globalisation and massification. Government priorities of increased access, lifelong learning and revised educational goals now underpin higher education in the country (Smyth et al., 2006), along with an emphasis on internationalisation, research and development. Policies have followed global trends and increasingly reshaped the role of universities to align with economic imperatives (Findsen, 2012). The Tertiary Education Amendment Act of 1990 signalled the formation of a centralised regulated framework which reduced the autonomy of universities (Codd, 2002). Learning is designed around performance-based outcomes described in the New Zealand Qualifications Framework (NZQA, 2013b). National priority goals are articulated through successive Tertiary Education Strategies (2002–2007; 2007–2012; 2010–2015) and accountability mechanisms, which are supervised by the Tertiary Education Commission (2012b). Research outcomes and qualification achievement are dependent on meeting government expectations (Findsen, 2012 ; Wensvoort, 2011).

The challenge for New Zealand is to remain competitive with lower-cost markets offshore. In pursuit of this aim, government funding to universities is now targeted, contestable and outcomes-linked, while research grants take the form of Performance Based Research Funding and involve the Centres of Research Excellence (Tertiary Education Commission, 2013). New Zealand universities are expected to produce skilled, flexible knowledge workers who are independent thinkers, problem solvers and lifelong learners (Jeffrey et al., 2006). Students are expected to become scientists, engineers and professionals who will also develop new technologies (Stevens, 2007). Faculties in the contemporary university are expected to collaborate with industry to enhance skills, knowledge and business through innovation and research (Ministry of Education, 2014). There is an increased openness and cooperation with a range of stakeholders, including those from industry and relevant professional organisations (Tertiary Education Commission, 2010). The Nursing Council of New Zealand (2012), for example, determines curriculum content and assists with the accreditation of its higher education programmes in conjunction with government and university bodies. Work or an applied component is often included in vocational and professional courses

at postgraduate level, a dimension which aligns with market-driven requirements (Schuetze & Slowey, 2002).

New Zealand enrolments in tertiary education increased from 8.9% to 13.4% between 1994 and 2003 (Smyth et al., 2006, p. 69). The significant increase in part-time study and in participation by older students was highlighted by Smyth et al in 2006, when students enrolling in tertiary education from school became a minority. Enrolment patterns include a steady increase in postgraduate honours and masters students between 2005–2013, while achievement of graduate certificates and diplomas remained stable over those years (Wensvoort, 2014, p. 13). Enrolments have aligned with the government priority of developing specialised technical skills through targeted training (Ministry of Education, 2005). As an example, the Nursing Council of New Zealand (2013) reports a need for an increased supply of students, and for continuing investment in nursing education because of the demands from an increasing and ageing population. Growth in the number of Māori and Pasifika nurses is another ongoing requirement, due to the changing ethnic composition of New Zealand. This need links to the government priority of improved qualification outcomes more generally for Pasifika (Tertiary Education Commission, 2013) and Māori students (Ministry of Education, 2013). While many postgraduate students are self-funded, government also provides targeted subsidies in areas of perceived need, such as the Adult Literacy Educator Grant (Tertiary Education Commission, 2012a). The overall focus of higher education has narrowed to an economic focus on human capital (Benseman, Sutton, & Lander, 2005).

New Zealand has benefited from the global increase in student mobility. In 2009 more than 2.5 million people studied outside their own country (Altbach et al., 2009, p. vi). New Zealand has been able to capitalise on the advantages of being a main English-speaking destination country (MEDC). Growth of international student enrolments was significant between 1998 and 2004, with universities as the main provider (McInnes, Peacock, & Catherwood, 2006). A subsequent decline in enrolments occurred in New Zealand between 2004 and 2008, largely due to fewer enrolments of Chinese students (Ministry of Education, 2012a, p. 3). However, during this time the government invested in international education, creating a competitive environment for New Zealand as a MEDC (International Division and Education Information and Analysis, 2005). There has been rapid growth in international enrolments at PhD level since 2006, when the domestic fees policy was extended to international students (Ministry of

Education, 2012a). Other packages to support growth in the international student market include streamlining visa requirements for selected provider destinations and making it easier for full-time students to work on a part-time basis (Joyce & Woodhouse, 2013). International students also enjoy a measure of protection with the development of a *Code of Practice* for pastoral care to assist students during their stay in New Zealand (NZQA, 2013a). Since 2008, enrolment numbers have steadily increased, with the top five source countries and regions being China, South East Asia, North America, India and Japan (Infometrics, 2013, p. 9). By 2011, international enrolments in New Zealand universities comprised 39% of the combined intake of international and domestic PhD student enrolments, a ratio ahead of Australia where 29% of the PhD intake were international students. The students make a significant contribution to New Zealand's economy, since the 2012–2013 value of international education was estimated to be $2.6 billion dollars (Infometrics, 2013, p. 29).

The increase in student numbers supports the Tertiary Education Strategy for 2014–2019, which emphasises the benefits of international linkages, both economically and for business and research. New Zealand has developed academic and research links, as well as business connections (New Zealand Vice-Chancellors' Committee (NZVCC), 2008; OECD, 2008). The majority of international students do not speak English as a first language. They benefit from studying in an Anglophone country, since English has "become the primary international language of science and scholarship, including the internet" (Altbach, 2006, p. 8). Other factors which students cite for selecting New Zealand as their host country include safety, the international recognition of New Zealand qualifications, the quality of education, and cost (Ward & Masgoret, 2004). Apart from the revenue international students provide, their presence also helps to develop cultural awareness, to create collaborative research, and establish linkages with students' home countries. While international student are not a focus of this research project, a small group of students in the study were second-language speakers.

The opening up of higher education has also seen growth in the number of part-time student enrolments. These students follow international trends in that they are older, more likely to be women, have family commitments, and need to integrate work with study. In 2011 61% of enrolments at bachelor's and higher qualification levels were female (Ministry of Education, 2012b, p. 61). These students are also more likely to opt for web-based courses.

3.2.1   Web-based courses in higher education in New Zealand

Web-based courses at postgraduate level fulfil economic and professional needs in areas such as health, education, and information literacy (Victoria Business School, 2015). For example, postgraduate specialty courses are offered in Health for Nurse Prescribing or Aged Care Nursing (New Zealand Ministry of Health, 2015). The Ministry of Education (2015) has initiated policies to lift the quality of teacher education. Further professional development is provided at postgraduate level in specialist areas such as e-learning, digital technologies, special education and literacy (Ministry of Education, 2015). Other postgraduate qualifications, such as information literacy, also offer part-time or full-time study options. These emphasise continued upskilling, which means that entry into university may be anticipated at different career points. Some faculties include provision for mature students to enrol at postgraduate level without a bachelor's degree. Individual students seeking further professional qualifications may seek special admission with equivalent status on the basis of professional experience.

However, this changing education environment means that accompanying changes are needed to the way learning is facilitated. Wilkinson and Folley (2014) contend that higher education requires a major overhaul to move away from the didactic approach where the lecturer is the fount of all knowledge. One of the ways in which this can be achieved is to make use of technology, but, as Marshall (2010) argues, the introduction of technology has not necessarily resulted in an improved teaching and learning experience. There is also a call for the development of more appropriate theories of learning (Kress, 2008) and new teaching methods (Ganobcsik-Williams, 2006a) to cater for the ongoing instability and diversity of contemporary education. Tensions may occur in relation to teaching styles. For instance, students or staff may have different preferences around learning collaboratively, in contrast to learning alone (Jeffrey et al., 2006). A socially constructed, active learning approach, where student independence is encouraged and the lecturer takes on a facilitative role, may be espoused but does not always happen (O'Donnell et al., 2009). At times there is a continuation of the traditional cognitive approach involving direct instruction where students learn as individuals.

Students still, of course, need to meet the academic expectations set by the institution. Non-traditional students might find these to be out of touch with their lifeworlds, and they may need to come to terms with the more academic and theoretical approach

offered by universities, as distinct from a collaborative, real-life setting (Hiemstra, 1994; B. Merriam, 1987; D. Pratt, 1988). Transitioning students, whether mature, second-language or enrolling with alternative entry, may find a gap between their understanding of academic reading and writing and their lecturers' expectations (Lillis, 1999). Students are positioned through their participation in disciplinary discourses. They acquire the academic and cultural characteristics of the discipline through reading, writing and socially situated engagement (Lave & Wenger, 1991). The challenges that mature postgraduate students face in meeting the academic literacy requirements of institutions of higher education are a major focus of this study.

3.3   Students and academic literacy needs

As indicated in Chapter 2, the increase in student numbers in recent decades and issues surrounding student writing have brought academic literacy practices at university under scrutiny. Whereas the United States has a history of providing writing instruction for students from diverse backgrounds, especially since the Second World War (Bazerman et al., 2005), in the United Kingdom a focused concern about writing in higher education has a shorter history, and arose principally in the 1990s (Lillis & Scott, 2007; Wingate & Tribble, 2012). To date, practical support for academic writing has not focused a great deal on embedded approaches. Instead provision has largely concentrated on two areas: instruction for non-native speakers of English; and remedial study skills support through workshops taught separately from the disciplines (Lea, 2004; Wingate & Tribble, 2012). Both Australia (Skillen, 2006) and New Zealand have followed this trend (Emerson, Mackay, Funnell, & Mackay, 2002). There is general acceptance of the value of mainstream teaching along with evidence of improved retention and pass rates when academic skills development is integrated within specific subject disciplines (Manalo, Marshall, & Fraser, 2010, p. 27). However, embedded initiatives are often ad hoc, since these moves are likely to be initiated by individuals or departments, rather than through an institution-wide approach (Emerson, 2004 ; Ivanic & Lea, 2006; P. Strauss & Mooney, 2011).

3.3.1   Expectations of student writing

Bartholemae (1985) observed that students learn to write using "the peculiar way of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding and arguing that defines the discourse of our community" (p. 403). Three decades later, literacy practices in the

academy continue to determine what is taught or published (Chege, 2009; Hermerschmidt, 1999). Students write for a particular audience and are judged by the standards of their discipline (Hermerschmidt, 1999). As potential members of a discipline, students need to imagine themselves as insiders and to assume the privileges of being a member. Writing is an "act of identity" since students have to demonstrate that they identify with the particular conventions, values and beliefs of that discipline (Burgess & Ivanic, 2010, p. 228). At a time of expansion in higher education and increasing student diversity, however, there are complexities involved in this approach.

As indicated earlier, academic literacy practices involve a range of texts, including those used in digital settings (Lea, 2013). Contemporary influences on literacy have resulted in the introduction of new forms of reading, writing and communication into the academy (Goodfellow, 2004b). These new genres include specialised texts required by professional disciplines and texts used in computer-based communications (Crook, 2005; Lea & Jones, 2011). However, in the social sciences, essayist writing continues to predominate (Henderson & Hirst, 2007), even though Graff and Duffy (2008) suggest that the bias towards formal, discursive writing constitutes a nostalgia "to a status quo that may have already passed" (p. 46).

As discussed in Chapter 2, the academic literacies framework has challenged the textual focus of the autonomous, skills-based approach to emphasise the social, context-dependent nature of writing (Street, 2004, 2006) and the difficulties associated with assumptions that writing is transparent and easily transferred from context to context (Lea, 2004; Wingate & Tribble, 2012).

3.3.2   The "problem" of student writing

However, despite Graff and Duffy's (2008) comment, writing remains a high-stakes activity and constitutes the main form of assessment (Lillis & Scott, 2007, p. 9), as well as being a central aspect of disciplinary knowledge development (Hyland, 2011). Since writing is historically and socially defined, newcomers have to negotiate the unfamiliar concepts, values and viewpoints. Gee (2004) observes that learning to write is "part of the reflection upon and change in disciplinary knowledge itself" (p. 16). Yet poor writing at university is still blamed on inadequate preparation by schools (Hyland, 2009a; Tusting, 2008) or the suspect quality of diverse students in a mass education system. Beginning students, regardless of level, "no longer necessarily know what to do

in response to conventional assessment tasks, essay criteria, or instructions about styles of referencing" (Haggis, 2006, p. 522). Furthermore, students may not appreciate that, as well as exploring existing knowledge, learning is about critical questioning and creating new knowledge (Lillis, 1999; Lillis & Turner, 2001). Requirements are often an "institutional practice of mystery" (Lillis, 1999, p. 127) for students, since they are not always explicit, while lecturers, who have been immersed in their discipline, regard the use of these conventions as common sense and transparent. In addition, the focus on students as underprepared, older, or from different ethnic backgrounds (Ivanic & Lea, 2006) diverts attention from a critical examination of the discourse practices of the institution (Badenhorst, Moloney, Rosales, Dyer, & Ru, 2014). Instead of a focus on student inadequacies, the embedded and sometimes invisible discourse practices should be examined (Lillis, 1999), along with considerations such as the adequacy of the pedagogical approach or course design practices (Haggis, 2006; Wingate & Dreiss, 2009).

A concern for postgraduate students is the need to gain access to ongoing support for academic literacy concerns. O'Donnell, Tobbell, Lawthon and Zammit (2009) caution that it may be difficult for students to transition satisfactorily into postgraduate study if course design practices do not assist in the development of academic skills. There is general agreement about the value of situated approaches (Feekery & Emerson, 2013; Gee, 2010; McWilliams & Allan, 2014) and a call for greater engagement between disciplinary teachers and writing specialists (Starfield, 2007). Despite these sentiments, a frequent response to inadequate student writing continues to be remedial, skills-based instruction. Researchers have argued that this tendency pathologises the student (Haggis, 2006; Lea & Street, 1998). Haggis (2006) suggests that the focus should be on clearly explaining expectations to students in terms of the underlying values and assumptions. Wingate (2014) adds that it is necessary to provide all students with support, which reinforces the argument for embedding instruction into course design and requiring lecturers to take some responsibility for teaching writing. This approach aligns with sociocultural perspectives, including writing in the disciplines and community-based approaches, where students learn the norms and values of the community through peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Students may arrive with their own understanding of literacy requirements only to discover they do not align with lecturer expectations (Lea, 1999; Lillis, 1999). Those

with a non-traditional profile, whether mature, second-language, or enrolling with alternative entry, may have little prior experience with academic literacy (Ackerman, 1991). Hermerschmidt (1999) argues that even professional English teachers may become outsiders and newcomers on their return to university. In a similar vein, Lea (2012) describes the tension between academic theory and professional practices which surfaced in a postgraduate research project involving new lecturers taking an online Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practices. Whereas facilitators expected these lecturers-turned-students to start from the theoretical material and to incorporate their practical experience in terms of theoretical perspectives, students approached their assignments from the opposite perspective of practical experience. They experienced difficulties in shaping their reflections on practice to course theory, and in supporting their claims with appropriate references. Lea also found that the facilitators spoke of "scholarly writing", a term which embodies implicit expectations. For their part, the students were unsure what scholarly writing actually looked like.

The values, beliefs and practices which belong to a particular discourse – referred to as an "identity kit" by Gee (1996) – need to be acquired. Essentially, academic writing involves persuading readers and establishing one's own credibility by using conventions which fit the assumptions, methods, and knowledge of the group (Hyland, 2009b), as well as writing and thinking in ways attributable to long-standing traditions (Lillis & Turner, 2001). For a student to communicate as a disciplinary insider, practices such as clarity of expression, tight structure and logical coherence need to be mastered (Bazerman, 1988). Basic requirements, such as argument, analysis and critique, are broadly applicable (Lea, 2012), but discipline-specific knowledge about the use of disciplinary variations such as the use of reporting verbs, hedges, or self-mention (Hyland, 2009b) is also required. Paradoxically, conforming to disciplinary conventions to become accepted as an insider requires a writer to convey a credible sense of self, such as through the use of the first person (Hyland, 2002c). Displaying a sense of authority and confidence is another dimension which draws attention to the issues surrounding power and identity considered central to academic writing (Lillis, 2006).

3.3.3   Knowledge, identity and power in academic writing

In poststructuralist theory, knowledge, identity and power are co-constituted in educational practice (Mason & Clarke, 2010). In a poststructural world identity is no longer perceived as fixed and objective (Mason & Clarke, 2010) but as multiple,

changing, and a site of struggle (Norton & Toohey, 2011). An academic literacies perspective argues that universities have developed social, cultural and institutional practices which are permeated by relations of power (Burgess & Ivanic, 2010; Lea & Street, 1998). Kramer-Dahl (1995), taking a critical perspective, contends that the rhetorical demands of every course at university are potentially threatening to students:

> Every faculty member is a potential executioner, not simply because of his or her personal characteristics ... but because of the tradition of the institution and the way it is actually organized. I suggest therefore that the first line of defence against the violence of the rhetoric of the establishment is to learn something about rhetoric. (p. 21)

Students transitioning into learning usually arrive with a sense of optimism and with the intention of learning and achieving. However, Wilkinson and Folley (2014) suggest that the requirements of academic rigour alongside work-life demands can destroy initial enthusiasm unless students are offered adequate support. For the individual, a sense of self is constructed through language use (Norton, 2008), along with the development of an identity based on the values, beliefs goals and activities of the community (Ivanic, 2004). However, the process of learning the requisite academic literacy may make a student feel devalued and alienated (Canagarajah, 2002; Lillis & Turner, 2001), especially if prior experiences are not recognised (Baynham, 1995; Gee, 1989b; Graff & Duffy, 2008). Some students may also be resistant when requirements conflict with their current sense of identity, such as when mature professionals-turned-students feel they are being "deprofessionalised." This can happen when their practice-based knowledge is subordinated to institutional requirements (Hermerschmidt, 1999, p. 14). Students who struggle to master conventions, such as those relating to genre or referencing, may also have difficulty building a positive academic identity in the study situation (Starfield, 2007).

Burgess and Ivanic (2010) explain that the process of constructing a discourse identity takes place over time through progressive identity shifts. They identified four aspects of writer identity in their study of six mature women and their struggle over the values and beliefs involved in conforming to academic writing conventions (see Figure 1). The aspects include the autobiographical self or identity the students bring to their writing; the discoursal self or impression they convey through their writing; the sense of self, including authoritativeness as an author; and the subject positioning the student adopts

(Ivanic, 1997a). More recently, Burgess and Ivanic have introduced the reader as a fifth element in the complex interrelationships involved in writing.
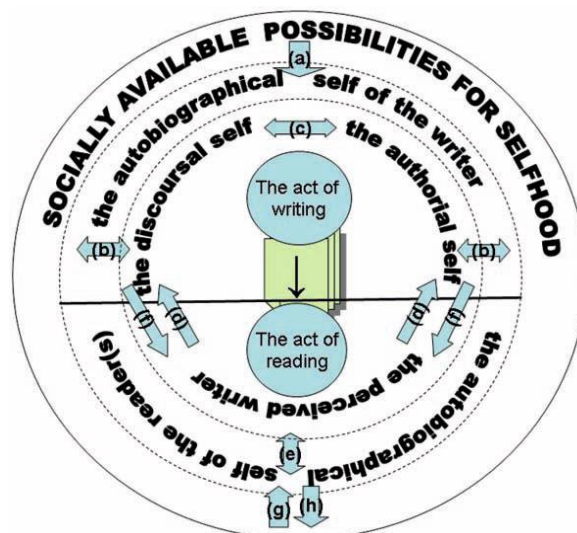
Figure 1 The discoursal construction of writer identity: aspects and relationships. Reprinted with permission (Burgess & Ivanic, 2010, p. 236).

This emphasis on development over time has implications for students in modular courses, which tend to be of short duration. Since writing is a process, the way that students engage with academic writing is an important consideration. Ivanic (1997a) argues that student writers have the choice of reproducing requirements uncritically, or challenging the values and beliefs of the discourse. In practice, however, overt challenges might not be possible because of the inherent power and gatekeeping involved in writing and assessment. As Street notes:

> Literacy in this sense is always contested, both its meanings and its practices, hence particular versions of it are always 'ideological', they are always rooted in a particular world-view and a desire for that literacy to dominate and to marginalise others. (2006, p. 2)

The contested nature of literacy is characteristic of asymmetrical relations of power. Lave and Wenger's (1991) work on what they term "limited peripheral participation" also contributes to considerations about power, since newcomers learn through participation, although their access may be assisted or constrained by old timers. The institutional structure of organisations often creates relations of power between those who hold it and those who strive to gain access to the norms and conventions needed for acceptance (Lea & Street, 1998), an aspect which occupies the attention of critical theorists. While critical pedagogy has been championed by Freire (1972) and Shor

(1999), the approach is largely peripheral to mainstream practice. English for academic purposes (EAP) specialists have articulated a dilemma as they wonder whether or not students should be helped to challenge specific literacy conventions (Cadman, 2000; Canagarajah, 2006). Where students are discouraged from active critique, writing is viewed as a process of silencing one's voice (Cadman, 2000; Viete & Phan Le Ha, 2007) or of submitting to the requirements of native speakers of English who assume ownership, in spite of the internationalisation of the English language (Phan Le Ha, 2005). These perspectives influence the process of acculturation into existing discourse and may hinder the development of a discourse identity, especially for students from non-mainstream backgrounds.

An important influence on students' identity is the nature of feedback on assessments, which sometimes positions the student in deficit (Burgess & Ivanic, 2010; Lea & Street, 1998). Feedback on assessments and thesis chapters can inadvertently contribute to students' feelings of inadequacy. Brief comments and suggestions about analysis, structure or argument could have a particular disciplinary orientation which the students do not understand and interpret as a criticism of their writing style. Lillis (2003) argues that students need to be able to pursue a dialogic approach to assist their writing development. Eventually, increased awareness of disciplinary conventions enables the student to contribute to existing knowledge through writing (Thaiss & Zawacki, 2006; Wallace & Wray, 2011). Students in some programmes will be encouraged to contribute to new knowledge by building on existing knowledge (Wingate, 2006), while others may be required to keep within the frame.

3.4   The web-based environment amidst ongoing change

In the 21st century web-based delivery modes have become a regular part of teaching and learning (Lea & Stierer, 2000) in the same way that they have permeated the home and workplace (Leu et al., 2004). However, digital technology, with its continually emerging literacy forms and communication styles, creates areas of tensions with traditional literacy practices. Old, monomodal literacy genres offer a secure, stable link with the past. In contrast, literacy influenced by technology is a reminder of the shifting communication environment. In a review of digital technology, Goodfellow (2011) summarises the way these changes challenge traditional assumptions about knowledge in higher education, noting that they represent a move away from a "conventional focus

on disciplinary knowledge expressed as 'academic' writing and from the ethos of debate and principled scepticism, towards a more contingent culture of participation in digitally mediated professional, occupational and lifelong learning communities" (p. 141).

In spite of official policies celebrating widening access and the literature documenting changes, dominant cultural practices within the university persist: "Traditional hierarchies of esteem remain largely untouched" (Schuetze & Slowey, 2000, p. 20). Lecturers often continue to view the university role in terms of selective entry and specialised academic disciplines (P. Scott, 1995) and hold the conviction that students should arrive with the requisite writing skills (Russell et al., 2009). Where academic writing is viewed as a stable, autonomous form, the question to consider is whether this static interpretation is sufficient for contemporary society (Kress 2000). The intertwining of technology influences and longer-term practices (Lea, 2012) means that discourse conventions continue to evolve. Traditional academic writing in contemporary higher education is less stable, less unified and less resistant to alternatives (Thaiss & Zawacki, 2006); there are emergent discipline areas (Baynham, 2000; Street & Hornberger, 2008) and claims about exceptions to traditional academic writing.

Communication technologies, as part of the dynamic global landscape, include a range of multimedia and online text forms. In web-based education, DFs, wikis and blogs are familiar genres, often used to co-construct knowledge (S. Alexander & Golja, 2007). The integration of innovative literacy practices such as instant messaging (Weller et al., 2005) may also be expected as part of web-based study. There is a growing literature on the integration of emerging technologies into course design (Aldrich, 2009). This practice reflects the move to less formal mediums, with the inclusion of social networking tools such as wikis, Facebook and YouTube. The dialectic about the integration of technology-based tools, along with simulated, immersive teaching environments such as Second Life, takes place through peer-reviewed journals, conference presentations (T. Anderson, 2007) and personal websites. Siemens' (2004) proposal of revising e-learning pedagogy using his theory of connectivism epitomises the mixing of these formal and informal technology tools.

However, formal disciplinary characteristics and requirements persist despite the increased influence of virtual literacies (Bloomaert, Street, Turner, & Scott, 2007). Lea

and Jones (2011) argue that the integrated nature of learning, literacies and technologies means that to study a text in isolation is no longer sufficient for academic research. There is the potential for technology to disrupt traditional academic literacy. Nevertheless, when students access web-based resources, the evidence suggests that they are guided by the authority of institutions who appear to favour the traditional approach (Thaiss & Zawacki, 2006). Goodfellow (2005) reinforces this view of the influence of institutional power. In his study of masters online students, the use of an e-Write site was intended to promote the students' critical awareness of literacy practices and to encourage critique. Yet student responses were framed in terms of the dominant, formal writing model. Lea (2004) recorded a similar experience in relation to marking criteria. An attempt at a discursive approach to assessment resulted in students requesting a more familiar marking schedule. In spite of ongoing change, students, and even facilitators, may prefer the familiarity of established worlds and assumptions between facilitator and tutor, along with familiar assessment tools (L. Bartlett & Holland, 2002).

For some students and tutors however, a tension exists between newer interactive text types used during courses and more conservative formats used for assessment practice. Online postings and interactive strategies are often used to build competencies rather than to assess them (Goodfellow, 2004a). Higher education still privileges individual assessment based on traditional genres such as reports and essays (J. Murphy, 2008). The integration of social networking tools into course activities invites a closer examination of student and course coordinator perceptions of their uptake for academic literacy development and for assessment purposes, especially for the postgraduate, web-based cohort. The tension between traditional education practices and the level of engagement with the integration of dialogical technology tools as part of literacy practices is ongoing.

3.4.1   Interaction as part of web-based learning

The web-based environment enables academic literacy skills to be embedded online as course tutorials (Gunn et al., 2011; Wingate & Dreiss, 2009). Potentially, online strategies and interactions can provide authentic tasks to effectively support large, multilevel, online classes (J. Herrington, Oliver, & Reeves, 2003). There are numerous advantages to using a web-based environment. Students' access is flexible, which allows them to structure their studies around other commitments and work at their own

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pace. In many institutions, services such as information literacy instruction are hyperlinked on course webpages, so that assistance is accessible with one click on the link at point of need (Ellis, 2012b; Rempel & Davidson, 2008). Links to specialist support staff (Chanock, 2003) are also available to assist students with their web-based learning (Ludwig-Hardman & Dunlap, 2003; Thompson & Hills, 2005).

The didactic literature on web-based, student-centred pedagogy is substantial (R. Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007; Jonassen, Davidson, Collins, Campbell, & Bannan Haag, 1995; M. Moore, 2002). Theoretical models which frame online, co-constructive course design include the Community of Interest (T. Anderson, Rourke, Garrison, & Archer, 2001), Mayes' Conceptualisation Cycle (InfoNet, 2008), and Salmon's five-stage E-tivities (2004, 2006). These approaches emphasise interaction and social-constructivist Vygotskian principles (Hung & Chen, 2001) and might underpin the teaching and learning experiences of online students, if their tutors are familiar with the literature. The assumption underpinning these models is that web-based teaching and learning is based on collaborative endeavours (R. Garrison, 2006; Rovai & Jordan, 2004; Salmon, 2004). Participants build understanding together, scaffolded by a course coordinator or by more experienced group members (Jonassen et al., 1995; McLoughlin & Marshall, 2000; Salmon, 2005). Through communities of practice, a process akin to apprenticeship, participants are expected to acquire implicit and explicit cultural and academic group values and skills (Wenger-Trayner, 2011). Social presence, described as "the ability of learners to project themselves socially and emotionally in a Community of Inquiry" (Rourke, Anderson, Garrison, & Archer, 2001, p. 3), is seen as a cornerstone for developing such a community. Learning occurs through co-constructed written activities shaped to discipline interests. The process includes activities such as DFs, problem-based activities, weblogs and wiki development (Lorenzi, MacKeough, & Fox, 2004).

However, the literature appears to offer little information about mature postgraduate students' understanding of the pedagogy underpinning online instruction in relation to academic literacy development. An area for investigation therefore is how such students respond to a change from lecturer-directed models to those based around web-based engagement with learning (Laurillard, 2005), and to what degree such changes challenge students returning to further study. In some courses the learning management system (LMS), which is the software application used for delivery of e-learning

education, is used solely as a repository for resources and does not utilise the potential of the LMS as an interactive learning environment (Marshall, 2012). The integration of social networking tools into course activities invites a closer examination of student and coordinator perceptions about their usefulness, and of the way that the development of competencies surrounding newer forms of literacy are developed. The complexity of web-based learning is recognised by higher education institutions, and it is common practice to hold orientation or induction sessions for students to assist retention and to ease their transition into web-based study (Forrester, Motteram, Parkinson, & Slaouti, 2005; Kanuka & Jugdev, 2006).

3.4.2   Kick-starting through induction

Induction refers to face-to-face sessions of varying duration held at the commencement of web-based programmes to prepare students to become effective web-based learners (Forrester et al., 2005). These programmes include online packages and blended programmes, where events such as block courses are held. The literature suggests that induction sessions serve several important functions. For example, fostering a sense of community is considered central to promoting satisfaction and retention (Rovai, 2002). In addition, academic and social engagement is enhanced (MacFadden, 2008) and feelings of isolation and anxiety reduced (Knight & Pearson, 2005; Muilenburg & Berge, 2005; Rovai, 2002). Positive social interactions are also said to support a move from social to cognitive presence, a process involving collaborative construction of meaning as part of constructivist pedagogy (D. Garrison & Cleveland-Innes; Palloff & Pratt, 2003; Salmon, 2012; Yildiz, 2009). Another valuable outcome of interactions during induction is the reduction of the social distance between facilitator and students, referred to by Arbaugh (2001) as "instructor immediacy behaviours" (2001, p. 42). The literature also emphasises the importance of minimising negative experiences such as frustration associated with learning technical aspects of web-based learning (Hara & Kling, 2000; MacFadden, 2008; O'Regan, 2003).

Development of relevant technology competencies is vital to assist the transition into web-based study (Ludwig-Hardman & Dunlap, 2003; McVay Lynch, 2001), for resource access, for interactions (M. Moore & Kearsley, 2011) and to enhance satisfaction, retention and completion rates (Forrester & Parkinson, 2006). Mastery of new computer applications is another consideration which Anderson (2001) contends is not overtly taught but is part of a hidden curriculum. In addition, students are

introduced to digital library resources and web-based support services offered by the library (Kumar & Ochoa, 2012; Lamond & White, 2008). Because web-based postgraduate students often enrol with varied levels of readiness, both Atak and Rankon (2002) and Gaide (2005) recommend pre-assessment of student competencies so that induction sessions can be targeted to individual needs. However, this is no easy task as the diverse requirements of students are usually not fully acknowledged. Induction sessions often follow a whole-class teaching model which appears to assume the homogeneity of students (O'Donnell et al., 2009).

As stated above, postgraduate students entering web-based study often lack familiarity with academic expectations (O'Donnell et al., 2009). In an employment-focused era (Bocchia et al., 2004), enrolment may be based on professional experience rather than on academic qualifications. These students face a number of very real challenges that need to be addressed in induction sessions. To begin with, a challenge for some is simply coming to grips with self-directed learning (E. Murphy & Coleman, 2004) and discovering how to access resources online (R. Miller, 2005; Motteram & Forrester, 2005). Engaging in critical discussion on web-based DFs is another source of anxiety (M. Moore, 2002). In the same vein, many students are concerned about how they should interact with lecturers online (Motteram & Forrester, 2005). In addition, many students feel overwhelmed by the amount of reading which is required and express uncertainty about how they should manage their time.

From an organisational perspective, the multiple concerns of students indicate that there are competing priorities at the induction stage. One area is the tension between learning technology applications and clarification of academic expectations. Mastery of basic technology applications can often take precedence over such aspects as academic literacy requirements, simply because it is essential to establish technology competencies first. Without these competencies students will not be able to operate online. The sessions are often information-dense and may not allow students sufficient time to practise the various competencies they require to operate successfully in the online environment. Cognitive overload and anxiety caused by too much information may lead to early student dropout (Chen, Pedersen, & Murphy, 2011; Tyler-Smith, 2006). Such tensions are also exacerbated by the trend towards modular courses with short timeframes.

Students are expected to develop advanced information literacy skills and cognitive qualities such as negotiation of meaning, reflective analysis and metacognition in a relatively short space of time (Nunes & McPherson, 2006). As a consequence, some facilitators choose to lessen the intensity of their induction sessions by limiting academic literacy content, indicating that a balance between cognitive overload and laying the groundwork for academic literacy is needed. However, challenges for some students ensue if course requirements are not made explicit (Lillis & Turner, 2001; Mayer, 2004; Street, 2004).

O'Donnell et al (2009) observe that educational transition literature on newly enrolled postgraduate students is sparse. There may be an assumption among providers that postgraduate study is the continuation of previous education at a higher level, regardless of whether students are adequately prepared. However, there is evidence that cognitive, affective and administrative support provided at induction increases motivation, retention and completion rates (Forrester & Parkinson, 2006; Kanuka & Jugdev, 2006; Tait, 2003).

Among the many dimensions of web-based study which could be introduced at induction is the meaning and nature of self-directedness (R. Miller, 2005). Lecturers may expect postgraduate students to take responsibility immediately for their academic literacy needs (Caffarella & Merriam, 1999). However, students express anxiety about how to become self-directed in the web-based environment (R. Miller, 2005; Motteram & Forrester, 2005). Pratt (1988) suggests that self-direction should be viewed as a situational attribute which alters according to need. His view is that students should be able to seek support and direction from a lecturer when they lack the knowledge or skills. This perspective is supported by Brockett and Hiemstra (1991), for whom self-direction involves students taking responsibility for learning, with or without the assistance of others. Such considerations highlight the pressure and difficulties involved in meeting individual needs, since incoming students will have different strengths and requirements. Although induction is considered very important, one-off, front-loaded sessions are not necessarily sufficient if the student has to return home where help is not readily available. Continuing support is needed. Targeting information on a just-in-time basis (Forrester et al., 2005) through strategically placed hyperlinks (K. Moore & Aspen, 2004) is one possibility. Another solution is to provide the induction process on

an extended timeline, where additional support is arranged as an ongoing process (Wozniak, Mahony, Lever, & Pizzica, 2009).

Student responses to induction practices vary. Miller (2005) found that some students felt overwhelmed, while others took new requirements in their stride. Cain, Marrara, Pitre and Armour (2003) report that after induction some students are either unaware of, or choose not to access, academic or technical support services offered by their host institution. A concern is that students are often expected to "hit the ground running" in line with the trend towards courses with short timeframes (Wozniak et al., 2009, p. 221). The process of establishing a social presence and a functioning online community also needs to be nurtured at this time (Vesely, Bloom, & Sherlock, 2007), since positive interactions underpin effective academic engagement (Palloff & Pratt, 2007; Yildiz, 2009). Ideally, web-based learning involves effective interaction through DFs, audio conferencing, or other computer-mediated means (Motteram & Forrester, 2005).

3.5   Computer-mediated communication (CMC)

Computer-mediated communication (CMC) refers to "the use of networks of computers to facilitate interaction between spatially separated learners" (Jonassen et al., 1995, p. 221). Different forms of CMC used in web-based study include weblogs, wikis, and video or audio interactions. A common use of CMC in the web-based environment is the exchange of ideas on course readings through writing. The academic benefits of CMC are supported by a considerable number of studies (Boud & Prosser, 2002; D. Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2005; Goodfellow, Morgan, Lea, & Pettit, 2004; Laurillard, 2005; M. Moore, 2002; Sharpe & Benfield, 2005). This research is based on the belief that learning is socially constructed (Ostlund, 2008; Swan, Garrison, & Richardson, 2009) and argues that student reflections on CMC support the process of collaborative dialogue.

DFs, whether synchronous (real-time), or asynchronous (delayed time), are promoted as opportunities for students to question, analyse and interpret evidence. Reflective sharing through writing is assumed to promote the development of academic literacy attributes. A rich environment for active learning is claimed for this self-monitoring, situated learning process (Grabinger & Dunlap, 1995). Reading and formal writing have been shown to improve as a result of interactive text practices (Harasim, Hiltz, Teles, & Turoff, 1998). Metacognitive skills are promoted through reflection (Berge, 1995;

Schon, 1987), while critical engagement is considered to enhance understanding (Littleton & Whitelock, 2005). Hew and Cheung (2010) note the value of written online communication for exchanging views, seeking clarification and constructing ideas. Their study explored a complex problem-solving task for 41 masters education students and found that the quality of contributions and knowledge construction was greater when there were more frequent contributions.

One of the advantages of using DFs is that they can help to create a holistic, supportive, online environment. A strong sense of community can increase feelings of belonging and reduce attrition (Rovai, 2002). Following a constructivist approach, R. Garrison and Arbaugh (2007) argue that cultivation of social presence enhances learner satisfaction. They also emphasise that, although students are not engaging for purely social reasons, social presence is necessary for the development of cognitive activities. Hammond (2005) emphasises that participation in class activities is one of the characteristics of a successful learner.

Although DFs have many advantages, they also have a number of drawbacks. Students experience discomfort at the lack of verbal clues in text-only communications (E. Murphy & Coleman, 2004). DFs may fail because of lack of peer interaction. Alternatively, some students might be alienated if others dominate discussions. Furthermore, in spite of the evidence that increased participation appears to enhance cognitive performance (Hew & Cheung, 2010), as does lecturer input (Rourke et al., 2001), it is often difficult for facilitators to get students involved in high-level thinking and critical analysis. All too often, interactions stay at the comfortable stage of social interchange where there is minimal discussion, exploration of difference, co-construction of meaning, or new knowledge shared (D. Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2001; Kanuka & Anderson, 1998; Picciano, 2002). Gulati (2008) provides another critical perspective by inviting readers to consider that compulsory forum participation, far from allowing for individuality, represents conformity based on the dominant discourse and a disregard for individual learning styles. Gulati's argument challenges assumptions that dialogue using DFs automatically encourages deep learning or active student engagement and reflection (Conole, 2004).

Students too have reservations about the benefits of DFs. La Pointe and Reisetter (2008) surveyed 74 graduate students and reported unfavourable reactions to forum

participation, where exchanges with peers were described as "superfluous and inconvenient" (p. 6). Students on single-semester courses may not want a situated, collaborative learning experience and may instead rely on pre-existing social and academic networks outside their course. Those with a limited amount of time and whose focus is to meet assessment requirements sometimes prefer a teacher-centred approach (D. Pratt, 1988) and interactions with their course coordinators, rather than with their course peers (T. Anderson et al., 2001).

Clearly interaction in the online environment is challenging. As indicated, some students prefer a traditional approach. Similarly, some lecturers also prefer a more direct teaching style. Mayer (2004) and Kirschner, Sweller, and Clark (2006) argue cogently in favour of direct instructional guidance, drawing attention to different discipline approaches (Jonassen, Mayes, & McAleese, 1993). Direct instruction may also align with the experiences of second-language learners who need time to master basic academic literacy practices before using DFs (Cadman, 2000).

At the same time, the importance of the DF as a social tool is widely recognised. Moore (1997) found that where forums are working well, the opportunity for dialogue helps to reduce the sense of isolation or transactional distance, as well as create the opportunity for lecturer input into scaffolding and guidance of forum exchanges (Hara, Bonk, & Angeli, 2000). Lecturers have also responded with a range of strategies including compulsory assessed participation (T. Anderson & Kanuka, 2003; Hung & Chen, 2001) and induction of students into the routines and the discourses of CMC (Littleton & Whitelock, 2005). Other strategies include the use of questions, feedback, modelling of processes, and summarising contributions on DFs (Salmon, 2006). What is also apparent is that many students often need more help than can be supplied by individual lecturers. Academic support centres have an important role to play in this regard.

3.6   Academic student support centres

Central academic support centres are the dominant approach to academic support for students in New Zealand (Emerson et al., 2002). The centres are a key tool for facilitating successful academic literacy development. In spite of the criticism that standalone support focuses on skills and socialisation and is not sufficiently contextualised (Gee, 1989b; Street, 2006), the literature provides some evidence of the benefits of standalone provision. One example is a study by Manalo (2006) which

shows improved retention and high rates of qualification completion at postgraduate level. Over time student support programmes have expanded across all levels of university study to include a large array of graduate workshops, writing retreats, and static resources material for students. Support provision includes sessions which cover aspects of academic literacy such as reading strategies, technology usage, writing in different genres, and oral presentations. Academic student advisors located at a centre are also available for one-to-one assistance. Often these advisors are invited to course orientation sessions to introduce themselves and to encourage students to make contact. Centres increasingly offer voluntary services ranging from email contact to teaching sessions via Adobe Connect (Manager CTL, 2012).

Student academic support facilities have expanded to meet the new demands of internationalisation, increased numbers of student enrolments, and web-based study (Stevenson & Kokkinn, 2007). Attendance at workshops is usually voluntary but may not be available to web-based students. Where access is an issue, there is the question of equivalence and whether links are made between general campus support and the distance student (Lamond & White, 2008). Some researchers report raised awareness of the need for greater contextualisation of support utilising online spaces. Hicks, Reid and George (2001), for example, describe an institution-wide approach where a range of different support options allows choice and flexibility, and acknowledges changing needs. Provision was widened from standalone support to include online access to learning guides, workshops, and a focus on collaboration with academic staff. Other examples in the literature include embedding academic literacy (Gunn et al., 2011) and customised, online writing support with lecturers linking generic resources to the identified needs of masters students in their discipline area (P. Strauss, Goodfellow, & Puxley, 2009).

There is a great deal of evidence that the aid offered by these centres is welcomed by students. Tait (2003), commenting on student provision for open and distance learning in the United Kingdom, noted that 90% of students surveyed wanted student support, an important consideration in an era where students choose their university and where flexibility is important. Many students continue to take advantage of one-to-one support (Haggis, 2006), either online or in person (l. Wilkinson, Bowker, Deane-Freeman, & Rullan, 2008). Some postgraduate web-based students also travel to campus-based

courses or block sessions, while other activities, including peer support groups, are often promoted by student support centres (McLoughlin & Marshall, 2000).

Because students value the input of both academic support staff and their lecturers, it appears that greater interaction between support centres and disciplinary staff should be encouraged. There is widespread acknowledgement amongst language practitioners that all students need support (Ganobcsik-Williams, 2006a; Wingate, 2006). Leung (2008) reiterates the view that, irrespective of their language backgrounds, students benefit from assistance with academic language acquisition. A considerable body of literature records examples of successful embedded support (Chanock, 2007; Ganobcsik-Williams, 2006b; Gunn et al., 2011; Mackay & Simpson, 2013) and of liaison between academic staff and writing support staff. Challis, Holt and Palmer (2009) reflect on this and suggest there is a need for the support of senior executive staff and for academic language and literacy specialists to demonstrate their value through implementing activities in conjunction with faculty.

However, the reality of campus life is that these centres are viewed by university management as low-cost, budget-driven, add-on options (Wingate, 2006). Widening enrolments and the globalisation and marketisation of higher education has coincided with a fall in government resourcing (Lillis & Scott, 2007; Russell et al., 2009). Resource restraints mean a decrease in student-lecturer contact hours and pressure on non-lecturer, student-based services such as academic resources centres. Exacerbating the challenges these support centres face is the fact that the majority of discipline lecturers do not appear to value the work that they do (P. Strauss, 2013), viewing the centres "as a form of crash repair shop where welding, panel beating and polishing can be carried out on students' texts" (Chanock, 2007, p. 273). As Chanock points out, such a view only makes sense if the text is regarded "as a vehicle for the writers' thoughts and separable from the thoughts themselves" (p. 273).

Bartlett and Chanock (2003) assert that their work is neither remedial nor about fixing problems. They argue that students are proactively taught strategies to achieve appropriate outcomes. Stevenson and Kokkhin (2007) emphasise that academic practitioners view writing instruction as developmental and that they aim to develop student independence. Others argue that academic teaching approaches offer more than superficial skills instruction and seek to develop deeper student engagement based on

academic acculturation, explicit explanation of conventions, and proactive linking of strategies to disciplinary contexts (l. Wilkinson et al., 2008). Many specialist practitioners support socially situated rather than discrete approaches (Chanock, 2007). In a related area, EAP teachers also emphasise that multiple academic discourses cater for "specific needs and practices" (Hyland & Hamp-Lyons, 2002, p. 2), while Leung (2008) reports positively on academic language centres for second-language speakers across different countries.

However, the negative perception of academic advisors means that they are often employed part time or are contracted, as opposed to tenured staff, and are not accorded academic status (Hyland, 2004; Manalo, Bartlett-Trafford, & Crozier, 2008; P. Strauss, 2013). This lack of status and job security impacts negatively on their ability to help students facing challenges in the academic environment.

3.7   Information literacy

In the current digital environment the development of information literacy competencies is a graduate attribute (Lamond & White, 2008) and an essential component of academic literacy. In educational circles, information literacy is a " set of abilities enabling individuals to recognise when information is needed and have the capacity to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information" (Bundy, 2004, p. 2). At university, postgraduate students need to be information literate for research purposes, as well as for their future personal and professional lives (Rempel & Davidson, 2008). Health professionals, for example, need to be able to draw on the professional literature to inform their practice. Unlike students on campus, web-based learners typically lack access to a physical library, although they do have access to the online environment and to an abundance of resources (Ashcroft, 2004). However, there is a distinction between technology usage and information literacy competencies. These students need to be comfortable with technology and be able to understand the processes involved in order to find and use resources effectively (Johnstone & Krauth, 2002; Secker, 2004).

Rempel and Davidson (2008) found that information literacy development at postgraduate level is often neglected, either because lecturers assume that graduate students are already competent, or because students are expected to develop library and information skills independently. However, the wide variety of educational backgrounds amongst students suggests that there are knowledge gaps where students need

assistance. Examples include use of library interloan services, access to subject databases, and accurate citing of selected resources.

An overview of distance student information literacy needs from the librarian perspective is presented by Johnstone and Krauth (2002), who argue that it is more important to provide distance learners with instruction in information literacy than those on campus. Librarians, in collaboration with lecturers, could offer one-off face-to-face sessions at induction or during block courses on campus. Web-based options include standalone tutorials, credit-bearing online courses, and embedded information literacy instruction accessed online by the student.

Lamond and White (2008) suggest that the progress from passive to independent learner can be framed in terms of the delivery modes employed for resource access. The document delivery mode involves set reading lists, and is viewed as a passive method which encourages dependence. The second mode, reference, involves searching, locating and selecting resources. In partnership with a librarian, this method has typically been used as a teaching and learning situation. The third mode, autonomous, represents the active learner who works independently. Lamond and White also draw attention to sequential online tutorials available on some institutional library websites, which progressively lead students towards mastery.

Embedding information literacy skills development within a course is an effective way to meet the diverse needs of postgraduate students. By integrating the activities, all course participants have access to the information literacy component which is targeted to the appropriate level and shaped to the particular discipline. Because the information is contextualised, transfer issues are avoided, and students can take advantage of the flexible, self-paced design.

3.8   Summary

This chapter has highlighted recent societal changes and their impact on higher education in the 21st century. Universities have become knowledge-intensive organisations with far more open access. Consequently they are now catering for a very diverse student cohort. Postgraduate returning students, as part of these expanded enrolments, exhibit diverse characteristics as they transition into study using the web-based medium. Academic literacy development is a central concern, and particular

attention needs to be paid to writing and the way that academic literacy development is shaped by the postgraduate, web-based experience. This review has highlighted the potential tensions between integrated and standalone assistance and the varying effectiveness of course design strategies such as induction and CMC. Since students are "experts on their own experiences" (Creanor, Gowan, Howells, & Trinder, 2006, p. 9), their perspectives will offer valuable insights.

The character of the student population has changed (Laurillard, 2005). The literature emphasises the challenges faced by second-language students (Canagarajah, 2006), yet academic literacy issues extend to a wider range of learners, including first-language students. Arguably, all students, including the diverse range of postgraduate returning students, benefit from academic literacy instruction (Leung, 2008). In the web-based environment, Muilenburg and Berge (2005) suggest that student challenges are reduced after completion of one semester. However, the diverse student intake may include those who leave rather than voice their anxieties (Goodfellow, 2004b; Zepke & Leach, 2007). The combined voices of students, lecturers and support staff from library, academic literacy and information technology areas will assist in clarifying conditions, challenges and successful enabling strategies which are part of the postgraduate teaching and learning experience (MacDonald & Schreiber, 2001).

Contemporary theoretical literature, based on a new literacy studies perspective, views web-based teaching and learning interactions as socially situated (Street, 1993, 2004; Street & Hornberger, 2008), and such an approach is adopted in this thesis. Attention is drawn to the discipline-specific nature of academic literacy and the different writing styles and genres students are required to engage in across different disciplinary areas (Bartholomae, 1985; Lea & Street, 1998). Indications that central academic support courses are deficient (Lawrence, 2005; Lillis & Scott, 2007; Street, 2006) may require further investigation. It appears that in spite of the low status often accorded these support systems, they continue to play an important role in providing for students' academic literacy needs.

Web-based postgraduate programmes continue to increase internationally (Allen & Seaman, 2008; OECD, 2005). In this review I have provided the background for a study involving student, support staff and coordinator perspectives on academic literacy

acquisition for this cohort. Amidst ongoing technology changes it is hoped that the findings will have useful application for teaching and learning.

Chapter 2 surveyed the different approaches to student writing and the contributing influences of critical perspectives, genre frameworks, multiliteracies and the academic literacies paradigm. In this chapter, wider societal changes have been presented as the background context for the recent dynamic changes in higher education. I have explored prominent conceptualisations of academic literacy, along with assumptions relating to course design features such as induction, web-based communication, and the ways students are supported. Based on both literature reviews, I have identified the following areas for investigation in the context of mature postgraduate students returning to study in a web-based environment.

- Wider concerns which impact academic literacy development
- Participant perspectives on the value of standalone academic support
- Differences between student and lecturer expectations
- Postgraduate responses to induction in relation to academic literacy needs
- The value of collaborative web-based interactions

In the next chapter I describe the methodology used in this research, beginning with an explanation of how the literature reviews conducted in this and the previous chapter informed the choice of methodology.

Chapter 4 Methodology

The areas identified for investigation at the conclusion of chapter three provide the basis for the research questions. The first area involves wider concerns which impact academic literacy development. This is discussed in section 4.11 in terms of the conditional matrix. The area covers events such as globalisation, massification and tertiary education systems shaped to meet economic priorities. The other four areas investigate the value of standalone academic student support, the gap between student and lecturer expectations, responses to induction in relation to academic literacy needs and the value of collaborative, web-based interactions. These areas, developed from the literature review before being further refined by focus group sessions, provide a framework for the study. Suggested questions developed for the semi- structured interviews reflect the areas for investigation. The grounded theory approach allows participants to identify the nature of challenges and enabling factors from their own perspectives. These perspectives were reinforced by an examination of documentary resources. Collectively, the methods chosen for this study attempt to present a balanced view of participants' experiences and insights.

This chapter begins by discussing the influence of the literature review chapters in shaping the choice of methodology for this research. It then explains the analytical framework and features of the methodology before considering the adequacy of the methodology for the research topic.

The literature reviews conducted in Chapters 2 and 3 highlighted the impact of ongoing social changes in higher education. The nature of these changes suggest the suitability of a qualitative, inductive study design and the development of a grounded theory model, described as "a general methodology for developing theory that is grounded in data systematically gathered and analysed" (A. Strauss & Corbin, 1994, p. 273). This is because past, present and future events, based on the processes of action, interaction and consequences, underpin the transition experiences of postgraduate students in the web-based study environment. With respect to academic literacy, the historical legacy of the past is apparent in autonomous approaches (Baynham, 1995; Ivanic & Lea, 2006; Street, 1984; Wingate & Dreiss, 2009). However, these perspectives operate in competition with more recent sociocultural approaches (Gee, 2010; Lawrence, 2002). (Lillis & Turner, 2001). Tensions between remedial, study-skills provision (Lillis &

Scott, 2007) and discipline-specific academic literacy practices (Ivanic & Lea, 2006) also contribute to the background context for this study. Gaps between student and lecturer expectations (Lillis & Turner, 2001), the demands of web-based environments (Lea & Goodfellow, 2009), and changing government requirements add to the sense of ongoing change (Ivanic & Lea, 2006; Lillis & Scott, 2007; Lillis & Turner, 2001).

A grounded theory approach enables the complexity involved in experiences of students' academic journeys to be captured. (Emerson, 2012; Gunn et al., 2011; P. Strauss, 2013). The literature provides a useful starting point as a source of sensitising concepts (Bowen, 2006, p. 17), and initial interview questions (Corbin & A. Strauss, 2008, p. 37). The student transition into web-based, postgraduate study can be framed as a journey with a starting point, but with unknown steps before reaching the destination (Wingate, 2012). Student experiences and meanings they attribute to these experiences are shared, interpreted and constructed by the researcher (Corbin & A. Strauss, 2008, p. 10).

The data-collection and coding processes described in this chapter were utilised to capture the individual circumstances and differing perspectives of participants (Corbin & A. Strauss, 2008). The viewpoints of lecturers, students and academic support staff, including librarians, were sought. The intention of this parallel involvement was to capture diverse ideas about management of challenges in the relatively new area of academic literacy (Brumfit, 2003).

Data were collected from focus groups, semi-structured interviews and documents. Initially four focus group sessions were held at one New Zealand university over a period of five months. These sessions were followed by 50 semi-structured interviews, involving participants from five additional New Zealand universities. Conducted predominantly face to face, the interviews were held at locations throughout the country over a period of 14 months. Qualitative document gathering, the third data collection technique, was used to obtain further supporting evidence. A description of the methodology and the philosophical underpinning follows, along with a discussion of possible limitations.

4.1   A qualitative approach

The study is situated within the qualitative paradigm which is focused on the world of lived experience. A qualitative approach to research has gained in influence since the 1960s, following dissatisfaction with quantitative practices based on objective hypothesis testing and measurement. Insights into human behaviour rather than verification are sought (Guba & Lincoln, 1998) and consequently, a subjective and contextualised approach is appropriate (Guba & Lincoln, 2000; I. Holloway & Wheeler, 2002). Data gathered are descriptive rather than statistical. Analysis is inductive and aimed at accurate interpretation of the perspectives and meanings participants give to their experiences (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). As a qualitative researcher, I have set out to "study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008, p. 4).

Guba and Lincoln (1998) argue that qualitative enquiry allows for a discovery dimension, in contrast to quantitative approaches where direct evidence is favoured over divergent thinking (p. 76). The strategies utilised in this project are idiographic and aim to seek understanding from individual rather than generalised points of view (Guba & Lincoln, 1998). The research design used is emergent and the enquiry is open to adaptation and purposeful sampling of selected cases to gain rich description (Patton, 2002b). During data collection, the researcher stance is one of openness, responsiveness and empathy towards participants, along with an appreciation of process and change as part of the general condition of society.

As human constructions, alternative research strategies have been developed, shaped by different historical moments and assumptions (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, 2008). Since a choice of conceptual positions may be applied to an enquiry (Corbin & A. Strauss, 2008; Guba & Lincoln, 1998), the particular philosophical orientation of this study is described in the next section, which was adopted based on its suitability to the research problem and to my own belief system.

4.2   The analytical framework

The sequential, analytical framework depicted in Figure 4.1 explains the research approach of this study. An outline of each of the four concepts follows, since their

related values and beliefs underpin and guide this research (Crotty, 1998). They also align with my own worldview of knowledge as socially situated, constructed and part of an ongoing process of change.
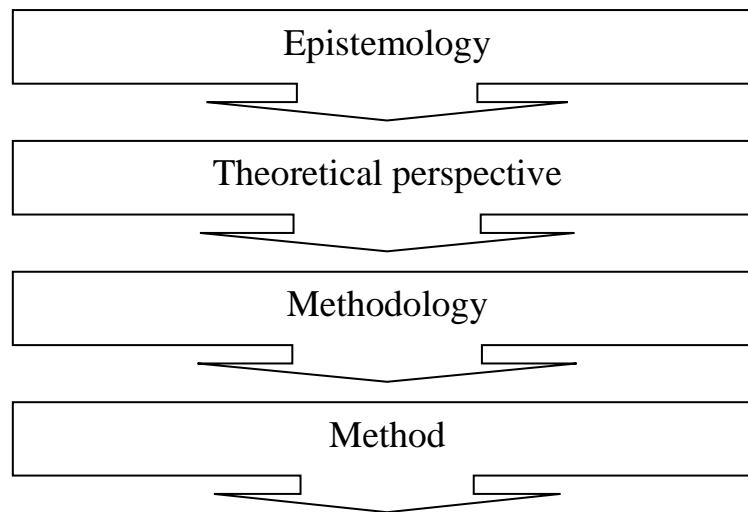
Figure 2 The theoretical analytical framework

4.2.1   Epistemology

The epistemology or theory of knowledge which guides this study originates in the constructivist paradigm. Bryant and Charmaz (2007) describe constructivism as:

> A social science perspective that addresses how realities are made. This perspective assumes that people, including researchers, create the realities in which they participate. Constructivist inquiry starts with the experience and asks how members construct it. To the best of their ability constructivists enter the phenomenon, gain multiple views of it, and locate it in its web of connections and constraints. Constructivists acknowledge that their interpretation of the studied phenomena is itself a construction. (p. 607)

Theory (or knowledge) is described as the construction of "an explanatory scheme that systematically integrates various concepts through statements of relationships" (A. Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 25). Constructivists define knowledge as local, multiple and constructed through social interaction (Corbin & A. Strauss, 2008; Crooks, 2001). Since knowledge is developed and findings are created as the study proceeds, the traditional distinction between ontology and epistemology disappears (Guba & Lincoln, 1998). Because knowledge is continually being created and re-created, results are always provisional. The researcher takes an active role in data gathering (Strubing, 2007).

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Participant and researcher co-create understanding (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011a) in a relationship which is perceived to be "interactive, subjective and interdependent" (Broido & Manning, 2002, p. 3).

This dynamic role contrasts with the traditional, received view which portrays respondents as passive and researchers as neutral. Traditionalists view interactions as a one-way conduit for receiving information from a pre-existing "vessel of answers" (Holstein & Gubrium, 1997, p. 117). Traditionalists may also describe an active approach to data collection as biased, for example when gathering interview data. Holstein and Gubrium (1997), however, argue that a pure interview situation is not possible. Guba and Lincoln (1998) concur, arguing that objectivity is not guaranteed. Since facts are always viewed through theoretical frameworks, the two are interdependent and are human constructions. In the constructivist paradigm it is accepted that interviews are not a neutral exchange: "Two (or more) people are involved in this process and their exchanges lead to the creation of a collaborative effort called the interview" (Fontana & Fey, 2005, p. 696). The active interviewer works flexibly, encourages participants to explore different perspectives, and focuses on the process and resulting information as a co-constructive endeavour (Rapley, 2011). This co-constructivist perspective represents a complementary theoretical perspective to symbolic interaction. The social construction of meaning is also influenced through the use of shared artefacts such as computers and through socially mediated language. In the following section, I link the constructivist view of knowledge with the theoretical perspective of symbolic interactionism.

4.2.2   Theoretical perspective

Symbolic interactionism, which was developed by sociologists of the "Second Chicago School" after the Second World War and influenced by the pragmatist tradition represented by Dewey and Mead (Corbin & A. Strauss, 2008, p. 1), maintains that human beings act on the basis of meanings which develop through social interaction (Crooks, 2001; Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). An objective view of knowledge is rejected (Guba & Lincoln, 1998; Rorty, 1982) in favour of knowledge developed through the actions and interactions of "self-reflective human beings" (Corbin & A. Strauss, 2008, p. 2). Truth is determined by what works in practice and by warranted assertion, where knowledge is confirmed through ongoing experience (Boyles, 2006).

Symbolic interactionists understand knowledge as negotiated and modified through an interpretive process involving symbolic representations such as language, rules or gestures (Blumer, 1969). Knowledge leads to action, which in turn generates changes in conditions as contingencies arise (Corbin & A. Strauss, 2008). Ongoing change on a variable trajectory is an assumption of qualitative research underpinned by symbolic interactionism (Dey, 1999; Patton, 2002a). My research incorporates these understandings through exploring enabling factors in response to challenges surrounding academic literacy, which in turn invite action by participants. An added perspective is provided by A. Strauss's (1993) use of the trajectory model to describe both the evolution towards a goal and the actions and interactions which assist this progression. The concept of trajectory is built into my study, since participants were seeking to develop their academic literacy skills to achieve learning outcomes.

At the micro social level, people use their understandings, language and beliefs (symbolic interpretations) to interpret each other's actions and to move towards a goal (Blumer, 1969). Participation in a web-based postgraduate course can be aligned to this view of knowledge as participants interact to develop academic literacy competencies and to achieve their course outcomes. Since actions generate ongoing change, these aspects of people's experiences are captured (Cresswell, 2013) and form an essential part of the study. At the individual level the process of academic literacy acquisition may also result in a redefinition of self.

While process encompasses individual agency (Charmaz, 2009), people also create meaning collectively through negotiation (Corbin & A. Strauss, 2008; Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Consequently, multiple and alternative perspectives of participants in their study setting are sought to ensure conceptual density (B. Glaser, 2009; Shalin, 1991). Interactionist beliefs also encompass the wider context and the ways in which participants' subjective experiences are shaped by dominant macro-level structures in society (Clarke, 2009; Denzin, 1992). Examples relating to this study include economic, social, governmental and technological influences, all of which have contributed to changing circumstances in higher education (Ivanic & Lea, 2006).

Symbolic interactionists define experiences symbolically through rules, norms and language (Denzin, 1992). Research participants adopt the language, processes and behaviours of their role within the university institution. However, the process and the

ways in which experiences are defined are likely to be more important than the structures themselves, since findings are specific to a particular time and place in society and history (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Patton, 2002b). Change occurs as a consequence of participant interactions. The findings of this study, as reported in later chapters, are therefore provisional and subject to modification as conditions and actions change.

Conclusions from this study have the potential to be applicable, useful and relevant in contemporary higher education (Charmaz, 2000; Corbin & A. Strauss, 2008). Because knowledge is social and contextualised, criteria for validity are defined in terms of the particular context. Criteria are also evaluated in terms of the interactive process between the researcher, subject matter, and the intended audience's perspectives (Altheide & Johnson, 1994). Symbolic interactionism demonstrates consistency with constructivist grounded theory methodology because both believe in the move from a received belief in an existing reality to a relativist ontology, where reality is viewed as multiple, local and constructed (Guba & Lincoln, 2000). Theory for constructivist grounded theory researchers is constructed as the research proceeds. Since individuals have choice, their actions in response to evolving conditions are complex. Researchers capture this range of behaviours as properties and dimensions of a category before progressively integrating findings as a grounded theory. This brief account explains how the theoretical perspective of symbolic interactionism influences constructivist grounded theory methodology, which is discussed in the next section.

4.3 Methodology: Constructivist grounded theory

In this section I describe distinguishing characteristics of grounded theory methodology (GTM) compared with other qualitative research methodologies. These characteristics are common to the different approaches in the GTM "family of methods" (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007b, p. 12). Three broad approaches are then described to indicate the evolving nature of grounded theory and to demonstrate the influence of underpinning paradigms (Guba & Lincoln, 2000). Accompanying issues are discussed to demonstrate the influence of the epistemology on data analysis, the research process (Birks & Mills, 2011) and use of the literature (Dunne, 2011). Characteristics of Straussian grounded theory and its evolution as a constructivist, postmodern approach in line with

contemporary thinking are then identified (Corbin, 2009). Lastly, my position as researcher is explained to demonstrate consistency with the methodological approach.

4.3.1 Distinguishing characteristics of grounded theory methodology

Compared with generic qualitative models, GTM has distinctive characteristics. According to Hood (2007), the three common components for a grounded theory study are constant comparative analysis, theoretical sampling, and theoretical saturation of categories (Babchuk, 2011; Bryant & Charmaz, 2007; Charmaz, 2006). Singled out as the "troublesome trinity" because of their perceived difficulty of application for newcomers (Hood, 2007, p. 163), these components are used across different versions of GTM. Constant comparison involves simultaneous data collection and analysis through all stages of the research study so that the coding process is built from existing data and not from prior hypotheses (Babchuk & Hitchcock, 2013; Hood, 2007). Coding decisions determine information to collect in the next round through the process of theoretical sampling (Charmaz, 2006; Corbin & A. Strauss, 2008). Negative cases are also sought and integrated into the emerging theory to provide increasing depth as properties of categories are developed (Dey, 1999; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Other characteristics of GTM include written records of analysis, or memos, to aid in the elaboration of categories and their relationships around a core phenomenon (J. Mills, Bonner, & Francis, 2006). Memos may be used to develop properties and categories, to ask questions, promote reflexivity, and develop a storyline (Corbin & A. Strauss, 2008, p. 118). Those who are using the method to develop theory present their findings as a unified explanation of a process or action (p. 107).

4.3.2 Evolution of the grounded theory method

Understanding and clarification of the evolution of grounded theory as a family of methods (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007a) assists in the selection of a grounded theory approach which accords with my personal beliefs as researcher and the aims of the research topic (Babchuk, 2011; Birks & Mills, 2011). Since the original grounded theory method promulgated by Glaser and Strauss (1967), different iterations have evolved along a methodological spiral (Birks & Mills, 2011; J. Mills et al., 2006). This evolution has occurred amidst a wider background of epistemological changes, away from positivist traditions towards interpretive ones (Bryant, 2002). These changes have included the development of constructivist grounded theory promulgated by Charmaz

(2000) and Straussian grounded theory, which are more flexible in their approach (Corbin, 2009). Grounded theory is presented as a family of approaches, with each approach having a particular philosophical and methodological perspective.

Babchuk (2009) identifies three broad epistemological versions of grounded theory. While Glaser (2002) has argued that classical grounded theory can be underpinned by any ontology, the expectation of tertiary institutions and research funding bodies is that students declare their underpinning philosophical position (Grix, 2002). The classical version of grounded theory, which is laid out in the seminal text *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research* (B. Glaser & Strauss, 1967), is associated with positivism. This tradition assumes an external world where reality emerges from the data and is discovered by an objective, neutral observer (Charmaz, 2009; Moghaddam, 2006). The publication of *Discovery of Grounded Theory* promoted qualitative research by creating a systematic methodology which allowed for extensive data analysis and theory construction (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007a). The approach assumes researcher neutrality, objective interpretation of data, and an external reality (Charmaz, 2000). Instead of verifying theory from existing research, the classical approach focuses on "discovering theory from data systematically obtained from research" (B. Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 2), a realist position which has remained consistent over the years (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007a).

The focus on emergence of concepts from collected data and on researcher objectivity influences the timing and function of the literature review. Classical grounded theorists advocate delay of the literature review to avoid contamination of emerging categories by preconceived ideas (B. Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Holton, 2007). However, this delay may create conflict for student adherents who must meet formal institutional requirements for research approval. Such practicalities surrounding academic research proposals influence the timing of the initial literature review which must accompany development of a topic (Schreiber, 2001, p. 58). In addition, it is necessary to situate a proposed topic within the current body of knowledge (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007c, p. 123), a requirement which is difficult to meet if the literature review is delayed. Interestingly, Charmaz (2006) entertains the idea of letting the literature review "lie fallow" (p. 166) by attending to the developing theory before using the literature review to provide information for subsequent chapters. This practice, if followed, is in line with use of the literature to challenge or support emerging theory (H. Heath, 2006).

By comparison, Corbin and A. Strauss (2008) argue that there are benefits from an early review of the technical literature, such as provision of questions for initial interviews. They suggest that ongoing reference to the literature as analysis proceeds enhances theoretical sensitivity towards data, stimulates thinking by providing examples of similar phenomena with their properties and dimensions, and suggests areas for theoretical sampling. The literature can also be used to confirm findings, while discrepancies within the literature may signal new discoveries.

The publication of *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory* (A. Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998) resulted in the development of a second broad version known as Straussian grounded theory. The resulting split between Glaser and Strauss led to debate centred around "emergence versus forcing" (Kelle, 2005, p. 1). While Kelle considers that the criticism is overdrawn, the grounded theory coding processes introduced in *Basics of Qualitative Research* were, at the time, considered too rigid. They were, it was argued, likely to force emergence and to result in low-level conceptualisation (Robrecht, 1995; Seidel & Urquart, 2013).

Basics of Qualitative Research (1990) also triggered debate about the philosophical underpinnings of grounded theory such as whether the approaches were post-positivist (Charmaz, 2000) or constructivist (J. Mills et al., 2006). The language used in the first two editions revealed inconsistencies. The second edition noted that it was impossible to be "completely free of bias" (p. 97) and made reference to "maintaining objectivity" (p. 43) and "creating theory out of data" (p. 56). Such statements attracted accusations of naive inductivism, where concepts emerge from data analysed by a neutral researcher (Kelle, 2005). The terminology, it was claimed, signalled a post-positivist emphasis on discovery and verification of data (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 12). In spite of these apparent inconsistencies, however, A. Strauss and Corbin (1994) claimed a relativist ontological position, stating that they did not believe in a pre-existing reality and that "truth is enacted" (1994, p. 279).

A further criticism centred on the Straussian approach to coding. Whereas Glaser's coding processes involve selection from coding families, with as many as 41 developed by 2005 (Seidel & Urquart, 2013), A. Strauss and Corbin (1994) advocated a single coding mechanism. "Axial coding" describes their process of networking concepts

around a category with the linking of related categories assisted by a coding paradigm. Critics asserted that the combination of complicated terminology, axial coding strategies, and the coding paradigm diverted attention from inductive development of categories (Birks & Mills, 2011; Charmaz, 2000; Robrecht, 1995), along with claims that the paradigm forced data, impeded emergence, and led to description rather than theory (B. Glaser, 1992).

Over time, the debates have subsided from acrimony into "more scholarly conversations" (Clarke, 2009, p. 195). Changes to strategies have also occurred. The Straussian coding paradigm originally conceptualised data from five different perspectives: context, causal conditions, intervening conditions strategies, interactions, and consequences (A. Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 6). This was considered obligatory in the first edition of *Basics of Qualitative Research* (1990, p. 99). The second edition, published eight years later, describes the paradigm more simply as a perspective and an analytic stance to help integrate structure and process (p. 128). By the third edition (Corbin & A. Strauss, 2008), the paradigm is described as one tool amongst others for helping the researcher to connect context and process, and the five components are reduced to three. They now cover causal conditions, interactions, and emotions in response to situations and consequences (p. 89). Instead of being mandatory, axial coding and the paradigm may now be used flexibly as part of a repertoire of tools. Changes to the methodology are intended to make it more relevant, and to acknowledge that people and methods change over time (Corbin, 2009, p. 37). As part of her own "analytic journey", Corbin no longer regards axial coding separately from open coding, describing the distinction as "artificial" (p. 198). Axial coding is really the last part of open coding where concepts are reassembled following initial fracturing. This evolution reflects changes resulting from engagement with postmodern and constructivist paradigms (p. 37).

The third edition of *Basics of Qualitative Research* (2008) finally articulates the pragmatist theory of knowledge which has underpinned Straussian grounded theory (Corbin & A. Strauss, 2008; A. Strauss, 1993). The technical focus of previous publications is also downplayed to align with contemporary thinking. Tools are options and processes to be used flexibly rather than rigidly followed. The change is reflected in practices already followed by members of the research community. Seidal and Urquart (2013), for example, conducted an extensive review of 96 empirical articles published

between 1987 and 2010. They found that axial coding and the coding paradigm were used flexibly, as part of a range of options and techniques available (p. 249). Corbin's own evolution and adoption of the postmodern paradigm encapsulates her belief that knowledge is built by researchers out of stories fashioned by research participants (2008, p. 10). The third edition of *Basics of Qualitative Research* follows a constructivist approach which I have chosen to use, and which aligns with the third version of grounded theory known as constructivist grounded theory.

Constructivist grounded theory has been primarily championed by Charmaz (2000). This version adopts a postmodern perspective and emphasises a relativist epistemology involving multiple, local and constructed realities (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007a). This position contrasts with the classical grounded theory view that theory emerges from data (Kelle, 2005). Because of its pragmatist underpinnings, theory is conceived as a representation of experience which is part of an ongoing process of change and "constructions and reconstructions" (Corbin & A. Strauss, 2008, p. 13). The constructivist researcher is positioned as an active participant. Theory is perceived as a co-construction between researcher and participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000), epitomising the belief that "there are and can be no sensations unimpregnated by expectations" (Lakatos, 1970 p. 90). Incorporation of multiple voices and their lived experiences is encouraged to represent "the 'realities' of those in the studied situation in all their diversity and complexity" (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007a, p. 30). Both researcher and participant values and preconceptions are acknowledged.

In contrast to the objective and neutral position advocated by classical grounded theory, constructivists turn to reflexivity and the need to acknowledge and analyse the way that prior experiences and biography inform their study (Cresswell, 2013). Researchers question the claims of themselves and their participants (Cunliffe, 2003), seeking to make responsible use of previous knowledge by keeping an open mind (Strubing, 2007). This is compatible with my role as researcher as it is explained in the following section.

4.4   Justification for the research approach

The analytical framework outlined in section 4.2 is an appropriate choice for a study aimed at exploring perspectives about academic literacy development in the context of contemporary postgraduate web-based study. This is because of the framework's

suitability for gathering data from practice-based settings. Theory can be inductively generated, rather than imposed from other research studies (Babchuk, 2009), and can uncover the contextual conditions and circumstances of events surrounding academic literacy acquisition (Seidel & Urquart, 2013, p. 248). As a recent line of enquiry, academic literacy practices in the online situation are situated within a dynamic, changing landscape. A qualitative research approach which allows for individual rather than generalised accounts of participants' experiences is important because of the diversity of this student cohort in contemporary university education. The epistemology and theoretical perspectives, based on symbolic interactionism, have already been outlined in this chapter. They permit use of a methodology which utilises "interpretive practices that make the world visible" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, p. 3).

Constructivist grounded theory allows the situated views of participants to be located within the larger contemporary context of higher education. This is a context characterised by marketisation, ongoing technology innovation and policy changes at both the institutional and governmental level (Ministry of Education, 2010; Tertiary Education Commission, 2014). Generating, developing and checking concepts during analysis also provides flexibility in response to unexpected findings (Bryman, 1984). Conclusions are presented as an integrated theory that is "a set of well-developed categories that are systematically interrelated through statements of relationship to form a theoretical framework that explains some relevant social, psychological, educational, nursing or other phenomenon" (A. Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 22). The resulting theory, based on multiple viewpoints, is intended to make a useful contribution to practical, contemporary academic literacy developments. Corbin (2009) notes that "findings either resonate, offer new insights, explore phenomena in depth, add to a knowledge base, and make you stand up and listen or they don't" (p. 52). It is hoped that the outcomes of this study will contribute practical suggestions to academic literacy aspects of teaching and learning for this cohort.

Grounded theory is today used extensively in the social sciences. Examples include describing process and challenge with minority groups in special education (Harry, Sturges, & Klingner, 2005), e-moderation practices in asynchronous online discussion (Vlachopoulos & Cowan, 2010), and approaches to teaching in higher education in Australia (Gregory & Jones, 2008). Grounded theory has also been used in New Zealand education doctoral theses (Lind, 2004). Across numerous disciplines grounded

theory is currently the most widely used qualitative research method (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007b).

The methodological justification for using a constructivist version of grounded theory includes philosophical and procedural appropriateness. The philosophical underpinnings of the third edition of *Basics of Qualitative Research Basics* (Corbin & A. Strauss, 2008) method align with contemporary qualitative approaches (Corbin, 2009). Pragmatist and symbolic interactionist perspectives have practical influences on the research process (Huber, 1973; A. Strauss, 1993), where knowledge is seen as local and provisional (A. Strauss & Corbin, 1998), involving human agency (Charmaz, 2014) and multiple perspectives constructed through social interaction (Crooks, 2001; A. Strauss & Corbin, 1998). An implication for researchers is the importance of taking individual differences into account (Corbin & A. Strauss, 2008). While concepts and theories are constructed by researchers out of stories constructed by research participants, MacDonald and Schreiber (2001) state that the pragmatic criteria of "fit, work, and grab" apply (p. 43). As Bryant (2014) explains, "fit" means the theoretical insights are appropriate to the context; a theory "works" if it is useful in the contexts in which it is grounded; and "grab" means findings are readily understood and match participant experiences (p. 121). A study will be grounded, relevant and useful if it applies appropriate tools for analysis.

As "a way of thinking about data" (Morse, 2008, p. 14), GTM provides clear but flexible guidelines as data collection and analysis proceeds simultaneously (Charmaz, 2000; Mertens, 2005). Parallel involvement of three groups of participants from different institutions gives strength to in-depth comparison and analysis, and enables triangulation of rich data (Bryman, 2004). The aim of building a substantive theory from interrelated concepts is assisted by the step-by-step process involved in Corbin and A. Strauss's version of constructivist grounded theory. A further justification for using this version of GTM is its self-correcting style of analysis through the constant comparison process, along with evaluation criteria for research findings. Researcher reflexivity and sensitivity, and the ability to see issues from the perspective of participants are also important (Corbin & A. Strauss, 2008).

4.5 The process of coding and analysis

4.5.1 Coding overview

A grounded theory is a model which is built from systematic integration of data into a set of plausible relationships amongst different aspects of the phenomenon being shown (A. Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Key strategies used to build this analysis were coding, the constant comparison method, and theoretical sampling, which are the subject of this section. Coding followed an iterative sequence and proceeded parallel with data collection. As Table 4.1 shows, a non-linear, three-stage coding process was used.

Table 4.1 The three-stage coding process used in this study

Open coding	Axial coding	Selective coding	Theory
Breaking data apart and labelling as concepts	Relating concepts around a category	Integration of developed categories under the core category	A unified explanation
Constant comparison involving simultaneous analysis, comparing incidents, and relating current data to the previous analysis			
Theoretical sampling or data collection determined by increasingly selective analysis at an abstract kevel.			

The first stage of analysis was open coding, whereby data were broken down into their component parts and coded, predominantly using a line-by-line approach. An example of this is depicted in Table 4.2.

Table 4.2 Open coding resulting in the category "Identifying lecturer concerns"

Excerpt from data	Codes	Concepts (became properties)	Category
We weren't there just to teach writing. I'm not a writing lecturer or teacher or anything like that. But we thought, `Well, not everyone is going to need support for writing but some will. How can we embed some of that into the course so they can get what they need? And, the other things is, How much time have we got so that we can do this?	Not just teaching writing Not a writing lecturer (What) Only some need support (Who) Getting them what they need (How) Time query (How)	Lecturer role perception about academic writing Diverse student abilities Embedding support Time constraints How to meet needs given the constraints Timing of interventions	Identifying lecturer concerns

The second stage of analysis, called axial coding, occurs when codes are reassembled under general categories (A. Strauss & Corbin, 1998). While the third edition of *Basics of Qualitative Research* (Corbin & A. Strauss, 2008) has simplified and conflated the open coding and axial coding process, the concept of axial coding provided a useful framework for maintaining control of the ongoing analysis through relating codes (Kelle, 2005), as depicted in Table 4.3.

Table 4.3 Axial coding example: interrelated properties are gathered under subcategories which in turn form a category

Properties	Subcategories	Category
(What)		
Stepping up to research articles	Working it out (strategising)	
Finding patterns		
Identifying implicit information		
Note taking as you go		Reading to succeed
Unpacking vocabulary		
The reading-writing nexus		
Critiquing the text (critical reading)	Becoming a critical reader and thinker	
Reading for a purpose		
Responding to a focus question		
Anticipating disciplinary differences		
Understanding audience Authority and power		
(How)	Developing underpinning skills	
Highlighting		
Online /printing off		
Using the digital library		
Using discussion forums to build knowledge		
Developing a reading routine		

The axial coding process interrelated categories in terms of their properties and dimensions (Moghaddam, 2006) (see Table 4.4). The accompanying coding paradigm assisted in establishing relationships between categories and subcategories according to conditions, actions and interactions (Charmaz, 2014; Corbin & A. Strauss, 2008). In practice, because constant comparison analysis was ongoing, there was frequent movement between open coding and axial coding. Over time, my thinking became increasingly focused and theoretical (A. Strauss & Corbin, 1998). At the third level of selective coding, developed categories were interrelated around a core category

designated "Managing the gap", which became the foundation of the model (B. Glaser & Strauss, 1967; A. Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Coding and data collection proceeded simultaneously following the constant comparison method (B. Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Incoming data were compared with existing data. The decision about which data to collect in each following round came from codes emerging from this ongoing comparison: "Beyond the decisions concerning initial collection of data, further collection cannot be planned in advance of the emerging theory" (B. Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 67). Part of this strategy was theoretical sampling, the process of focused data collection, which I used to add depth to categories (Dey, 1999; B. Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Examples of emerging categories which prompted theoretical sampling were questions designed to elicit student perceptions of forum usage, the interpretation of the gap between undergraduate and postgraduate study, and strategies used to develop critical reading.

Over time, categories were rechecked and sometimes adjusted or recombined (Corbin & Strauss, 1990), with memorandum writing used to record my thoughts and progress. Where there was insufficient development of a theme, I looked for a way to integrate that theme into an existing category. Data gathering continued until there were few new data to add (Dey, 1999).

4.5.2   Utilising NVivo 9

The computer software NVivo 9 is an important tool for analysis, record keeping and creating and storing linked memoranda (Corbin & A. Strauss, 2008). The role of software in creating an audit trail is also acknowledged. Upon receiving respondent approval, checked transcriptions and digital recordings were uploaded for coding. NVivo 9 proved invaluable because codes and memoranda could be easily entered and later retrieved, reviewed and updated. It was possible to listen to interviews several times to compare codes within and between interviews. Playing the digital recording of a script during analysis and coding added depth and meaning to the interview material.

The use of NVivo 9 facilitated the linking of codes to memoranda, which were sequenced and easily updated. I used linked memoranda as running logs to record insights and to articulate different perceptions each time I returned to a source. The

memorandum which follows demonstrates my thoughts about teaching and learning approaches:

> *A surprise is the significance of not using DFs except to ask questions. That approach has also triggered a student response of "we don't get any teaching input so what are we paying for?" The issue of how the forums are used also came up in the focus groups. The expectation that web-based teaching is based on developing an online community is not necessarily true. There is wide variation in teaching and learning approaches. Student interviews so far indicate that lack of regular contact of some sort has an unfavourable effect on their sense of well- being which then flows into other areas. The other positive end is the personalised input of some staff who take their role on board to a remarkable degree and the students who really respond to Adobe Connect sessions and seem to be very energised by the interactions. (Memo entry 24/11/2011, 9.49am)*

I found that memorandum writing helped to develop a response to the question "What is going on here?" The strategy created more distance and helped push my thinking to a more conceptual level (B. Glaser, 1992). I also used memoranda as a way to manage personal bias (Birks & Mills, 2011; Charmaz, 2014; Corbin & A. Strauss, 2008). Corbin notes that in one study she reviewed and rewrote some memos because of the way the data were slanted (Corbin & A. Strauss, 2008, p. 32). I was constantly aware of this potential and used memos to remind myself that the participant perception of an event is what matters (p. 33). Memoranda assisted in recording progress, providing direction for theoretical sampling, and integrating diverse perspectives (Stern, 2009).

I also used diagrams and charts to record detail as analysis progressed. While some diagrams were created in NVivo 9, hand-drawn summaries on large sheets of paper were more productive in terms of summarising, integrating and renaming concepts or categories. As visible records, diagrams helped me to focus and to understand the data (Morse, 2008). The example in Table 4.4 which follows, demonstrates the different ways that properties and dimensions relating to student diversity were recorded:

Table 4.4 Properties and dimensions relating to student diversity

Property	Dimensions demonstrating student diversity	
	Low	High
Confidence with technology	Never sent an email Technology a barrier to overcome before learning starts	Used to technology which is intertwined with study
Reading	Does not read outside the course	A masters graduate Has read academic texts for 10 years Reading is connected to writing
Writing	Has never written an essay	Confident with academic writing Dislikes the academic style
Collaborative learning	Unpleasant experience	Enjoyed the sense of community
Contact with the institution	Overseas; a distance NZ student	Access to on campus presentations
University experience	Never been to university; ESOL student	A lecturer in a related discipline The course is professional development
Technology access	No access to the internet at home so stays at work	A new computer with broadband access
Interdisciplinary	Science graduate	Social sciences graduate, Masters
Understanding	Does not know what to ask for	Able to seek out help
Digital library	It did not exist when he last studied	A university librarian
Student assumptions	Waiting to learn what to expect and what to do	Her readings were sorted before starting; she went to student support sessions
Perception of standalone assistance at the university	Standalone resources for web-based students are still developing	Developed and accessible standalone resources
Course design perceptions	Chaotic and disorganised	Interactive with sequenced content which builds towards assignments
Purpose	Relevance to professional life; does enough to pass	Personal reasons; wants experience with contemporary academic literacy

4.6 The researcher's role

4.6.1 Theoretical sensitivity and reflexivity

When a study adopts constructivist grounded theory underpinned by a qualitative epistemology, the researcher is required to demonstrate a balance of theoretical sensitivity and reflexivity. Early scholars admonished researchers to be objective and to ensure that analysis does not include preconceptions which force data into a predetermined framework (Dey, 1999; B. Glaser & Strauss, 1967; A. Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Constructivists, however, acknowledge the place of subjectivity and development of self-awareness by turning back social experiences on oneself: "Reflexiveness, then, is the essential condition, within the social process, for the development of mind" (Mead, 1934, p. 91). A researcher potentially brings valuable prior experiences to the analysis, along with disciplinary assumptions and theoretical perspectives (Charmaz, 2002; Corbin & A. Strauss, 2008). By objectively examining these beliefs, an understanding of the way knowledge is actively constructed develops. Rather than bracketing out beliefs, a reflexive approach acknowledges self-awareness of assumptions, interpretations and possible bias which researchers may bring to the enquiry. Charmaz describes this process as:

> The researcher's scrutiny of his or her research experience, decisions, and interpretations in ways that bring the researcher into the process and allow the reader to assess how and to what extent the researcher's interests, positions and assumptions influenced inquiry. (2006b, p. 188)

Reflexivity aims to increase transparency through insight into the influence of personal values and assumptions throughout the research process (Alvesson, Hardy, & Harley, 2008; Corbin & A. Strauss, 2008). Because both researcher and participant values and beliefs may change during the research process of co-construction of data, researchers need to comment on and account for their role in research writing (Cunliffe, 2003). Therefore, I now declare my interest in the study topic and my values so that possible biases and subjectivities are acknowledged and can be monitored (S. Merriam, 2009).

4.6.2 Personal reasons for undertaking the study

My personal reasons for undertaking this study stem from an interest in obtaining an insider view of teaching and learning approaches in universities, given the dramatic changes in education which have taken in recent years. What, I wondered, would be my reaction to the experiences involved on re-entry to university as a mature, postgraduate,

part-time web-based student? As a returning student myself, I perceived the challenges to be those of an outsider with limited technology competencies, but with the background advantage of experience in generic academic literacy. Once into study, I found that time was snatched and that there was a heavy reliance on course documentation, open-access websites and online interactions. At the time, general academic support in my host institution was still developing and difficult to access during unorthodox hours. Instead, assistance centred on the goodwill of the course coordinators and course participants. Since web-based study could be an isolating experience which varied greatly from course to course, I wondered how others managed; this was the genesis of this research project.

My position as researcher must include the responsible use of existing knowledge (Kelle, 2005; Strubing, 2007); therefore, findings have earned their way into the analysis through being grounded in the data (Glaser, 1978). I have consciously maintained an open mind alongside reflexive use of prior knowledge (Patton, 2002a; Strubing, 2007). Reflexivity during the research process has enabled me to be aware of the potential for misplaced preconceptions (Barbour, 1998). Theoretical sensitivity describes the ability to see relevant data (B. Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Guba & Lincoln, 1998; Reichertz, 2010; P. Strauss, 2007) but at the same time I also needed to consider how to manage responsibly a situation where absolute objectivity is not possible (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011b). One way is to follow Corbin's suggestions and to work through issues by writing self-reflexive memoranda. This increased my awareness of how far my own responses intruded into the data (Corbin & A. Strauss, 2008, p. 32).

At the same time, prior experiences have been useful in understanding some events. Some participants used the interview as a form of catharsis for an unpleasant experience, which happened on three occasions. Along with reflexivity, other strategies I used to enhance the research process included developing reciprocal interactions between researcher and participant, thinking comparatively, using member checks, and seeking multiple viewpoints (including negative cases) during data collection (Bryman, 1984). During analysis involving new codes, I also referred back to the literature to maintain rigour (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Harry et al., 2005).

## 4.7	Methodological congruence

Denzin and Lincoln (2011a) argue that all research is interpretive and guided by the researcher's values. Birks and Mills (2011) meanwhile emphasise the importance of agreement between the methodological approach, research aims and the researcher's philosophical position. The philosophy underpinning constructivist grounded theory is congruent with my view of knowledge as a co-constructed, interactive and changing process. I also agree that "concepts and theories are constructed (they do not emerge) by researchers out of stories that are told by research participants who are trying to explain and make sense of their experience and/or lives, both to the researcher and to themselves" (Corbin, 2009, p. 39). I am comfortable with the methodological approach, the research design and the researcher role as the primary means of data collection (S. Merriam, 2009).

### 4.7.1	Evaluation criteria

In this section I discuss criteria for evaluation before considering strategies for trustworthiness used in this study. Traditional generic evaluative criteria associated with validity, reliability and objectivity are used in quantitative research. In qualitative research carried out within a constructivist postmodern framework, there are often alternative criteria for evaluation (Blumer, 1969; Hammersley, 1992). Debate about defining criteria for qualitative approaches has led to multiple perspectives, terms and typologies being suggested (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Lincoln and Guba (1985) advocate the concept of trustworthiness that is based on four aspects: credibility (truth value), transferability (applicability), dependability (consistency) and confirmability. Hammersley (1992) describes the term validity as "representing accurately those features of the phenomena that it is intended to describe, explain or theorise" (p. 69). Silverman (2004), more simply, aligns validity with truth. Rigour in grounded theory research is also prominently discussed in the literature (Chiovitti & Piran, 2003; B. Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Morse & Richards, 2002).

Another aspect of quality in qualitative studies which also applies to grounded theory is consideration of audience reaction and anticipation of the potential criticisms of readers. Seale (2002) argues that reports should meet the needs and expectations of the reader. This view is reinforced by Patton (2002a), who considers that the ultimate test of credibility is the response of primary users and readers of a report. In the absence of a

universal set of criteria, the argument is that quality lies in the research report, in the account of the research process, and in the researcher's understanding of the implications of methodological decisions made (Hammersley, 1992; Rolfe, 2006; Sandelowski & Barroso, 2002).

In grounded theory, where findings are underpinned by a constructivist viewpoint, there is reasonable consensus amongst qualitative researchers that each tradition should have its own set of criteria for evaluating quality (Corbin & A. Strauss, 2008; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Charmaz (2006) cites credibility, resonance, originality and usefulness. Corbin (2008) supports these criteria, noting that they address both scientific and creative categories. Corbin has also assembled other criteria for quality, arguing that findings should fit with participant experiences, be applicable or useful, present coherently as concepts, and exhibit depth and variation in keeping with grounded theory. Both Charmaz and Corbin encourage fresh insights and creativity. Both researchers indicate that sensitivity to data and evidence of memoranda assist with the management of data, development of emerging theory, and management of reflexivity. In addition, details of the research process should be threaded throughout the study. A clear audit trail linking data and theory should also be evident. Lastly, researchers need to be reflexive and to self-disclose in order to ensure validity (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

Procedures to ensure quality in this study reflect evaluative criteria, and aspects of these are threaded throughout this thesis. They include strategies to manage researcher reflexivity or bias, peer checking of transcriptions, and availability of research documentation. A description of procedures and of the process of analysis is given to establish clarity and transparency. Part of this process involves triangulation of sources. Three different groups of participants conveyed their perceptions about academic literacy in terms of challenges, enabling factors and change over time. In addition, three different data collection methods were used. A further procedure is the search for disconfirming evidence, which, in addition to adding credibility, contributes to rich description and captures multiple perspectives (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Another process utilised was peer debriefing, where a trusted colleague provided support in the form of challenge and discussion to test and to tease out interpretations of the evidence (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Lastly, the quality of this research will be determined by the readers and their perception of its usefulness.

4.8   The data-gathering process

4.8.1   Ethical clearance

Ethical clearance was granted in two stages. Approval to hold focus groups was granted on 11 November 2009 by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEC, Ethics application 09/206). Approval for data collection for the next stage, involving interviews and document gathering, was granted by AUTEC on 31 August 2010 (Ethics application 10/174).

4.8.2   Participants and recruitment

Participants were purposively selected because of their involvement and experience with web-based postgraduate courses. Different viewpoints were generated by having three groups of participants: course coordinators, support staff including library staff, and postgraduate students who had newly enrolled in web-based study after a break of at least three years. Students who first enrolled after at least three years away from postgraduate study but who had since completed more than one paper were also included. This allowed perceptions about the process of development of academic literacy over time to be explored. Diversity, a recognised characteristic amongst postgraduate web-based students (Haggis, 2006), matched the methodological requirement to seek multiple viewpoints following the principle of "maximum variation" (S. Merriam, 2009). Consequently I sought a wide range of opinions.

"Postgraduate study" in this research is defined as study above the level of a bachelor's degree, both nationally and internationally. In New Zealand this involves qualifications equivalent to Level 8 and above on the New Zealand Qualifications Authority framework (NZQA, 2013b). "Web-based study" is defined as study which requires students to access online materials and resources and to make extensive use of online interactivity and communication tools (Massey University, 2003).

Recruitment for the first stage of the study was completed at one institution, while stages two and three involved recruitment from five other higher education institutions, including from support services and courses across four disciplines within the social sciences context. In the next section I describe the data collection methods used in this research.

4.9   Data collection methods

4.9.1   Overview

The primary methods of data collection were focus groups, one-to-one interviews, and qualitative document gathering. Focus group questions were designed to elicit multiple perspectives on the challenges, enabling factors and changes of academic literacy over time. Ideas for questions came from technical and non-technical literature, from personal and professional experience, and from expert suggestions (Bryant, 2009; Corbin & A. Strauss, 2008).

The first phase, the focus group interviews, was exploratory and aimed at generating hypotheses. Semi-structured interviews followed, which were carried out in three stages. These were also based around open questions. Existing themes/codes were progressively expanded and new ones added. During interviews, non-sensitive, publicly available documents were also collected as a further source of information.

Document gathering and subsequent analysis complemented data already collected from focus groups and interviews. Records were gathered from publically available sources and from interviews digitally recorded or transcribed. Documents took the form of course materials, pamphlets, webpages, handbooks, videos, policy statements, annual reports, emails and compact discs. Contextual information, which included policy and availability of services to students, was also collected from these documents.

4.9.2   Transcriptions and member checks

Focus group and semi-structured interview transcripts were transcribed and returned to participants for feedback and possible amendment, as well as to check for accuracy and to assist trustworthiness and internal validity (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). Although all focus group transcripts were verified without change, some interview participants requested changes because personal details might have led to identification or because comments in the context may have been considered inappropriate. Most respondents expressed a willingness to receive follow-up questions if further clarification was needed (Corbin & A. Strauss, 2008; Gudea & Ryan, 2006). As data were processed, identifying information relating to participants or institutions was removed as part of agreed ethical processes.

Where possible, data collection was alternated with analysis. This process of constant comparison began at the focus group stage and allowed for greater immersion in the data. Constant comparison enabled interview questions to be further refined, using probe and prompt strategies as part of theoretical sampling (Rapley, 2011). As categories became increasingly integrated, alternative interpretations were sought to add depth to the complex topic of academic literacy. Categories sometimes needed to be revised or widened as some findings initially considered as negative cases became mainstream (Patton, 1987). One example was the prevalence of students in online distance courses seeking face-to-face opportunities to upskill on academic literacy aspects even where online resources were available.

During coding and analysis, I was aware of the possibility of using abductive reasoning where surprising findings might be deduced from existing material supported by the constant comparison method (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011b; Reichertz, 2010; Strubing, 2007). One example was the lack of discussion about the relationship between reading, writing and rhetoric. The place of these three characteristics in developing disciplinary knowledge, as distinct from a focus on vocabulary and structure, did not feature explicitly in conversation.

Focus groups and interviews have similarities and differences. Both formats involve interviewer and participant interactions initiated by the interviewer, who decides the focus and the questions, and acts as the audience (D. Morgan, 2002). Both formats are useful methods of data collection because they allow participants to interpret, in a confidential space, their past experiences and feelings which would otherwise go unobserved (S. Merriam, 2009). They differ however in relation to their purposes and dynamics, which are outlined in the following subsections.

4.9.3   Focus groups

Focus groups were organised in the exploratory phase of the research to generate themes/codes and perceptions about academic literacy challenges and enabling factors (Barbour, 2007). Potentially there are both advantages and disadvantages with focus groups. Disadvantages centre around the prior organisation needed to get people together, facilitation to ensure discussion comes from the group but is kept on track, issues for participants who may feel pressured to give similar responses to the dominant viewpoint, and consideration about whether focus groups are appropriate to deal with

sensitive topics (Acocella, 2012). To offset these considerations focus group organisation was based around one university with the venues selected according to participant preferences. The focus group format supported an interactive approach (Litosseliti, 2005) in an environment which allowed for a range of responses (Krueger & Casey, 2009). Participant selection was established around a common interest to ensure homogeneity.

Group dynamics and frank discussion were advantageous for the study. Questions were designed to encourage the development of discussion amongst participants, as distinct from a group interview where questions are addressed to individuals (Barbour, 2007). Opinions, ideas and experiences were grounded and clarified by the group, a process Morgan (2002) refers to as "sharing and comparing" (p. 122). The groups were also arranged to minimise a possible reluctance to self-disclose, with an emphasis on addressing and adhering to confidentiality requirements (Stewart, Shamdasani, & Rook, 2007).

Moderator bias and the possibility that student participants might attempt to please the moderator did not appear to be an issue. In contrast, staff focus groups could have created the opposite perspective, where focus group members were keen to express their viewpoints and were uninhibited by having a student researcher leading the focus group. After organising and establishing boundaries for the group, the role of the moderator was to let discussion flow. Facilitator intervention occurred on rare occasions when the discussion went off track. On other occasions prompting was relevant to engender rich data and further detail on an aspect of a topic. This detail was then fed into the process of data analysis to enable processes such as drawing out implicit meaning (Charmaz, 2006; Morse & Field, 1995). Compared with quantitative statistical summaries, the immediacy of responses and the open-ended nature of group discussion, which could make summarising difficult, were taken into account (Stewart et al., 2007). Potential issues were overcome through ensuring the homogeneity of each group, keeping a low-key but organised moderation approach, and arranging focus groups at preferred locations.

Recruitment from only one university eased potential issues regarding availability and organisation (D. Morgan, 2002). Four 60–90 minute sessions were held at informal venues. The session participants comprised one group of student support staff and

course coordinators recruited from three disciplines; one group of library support and flexible learning advisors; and two groups of students. Students in the focus groups had all completed one online postgraduate paper. As indicated in Figure 4.6 below, the number of participants attending each session varied between four and eight people, excluding the researcher.

Table 4.5 Focus group dates, numbers and aliases

Focus group	Date	Participant numbers	Alias
Library and teaching support staff	11/12/09	7 people	FG 1
Course coordinators and student support	27/12/09	8 people	FG 2
Students	12/03/10	6 people	FG 3
Students	08/11/09	4 people	FG 4

Once ethical approval and institutional access was in place, the recruitment process began. Permission was gained from heads of departments (HODs) to approach relevant staff members. Some potential staff participants were selected with the assistance of HODs, and others were identified from researching the institution's website for programmes in the social sciences which offered web-based postgraduate courses.

Gaining access to students followed a different course. Recruitment began using the snowballing technique whereby local contacts asked students to contact the researcher by email if they were interested in participating. Once identified, potential participants were contacted by return email and follow-up phone calls. The email contained a short letter of request asking participants to consider taking part in a focus group lasting between 60 and 90 minutes. Core documentation was attached. This included ethical approval, a participant information sheet, a consent to participate form, and a list of provisional focus group questions. A favourable response rate allowed me to take the next step of organising venues. A mutually suitable time to meet was based on participant availability. Both times and venues were arrived at through an exchange of emails. A week prior to meeting, each participant was contacted as a reminder and assured that hard copies of requisite documentation which had already been sent would also be available on arrival.

The provisional focus group questions were trialled with three members from another tertiary institution who had study experience as postgraduate web-based students but who were not connected with this project. They were asked to critique questions with regard to word choice, understanding and whether or not questions were formulated to be clear and open-ended. Some questions were modified so that language was more user-friendly in order to promote and encourage discussion. The questions were regarded as relevant starting points and intended to be used flexibly.

The focus group sessions were managed so that participants' interests or concerns could be expressed. While Morgan (2002) suggests that focus groups are more staged because of the difficulty of organising a time to suit all participants, importance was attached to creating a relaxed but purposeful environment. This was achieved through the choice of venue, opening instructions, and the ways the provisional questions were used. Sessions began with brief introductions. Time was set aside to allow a sense of openness and rapport to develop over coffee and food. Consent forms were signed and collected before commencement. At the beginning of the session suggested conventions included identifying oneself before speaking. Confidentiality reminders were given, and the processes of the digital recording of the conversation followed by return of a transcript to each participant for comment were explained. The focus and aim of each session were reinforced. Because the research was inductive, indicative questions were described as a guide (see Appendix D). Participants were invited to offer their own suggestions, experiences, insights and themes/codes on the topic. Following Krueger and Casey (2009), sharing and discussion of issues were encouraged, and it was made clear that there was no need to reach a consensus.

Each focus group discussion began with a general question so that the participants could warm to the topic. Using a low-key facilitation style allowed participant perspectives to become the focus. Strategies such as pause and probe were used to follow up, to clarify detail and, at times, to extend the discussion. In many cases participants provided these cues. Because participants in each session had common ground in terms of the research topic and their areas of experience, interactions were comfortable and allowed themes/codes and issues to emerge. (Litosseliti, 2005; Tolich & Davidson, 1999). Conversations often moved from a participant's personal experiences to an exploration of other perspectives. At the end of each session the conversation was summarised and followed with a finishing question to ask what had been missed (Krueger & Casey,

2009). Often participants responded by drawing attention to issues or experiences already mentioned which were important to them. The digitally recorded data were transcribed and notes typed up and returned to participants for comment. Focus group transcriptions were accepted by all parties, with some participants offering further assistance if I sought more information or clarification.

Table 4.6 Number of codes from each focus group session

Students 1	67 codes	283 references
Students 2	70 codes	267 references
Library and teaching support staff	58 codes	196 references
Course coordinators	75 codes	326 references

4.9.4   Initial coding

Analysis was conducted alongside data collection once transcriptions were returned after member checking. The analysis produced many themes, hereafter referred to as codes. After coding by hand using a line-by-line method, codes were entered into NVivo 9.

During coding, it was useful to listen to the digital recordings while reading transcriptions as the former conveyed more tone and emotion and gave the words greater meaning. The number of codes reflected the different focus of each group. The greater number of references coded in the course coordinators' group was attributable to a more lively discussion of topics in that group, including the nature of online pedagogy, the usefulness of DFs, student participation, and the role of the course coordinator. Examples of other early codes were students needing reassurance, living the experience of diversity, stepping up to the postgraduate level, strategising for learning challenges, and managing issues. A gap in the focus group discussions which became apparent at the interview stage was the minimal focus on information literacy challenges.

A concern at this early stage of analysis was the large number of codes. Reducing codes too soon is thought to limit the opportunity for in-depth analysis (A. Strauss & Corbin, 1998). However, Bogdan and Biklen (2007) suggest arranging incoming data to increase understanding. A satisfactory compromise was to reduce codes to manageable themes by collecting them under broad categories, and to regard these categories as

fluid and open to change as analysis continued. Aligning codes under categories was a useful management strategy. Possible directions and interconnections within and between groups were noted in memoranda for future reference.

4.9.5   Semi-structured interviews

The second stage of the study involved 50 semi-structured interviews. The demographic data is discussed in section 5.1. A single interview design was based on the decision that the research topic could be effectively examined using this approach (Baker & Edwards, 2012). In addition, when transcripts were returned for approval, many participants volunteered to be available for further clarification or questions if needed. Interviews, where possible, were held face to face so that rapport could be developed (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006), which at times enabled in-depth, intense discussion. Because of the immediacy involved, aspects such as non-verbal cues enhanced understanding (Ryan et al 2009). Using the process of constant comparison and the principle of theoretical sampling, themes isolated in one interview were incorporated into the next. Participants were recruited from four social science disciplines at five accredited universities. I began the process by applying for and gaining institutional access, a procedure which varied between institutions. Three institutions granted access through their relevant ethics committee, while two allowed a direct approach at the faculty level. In all cases recruitment processes followed the protocols of the institution. Once access was granted, relevant HODs were approached for approval to contact staff. Each time I aimed to interview one to two members of staff, comprising course coordinators, librarians or academic support people. Some HODs were happy to assist with making initial staff contacts in a confidential manner. Otherwise course coordinators were identified through a search of institutional websites and through reading course handbooks. This process was simplified when an institution clearly indicated the level of online input in distance learning courses.

Staff were approached using an email invitation to participate, followed by an explanation of the research project. Participation commitments were outlined, which involved an interview, possible negotiated access to non-sensitive course documents, and, if possible, course coordinators putting up a brief letter for interested students to contact me by email about possible participation. Copies of core documentation were attached. For those who expressed a willingness to participate, usually by return email, I

arranged a follow-up face-to-face meeting to establish rapport, confirm participation procedures and organise an interview date and venue of the participant's choosing.

Students were recruited in three ways. Since they could not be contacted directly because of ethical constraints, the first way was through electronic notice boards, the second involved my speaking briefly at an induction session, and the third – and most productive – was course coordinators emailing students directly, attaching my brief invitation to participate in the project. Interested students then contacted me directly and in confidence. Further arrangements followed. All participants were provided with an information sheet (Appendix B) which outlined ethical processes, a list of suggested questions (Appendix D) and a consent form (Appendix C). Where possible, interviews were held face to face. To this end, participants were invited to suggest a possible date and place of their choosing for the interview. Organisation was mostly completed through email contact or by phone.

The interviews followed a semi-structured format. Documentation, which included suggested questions, was forwarded in advance. The actual interviews were between 60 and 90 minutes long. One interview was also arranged using the video conferencing programme Skype, and three other students elected to complete an email interview. Interviews were approached in a flexible manner following a typical format involving introductions, a review of processes including transcription and member checks, and a reminder about confidentiality. The consent form was completed prior to data collection. Interviews were planned to allow time to establish empathy and to ensure participants were fully informed. On commencement of the interview proper, an initial general question was used to lead participants into the topic. During the interview probe questions were used and open questions were loosely adhered to as a catalyst and guide. New experiences and insights were encouraged in a confidential atmosphere. Participants' perspectives of their unique experiences were sought, along with general perceptions, understandings and experiences (Blaxter, Hughes, & Tight, 2001).

Interviews covered three parallel streams of participants: course coordinators, library and student support staff, and students. By conducting face-to-face sessions, participants could be interviewed in their own context. I was able to take note of body language, and questions and responses benefited from the immediacy of the situation (Opdenakker, 2006). Face-to-face interviews also appeared to result in more accurate responses and

the greater likelihood of self-disclosure because conversation was more natural (Shuy, 2002). Further advantages of the face-to-face option included greater success with the exploration of complex issues and a more conducive atmosphere for the discussion of sensitive issues compared with telephone responses (Tierney & Dilley, 2002). Participants used their own words, which brought me closer to their interpretation of the topic (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). As expected, a more representative sample was built as numbers of interview participants increased (S. Merriam, 2009).

I did not find that semi-structured interviews created the challenges commented on in the literature, such as issues caused by having to simultaneously listen to responses, manage time and ensure all queries were covered (Wengraf, 2001). These aspects were managed through drawing on my experience and through using strategies such as ticking off topics, clarifying and paraphrasing. A disadvantage of interviews held in person can be the unequal relationship between the participant and interviewer. This may have been manifested in some participants' reluctance to disclose on occasion, which was always respected. Many participants were familiar and comfortable with the interview process.

These interviews were held at locations throughout New Zealand over a period of 14 months, as shown in Table 4.7. Interviews took place in three phases, which allowed time for constant comparison analysis to indicate areas to expand on.

While general, open questions were part of each interview, more focused questions often followed naturally, reflecting the notion of an interview as "a gently guided, one-sided conversation that explores a person's substantial experience with the research topic" (Charmaz, 2014, p. 56). Examples of questions to students, where appropriate for the particular interview, included: In what way are these requirements a step up from previous study? What might be important about information literacy skills? How could that induction experience be improved? What is the effect of being restricted to required readings? Why are these comments unhelpful? What is making these (academic literacy) experiences so positive?

Table 4.7 Dates and aliases for semi-structured interviews

Students					
Alias	**Stage one**	**Alias**	**Stage two**	**Alias**	**Stage three**
Amy	14/08/10	Lucy	31/03/11	John	28/04/11
Sophie	20/08/10	Carol	15/03/11	Peter	28/04/11
Zoe	27/08/10	Maria	30/03/11	Hazel	30/04/11
Lilly	14/08/10	Julia	20/03/11	Denise	02/05/11
Amelia	14/09/10	Laura	18/04/11	Edna	02/05/11
Grace	18/11/10	Mary	18/04/11	Kylie	28/05/11
Evelyn	19/11/10	Joanne	18/04/11	Michelle	18/06/11
Hannah	18/11/10	Sage	18/04/11	James	24/06/11
Anna	21/12/10	Jane	18/04/11	Jennifer	14/08/11
Elizabeth	22/12/10	Alice	18/04/11		
		Nadia	19/04/11		

Course coordinators					
	Stage one		**Stage two**		**Stage three**
CC1	1/11/10	CC2	29/03/11	CC6	14/06/11
		CC3	24/03/11	CC7	08/06/11
		CC4	24/03/11	CC8	21/09/11
		CC5	24/03/11	CC9	03/10/11
				CC10	19/01/12

Support and library staff				**SJ1**	**21/01/11**
	Stage one		**Stage two**		**Stage three**
Advisor D	25/08/10	Library J	21/01/11	Advisor J	05/06/11
		Library P	21/01/11	Advisor L	07/06/11
		Library U	25/03/11	Advisor P	08/06/11
		Library R	30/03/11	Advisor Y	24/06/11
		Library K	11/04/11		

4.10   Qualitative document collection

Qualitative document collection was the third research method employed. Publicly available documents published by the government, universities and professional organisations (New Zealand Vice Chancellors' Committee, 2007-8; OECD, 2005; Tertiary Education Commission, 2013) were gathered at programme, institutional and

national levels. Documents, gathered in hard copy or in digital formats, took the form of pamphlets, news articles, statistics, webpages, handbooks, videos, policy statements, annual reports, emails and compact discs. Non-sensitive course documentation was also sought at interviews. Accessible documents in the form of videos on different aspects of academic literacy were sourced from YouTube.

The documentation gathered assisted with triangulation by corroborating data from focus groups, semi-structured interviews and from other sources (Yin, 2009). Some documents were also used to track change, an example being the ongoing development of web-based academic support services provided to students and staff (AUT University of Technology, 2007). Questions for interviews, provided in Appendix D, were sourced in part from documentation (Strauss & Corbin, 1998a), which also provided an effective means to gather data when events could not be observed (Bowen, 2009).

Resource categories are identified in Table 4.8, which indicates the range of information available to add depth to this study and to complement other data.

Document collection was an ongoing process. During interviews, paper-based information was gathered from campus locations and also from respondents who were willing to share non-sensitive material. Other documentation came from website searches. Once documents were sourced, they were skimmed for relevance. Written documents were thoroughly read and coding was carried out at sentence and paragraph levels. Information reinforced some codes already developed from interviews and focus group analysis, and some new codes were created. These tended to refer to themes relating to formal matters such as policy decisions which influenced the occurrence of postgraduate web-based university study. One example was the introduction of web-based postgraduate university nursing courses, and the encouragement for some nurses to return to study after a prolonged absence (K. Holloway, 2012).

Table 4.8 Documentary resources

Key institutions	Relevant website information
Government departments and key policies	*Education Counts: Profile & Trends *Educational research and statistics in New Zealand *Education Act 1989 *Ministry of Education – Policy and strategies *Tertiary Education Commission – Funding *New Zealand Qualification Authority
Universities New Zealand – Te Pokai Tara	*Academic quality (CUAP; NZ AAU) *Informal news articles *Links to other sites
Professional bodies	*Nursing Council of New Zealand *Nurse Education in the Tertiary Sector (NETS) *New Zealand Teachers Council
University websites identified as U1, U2, U3, U4,U5	*Key generic information, services and contact numbers *Academic information for postgraduate students *Student academic support *Digital tools and online assistance *Library websites/(digital)/support/face-to-face *Webpages devoted to distance learning *Academic literacy and e-learning policies *Hard copies of pamphlets from support and development centres
Department/College level	*Programme information booklets *Assignment marking schedules *Paper outlines *Programme events e.g. Adobe Connect/OL lectures
Student documentation	*Marked assignment comments *Course outlines
YouTube	*Academic videos, e.g. Massey video on literature reviews; UNiSA on academic literacy (Australia); Bryant on grounded theory

4.11   Wider influences and the conditional matrix

Figure 4.10 shows Corbin and A. Strauss's (2008) conditional matrix strategy, which I used to help identify the interconnections between changing conditions, interrelationships and consequences across different sections of the phenomenon under study (Clarke, 2009; K. Scott & Howell, 2008). This study has identified the ways in

which changing economic conditions and the evolution of technology influence government policy (OECD, 2008). In turn, universities have changed their role by accepting a more heterogeneous student population, encouraged by funding policies which have been linked to government priorities.
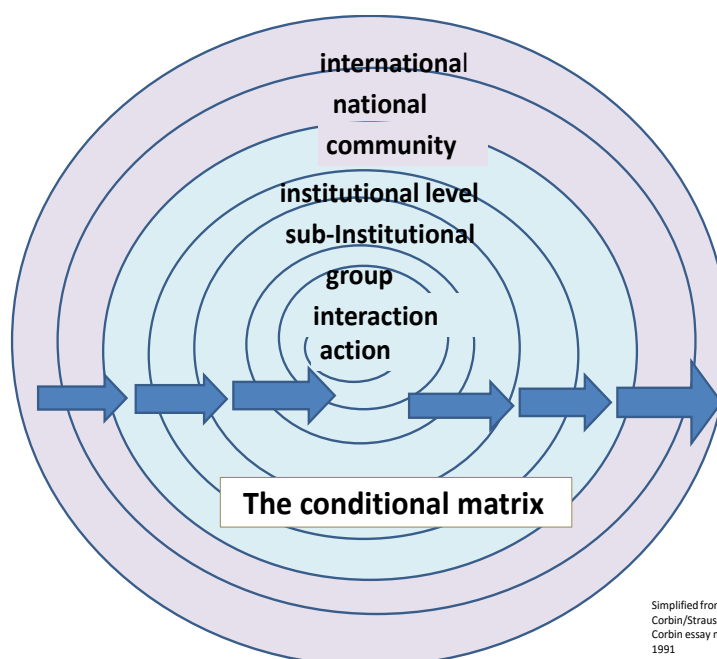
Figure 3 The conditional matrix: An aid to analysis of structure.

From Corbin, J., & Strauss, A. (2008). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory*, 3rd ed. Los Angeles, CA: Sage. Adapted with permission.

Consequences of these actions have filtered down to programmes, courses and students, revealing the interplay between postgraduate, web-based part-time study and wider conditions in society.

4.12   Adequacy of the methodology

Grounded theory has limitations like any other methodology. In this study the challenges centred on the amount of time required, the need to be clear about the grounded theory version used, managing data, and the challenge of raising description to the level of theory.

I found it necessary to understand and consider the different versions of grounded theory before making a choice. I focused on publications which assisted the novice researcher (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007c; Morse et al., 2009) using the constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006; Corbin & A. Strauss, 2008; A. Strauss &

Corbin, 1998). In this way I avoided the "methodological mire" and the dangers of a pick-and-mix approach (Breckenridge, 2012 p. 64). Increased flexibility, rather than slavishly following set procedures, is now encouraged (Corbin & A. Strauss, 2008, p. 17). However, I based decisions about strategies on their relevance to the research topic.

One challenge was the time-consuming nature of the interview process. The scheduling of focus groups fitted around participant commitments. There were intervals between sessions, which provided time for transcriptions to be approved and analysed. By comparison, some semi-structured interviews, held face to face in different locations in New Zealand, took place closer together. Where data was still to be transcribed, I listened to the audio recordings prior to meeting the next participant, a practice which allowed for new leads to be pursued at the next interview.

Other challenges included timely management of data, reducing data to manageable categories, and determining the core category. Initially I experienced difficulty in making sense of large amounts of data. I found NVivo 9 was useful to record and systematically assemble codes until I was ready to integrate them under categories. Once begun, the process of constant comparison and memoing was helpful, as I could write down insights and date the rationale behind coding decisions. Since the memos were linked to codes, they were easily accessible at a later date, and helped the process of integrating ideas.

Raising analysis from description to a more abstract level as part of the process of developing an integrated explanation or theory also proved challenging. Once underway, the steps involved in analysis of data helped this process. Similarly, deciding on a core category was finally determined by the data, as throughout there were indications of gaps in understanding. These gaps were conveyed in the form of assumptions, uncertainty about processes, and participants reflecting on initiatives taken to seek out new meaning. I found that Straussian grounded theory accommodated complex considerations and provided both direction and flexibility, along with the means to integrate insights into a structured explanation.

4.13   Summary

In this chapter I have described the methodological approach which underpins this research study. The analytical framework provides an explanation of GTM, and

research and data collection processes. The study is guided by Straussian grounded theory, which has evolved into a constructivist, postmodern methodology (Corbin & A. Strauss, 2008, p. 9). In Chapters 5 and 6 I report on the themes which emerged as participants interpreted and managed the transition experience of returning postgraduate web-based students. Their insights illuminate the different perspectives of this academic literacy journey.

Chapter 5 Findings and discussion: Part 1

This chapter reports on participant perspectives and experiences of the transition process for returning postgraduate web-based students. Such students arrive with different backgrounds, entry qualifications and prior experiences and it cannot be assumed that they will transition seamlessly into the next level of study (Wingate & Dreiss, 2009). Findings in this chapter explore the challenges and enabling factors underpinning academic journeys in the web-based environment for these students, including personal qualities perceived to be important. The first section of the chapter describes the demographic data collected from the interviews. This is followed by analysis and discussion of the various approaches taken to manage the gap between students' skill levels on enrolment and the expectations and learning outcomes to be mastered as participants on web-based postgraduate courses. These approaches have been divided into four categories:

- Induction is empowering
- Developing self-management
- Developing critical reading
- Developing critical writing

The first two categories will be discussed in this chapter and the third and fourth will be covered in Chapter 6.

5.1   Demographic data

5.1.1   Students

The 27 women and three men who took part in the semi-structured student interviews all fitted the definition of mature students over 25 years old (Tones et al., 2009). Ages ranged from 29 to 60+ years, and 73% (21/30) of participants were over 40 years old. Part-time study predominated as only four participants were full time. Eighty-seven per cent (26/30) both worked and studied part time. This figure is unsurprising given New Zealand has one of the highest proportions of degree-level students studying part time in the OECD (D. Scott, 2009, p. 2).

The students were predominantly English-speaking, but there were seven (23%) with English as a second language (ESOL). Six of these students were already working in

New Zealand and studying for employment-related qualifications. This group also varied in terms of prior postgraduate study. One was a New Zealand citizen who had enrolled with no university experience and who had begun her postgraduate course with no knowledge of information and communications technology. Another was bilingual, experienced in teaching English and was technologically literate. These ESOL students added another layer of diversity to the postgraduate profile and represented the growth of international students in higher education (Altbach & Knight, 2007).

As Table 5.1 shows, entry qualifications varied greatly, ranging from three students who had a masters degree to five who had been admitted to postgraduate courses through alternative entry. The majority of participants had obtained an undergraduate degree, although not necessarily in the discipline areas where they were now studying. Twelve students identified a 20-year gap in time since they last studied at university. Of these students, some recalled handwritten assignments, computer punch cards, and the use of dot matrix printers.

In this chapter student participants have been given pseudonyms, for example Edna, while course- coordinators are referred to as CC plus a number (1-10). Library staff are identified as Library plus an initial, for example Library J; Academic Advisors are identified as Advisor plus an initial, for example, Advisor Y. As indicated in Chapter 4 there were four focus groups referred to as FG plus a numeral: FG1 was made up of library and teaching support staff; FG2 was composed of course coordinators and student support staff while FG3 and FG 4 were students. The five universities are referred to as U1-5. Where participants have been quoted directly their words have been italicised.

Table 5.1 Student chart showing aliases and summary of characteristics on entry

Student alias	Second-language	Full-time	New study area	Previous degree	Age	Years since last studied
Edna		FT	Yes	BA	40–50	20+
Anna			Yes	BSc	40–50	3–10
Sophie				BA	40–50	20+
Lilly	Y			BA	25-30	3–10
Denise	Y			BA	30–35	3–10
Kylie				None	40–50	10–20
Alice				BA	40–50	3–10
Grace	Y	FT		BA	25–30	3–10
Sage	Y			MA	50–55	20+
Mary	Y			MA	50–60	20+
Lucy				None	40–45	3–10
Jennifer				None	40–50	3–10
Hazel		FT	Yes	B IT	40–50	3/10
Laura				BA	60+	20+
Jane				BA	40–50	10–20
Amy	Y			None	50–55	20+
Peter			Yes	BSc	40–45	20 +
James				BSc	45–50	20+
Maria				BA	55–60	20+
Michelle				None	30–40	10–20
Hannah				B IT	40–50	20+
Zoe				BA	40–50	3–10
Elizabeth				BA	30–40	10–20
Julia				BA	30–35	3–10
Amelia	Y	FT		BA	30–35	3–10
Evelyn				BSc	40–50	3–10
Carol				BSc	50–55	3–10
Joanne				BA	45–55	20+
Nadia				MA	35–40	3–10
John				BSc	40–50	20+

Around one-quarter (8/30) of student participants were familiar with the university environment because of relatively recent past experience of postgraduate study or because they were university employees who had an undergraduate degree but had not progressed to postgraduate level. A further eight students reflected on their initial concerns about learning the technical skills to negotiate the learning management system (LMS), access to online resources, and appropriate use of interactive tools. However, the majority (22/30) reported they were confident users of technology and could problem solve in relation to the technology demands of the courses. Even so, most students still spoke of their transition to study in terms of a learning curve. Individual responses to the challenges reflected a finding of Miller's (2005) study of doctoral students, where some followed a relaxed approach, treating their experience as "on the job training" (p. 447) where no preliminary work was necessary, while others felt lost and anxious and expressed the need for preparation such as induction activities, which are discussed below.

All participants linked their study to professional development or future career aspirations, indicating the changed role of universities and the influence of government priorities. This change can, perhaps, be seen as a reflection of the neoliberal environment imposed on the higher education sector in New Zealand. Roberts (2009) , for example, argues that a quality education in New Zealand is one that will "prepare people to become enthusiastic participants in the global economy" (p. 417). The dominant theme is one of economic transformation and the development of knowledge, skills and attitudes for success in world markets. The Tertiary Education Strategy for 2014–2019 expressly states that the role of tertiary education is to contribute to and maximise economic, social and environmental goals (Ministry of Education, 2014). Findsen (2012) notes that education is the means to upskill the workforce so that New Zealand can compete in a global market.

Therefore it is not surprising that student motivation for enrolment was often based on professional aspirations. One student who wanted to move ahead in her profession reflected:

> *My bachelor's base is not very strong. It's not all that robust. So what I am doing with the masters degree is actually making sure that it is robust.* (Zoe)

At the same time she was also driven by a strong personal desire to demonstrate the value of academic study to her whanau (family), indicating that personal factors also played a part in the decision to enrol. This finding is supported by Swain and Hammond (2011, p. 593), who found that student motives were complex and overlapping. However, employment-related reasons for enrolment in web-based study predominated, and included training as a condition of employment, professional development (Lea, 2012), or study for career advancement. As one student noted:

> *I should have been chipping away at something but have never quite done it. And then, I thought, Right, if I want to be in a senior leadership type role I need to lift my game and do some more study. So, I bit the bullet.* (Elizabeth)

The web-based study mode allowed participants to work around extrinsic factors such as time constraints imposed by work and home commitments. Without the flexibility of web-based study, students would have been unable to participate (Allen & Seaman, 2010, p. 13). Their circumstances as mature web-based students distinguished the group from other educational transitions (S. Wilkinson & Folley, 2014). Their prior experiences influenced the process of acquiring the knowledge to build an academic identity, which involves "participation in the practices of the range of communities to which an individual belongs" (Tobbell & O'Donnell, 2013, p. 127).

5.1.2 Staff

Staff interviewed included 10 course coordinators, five librarians and five academic student support advisors. The majority of course coordinators had five or more years' experience as web-based course coordinators. Longer-term coordinators described beginning with a traditional paper-based course which was then adapted to web-based learning. Two staff were relative newcomers to web-based learning but they gained support by working as part of a team within their respective programmes.

Table 5.2 Online experience of course coordinators

Course coordinators	Years of online experience	Course coordinators	Years of online experience
CC1	10	CC 6	6
CC2	5	CC 7	6
CC3	10	CC 8	2
CC4	10	CC 9	2
CC5	6	CC10	10

Experienced course coordinators described how they had begun by teaching paper-based courses in their subject area and switched to web-based teaching as their institution turned to web-based learning options. Eight were working towards or had achieved PhDs. The two remaining staff were published in their areas of expertise and were actively researching.

Support staff included five library staff and five student academic support advisors, all with five or more years of experience in their positions. All staff had relevant postgraduate qualifications including four staff with PhDs. Advisors focused on their supporting role of meeting student needs. Liaison librarians strongly identified with their subject area and with the needs of both students and their course coordinators.

Table 5.3 Experience of student academic support staff and librarians in years

Support staff	Experience in years	Library	Experience in years
Advisor D	10	Library J	10
Advisor J	6	Library P	7
Advisor Y	10	Library U	15
Advisor P	6	Library R	10
Advisor L	8	Library K	5

In the next section staff and student perceptions of the web-based study experience, including those participating in the four focus groups described in Chapter 4, are discussed in relation to induction and self-management strategies.

5.2   Category 1: Induction is empowering

The category of *induction is empowering* involved four key aspects: negotiating technology, community building, establishing support mechanisms, and introduction of course-specific academic aspects. As indicated in Chapter 3, induction describes introductory sessions at the course or programme level which are designed to assist students to make an effective start to study (Forrester et al., 2005). Both staff and students described induction by different names, referring to block sessions, information days, orientation or postgraduate weekends. The timing and style of sessions differed. Some programmes held only one session for each intake of new students: *Three days together and then off you go for the following two and a half to three years not seeing each other* (Sophie). Other sessions included both newly enrolled and experienced students from across a programme and were occasions that served to induct new students or provide a refresher for longer-term students. While most induction sessions were held on campus, some coordinators travelled to their students and met at off-campus locations prior to course commencement. Others arranged a postgraduate weekend later in the semester.

5.2.1   Staff perspectives on induction

Staff planned induction sessions on the basis of knowledge gained from accumulated experience and feedback from previous courses. As discussed in section 3.3, the literature recommends providing induction advice to support progress towards independent study at a distance (Forrester et al., 2005; Gaide, 2005) and to develop a sense of community (Rovai & Jordan, 2004). Although the literature cautions against information overload (Chen et al., 2011), academic support advisors suggested that coordinators should cover as much as they could: *Build everything that you think you need into the course to start with* (FG1). The different aspects of addressing student concerns were articulated by Advisor Y:

> *We still advocate strongly that you need to have that time to connect as individuals, to lay the groundwork, to lay the expectations to ensure there is a measure of comfort at least getting into course materials, understanding how to navigate and how to access support. You know they can contact us to ask questions, not 24/7 but by email, by phone and online.*

Staff identified the diverse needs and abilities of their students. Those who had recently completed another course of study were perceived to be the most prepared

academically, while ESOL students, and those who had completed their undergraduate qualification overseas, were considered to have the biggest gap to negotiate. Other concerns included a drop in skill levels since last studying, the demands of the digital library, managing the LMS, and those who gained acceptance onto a programme through professional experience with no experience of university study:

> *Those graduate students have been in practice a number of years, which has allowed them to get into university, and they have no undergraduate degree, have never written an academic essay in their life. And they actually have no knowledge of what it means to use electronic media to support their learning.* (FG2)

Staff did not necessarily think in terms of strategies to accommodate individual differences at induction:

> *We do evaluate induction each time and of course different individuals do have their own feelings about induction. Some want more and others want the opposite. So do the best you can and that's all you can do.* (FG2)

The focus was instead general, balancing different aspects so that students would feel informed but not overwhelmed. This finding echoes Forrester and Parkinson (2006), who describe the need to reassure students at induction, as well as to make them aware of their academic commitments. However, a fundamental consideration for web-based courses was to familiarise students with the suite of technology skills needed, as well as to establish ways to access technical support (Gaide, 2005). Overall, staff appeared to cover requirements such as those suggested by Miller (2005), which include training on the use and application of the LMS.

Familiarisation with technology

Most induction sessions began with a focus on technology fundamentals. Students needed to adapt to the particular demands of web-based education (Wozniak et al., 2009) by developing confidence in downloading resources and familiarising themselves with the different forms of online communication as part of an online community (Littleton & Whitelock, 2005). Levels of technology competency varied. Students might well have been using technology at home and in the workplace, but they still needed to learn applications in the university environment:

> *We are not necessarily seeing the digital immigrant/native distinction any more. I think that the perception that under 20s are open to technology and*

over 40s are not doesn't ring true as much. It is more around different communities of learning. (Advisor Y)

Some coordinators identified improving levels of confidence concerning technology usage over time, particularly with recent intakes of students. Two health coordinators from different institutions noted a growing familiarity with technology in their students since about 2006. By 2012 only one or two students out of an intake of up to 130 each semester were struggling with computer usage. One reason is that use of computer applications has become an everyday workplace skill for workers in the health profession. However, student competency with technology across all programmes could not be assumed:

> *For a long time people kept saying, "Oh well, at some point all of the IT skills will rise and then we won't have to worry about it anymore." Well that's not what we're finding. What we're finding is that people's knowledge is very patchy.* (CC4)

At the more basic level, some student cohorts still demonstrated anxiety and a low sense of self-efficacy around using email, word processing and the online environment generally. Induction enabled these students to be eased into achieving familiarity with online requirements:

> *So, we are asking them to log on to a site to get themselves introduced, to set up their profile on the site, to get into forums, to find the material and to use the email component.* (CC8)

On occasion the student profile within a discipline area changed between intakes. Students who studied with a career change in mind could lack specialised technology knowledge, whereas previously it was assumed that students already had a level of competency. In an evolving web-based education system, the gap in expectations showed that training issues surrounding individual student needs were still being addressed:

> *The other thing we picked up is that there's a number of them really not confident about their skills with technology, and that's a harder one to fill because I don't feel that it should be our job to teach them word processing and spread sheets; that's something student learning support could be providing, but I don't think our students are quite there yet in terms of having things.* (CC4)

During the focus group sessions, the theme of flexibility and response to group needs was articulated:

> *If things aren't going as they should be you need to be able to take the time, or you have to take the time to do something else and so alter that [programme] and be flexible.* (FG1)

Theoretically, gaps in student knowledge should be acted on within a tight timeframe (Forrester & Parkinson, 2006). However, students' needs were not always picked up quickly enough to be able to address an issue at the same induction session. In such cases managing shortcomings had to be prioritised. Gaps in student knowledge were sometimes responded to at a later date. Measures included organising training sessions in subsequent block meetings and the development of a strategy which students could access online. The value of follow-up in response to demand was demonstrated.

Introducing academic literacy requirements

Lea and Jones (2011) acknowledge the intertwining of technology and academic literacy aspects, not least because resource access and interaction through writing, reading and multimodal communication includes engagement with the multiliteracies (Cazden et al., 1996). Traditional print-based literacy continues to be very influential, but an introduction to digital texts often begins at induction:

> *As a student coming in, you're meeting a lot of technology. There's a technological challenge, let alone the academic literacy that they will encounter along with these technologies.* (Advisor Y)

Online texts form part of the practices of the disciplinary community (Lea & Jones, 2011; O'Donnell et al., 2009) and are often underpinned by constructivist, collaborative approaches to learning (Duffy & Cunningham, 1996). At induction, blogs, wikis, videos, media-sharing sites and online tutorials were introduced. However, the sessions were usually broad-brush and introductory because of the possibility of information overload (Chen et al., 2011):

> *If you give too much information with the technology and everything, you saturate the student because they have come from their homes and their families and it's a lot to take in, the factual as well as working out the masters programme. It's a balance of not too much but also enough.* (FG2)

In spite of the risk that some students might find there was too much new material to absorb, coordinators sought to take advantage of having everyone together so they could cover many different aspects:

> *From my point of view, the course design for induction day is such that I never do any teaching [of content]. I don't have time! I have to show them how to write an essay, I have to show them how to go to the library website, I have to show them what I mean when I say to use APA referencing, and all that sort of thing.* (FG2)

Another underpinning component of academic literacy was course documentation. At induction, coordinators typically provided course handbooks since students depended on accurate information as a firm basis for forward planning and guidance on course requirements. Experienced coordinators expressed their confidence that everything a student needed was in the course handbook. They often walked students through these materials, citing the importance of clarity of information and accessible meaning. Because students might be unfamiliar with university discourse, one coordinator also described how she altered handbook information to make the language less demanding for her newly enrolled participants:

> *I actually have modified and modified and modified the paper to deal with exactly that situation. With the last group of students, I had a number who said to me, "I wish I had done this paper first"... What it is about is that you have to have a lecturer who understands that very thing [the language demands], and you have to design your paper around it or you lose your customers.* (FG2)

Depending on the course, information was available to students in different combinations of hard-copy study guides, compact discs, or videos. Increasingly, however, course documentation was provided online, which students accessed through course webpages, demonstrating the intertwining of technology with traditional practices:

> *Okay, this is the LMS. I have put it on student view. When they open they can go straight in. So all the introduction is here: all the administration stuff, course outlines. They are not sent any copies as it is all done online.* (CC10)

Induction provided an opportunity to unpack academic expectations and assignment requirements. Coordinators communicated course-specific writing formats, such as literature reviews, annotated bibliographies, reports or essays. Unless students had

already studied at this level, these genre requirements could be new. Each discipline had particular practices, or identity kits (Gee, 1996), along with the language and conventions characteristic of the particular area of study (Hyland, 2009b; Lillis & Turner, 2001). Increased expectations at postgraduate level, compared with undergraduate study, were appreciated by staff, and needed to be conveyed to students:

> *There is a big step up from degree to masters in terms of assignments, and when you are in a face-to-face class often you can talk about that in the first week and develop that understanding. But with the online, people are less inclined to write things about a standard and a gap and that kind of thing. And often staff, and I know for myself, that when students enrol in a masters programme you expect them to be at a certain level. I know we shouldn't assume these things but you kind of do.* (FG1)

Induction sessions were designed to help bridge the gap between learning outcomes and current abilities. Students were also introduced to the additional support universities provided outside the immediate course structure. Academic support and library services were key means of assistance.

Introducing academic student advisors

Academic student advisors welcomed the opportunity to attend induction sessions, introduce themselves and inform students about their support programmes. The sessions included general presentations, website resources, and useful links to other information. At this time presentations on aspects of academic literacy, such as essay writing or report writing, were also given to explain assessment requirements. Services to individual students, either online or face-to-face, were also promoted so that students could make contact at a later date. Students were alerted to assistance offered through the online medium such as draft reading of assignments or interpretation of feedback on marked work. While academic assistance was sometimes embedded within programmes (Gunn et al., 2011; McWilliams & Allan, 2014), advisors often recommended that students should also attend as many face-to-face academic support sessions as possible. However, access to these programmes is a well-known challenge for web-based students (Thompson & Hills, 2005), and not everyone could make use of these opportunities:

> *They reiterated that when you get to this level you need all the skills, regardless of what you have done before. So, I've tried to get to as many as I can, and initially I wasn't working so I could take advantage of all of*

these. But now I'm working and it's frustrating that they don't have them in the weekend or when I can get to them. (FG3)

All institutions offered a personalised service either online, by telephone, or in person, a system which relied on students voluntarily making contact. Another avenue of support was generic, online information about academic writing, postgraduate writing types, oral presentations, instructions on referencing, and links to other library sites. Some university websites allowed visitors open access to their resources (Ellis, 2012b). It is, perhaps, the availability of this generic assistance which enabled a few lecturers to state that individual students who were slower to pick up academic processes should take the initiative and seek support for themselves: *There are too many who are capable now. The one or two who are colder (slower), they really just have to get with it. There is a lot of support* (CC6).

Introducing library support and information literacy

Information literacy, a subset of academic literacy, involves developing the skills, capabilities and experience to identify, find, and evaluate information needed for both academic success and lifelong learning (Bundy, 2004). An ability to access the digital library is considered essential to becoming an information literate person (Lamond & White, 2008), and this signals the need for students to use library services effectively (Kumar & Ochoa, 2012).

Librarians for their part empathised with transitioning students and appreciated both their busy lives and the importance of making sessions useful for all attendees:

> *They're juggling all these balls and coping with all those things and having to do their study to a very high standard and to complete it and all the rest of it. So, again, as I said to you earlier there is the need to make it meaningful so they don't waste two hours of their time coming to something that they can't see the value of.* (Library J)

Postgraduate students were expected to access and use scholarly journals. Librarians commented that there could be changed expectations between undergraduate courses where readings were often supplied, and postgraduate courses where students were expected to be able to find resources for themselves. In case mature students were intimidated by this expectation, time was often spent time allaying anxieties and assuring students that librarians were there to assist:

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There's that whole computer anxiety, and then no familiarity with all of that, let alone all the other things. So even simple things like using a computer – and you will find that with staff too. When people don't know how to do all of that, it is almost a barrier to them engaging in the research. (Library J)

Librarians also appreciated that students educated in the 1970s and 1980s needed to update their knowledge of the digital library:

But they don't know what they don't know, and so they ... I guess they're putting in research proposals where perhaps they don't have a good, sound body of literature because they're, perhaps, dependent on Google and Google Scholar, and you know they haven't yet really got to grips with the vast array of academic databases. (Library R)

Library sessions provided students with relevant information on aspects such as electronic resources, bibliographic packages, course reserves, three-day loan books and courier arrangements. Some librarians spoke about specialist support, such as being able to shadow students' online activities if they needed help at home. Induction established the connection and laid the groundwork for further contact by phone, email or through on-course links. Students had varied skills sets, so individualised consultations for areas such as research were recommended. The induction sessions were valuable because students who attended were more likely to seek help at a later time. From the librarians' perspective, induction was part of a multipronged approach and not limited to one-off sessions. Students could email or phone in, although face-to-face appointments with liaison staff were encouraged. There was a perception that *you can't really do it through wire as well as you can face-to-face* (Library Y).

Library staff strived for their sessions to be relevant, but had to manage the different levels of student readiness. Some students welcomed instruction in database searching and in information literacy. Other students, however, felt too much information was provided too quickly, with limited opportunities to practise:

There was a lot of telling and I needed to be doing; I needed time to consolidate and I had questions to answer. I felt I needed to have another go at raising my online library skills to another level and to go on and do this, but there was no opportunity to do this or learn that aspect. (FG4)

In several programmes, library sessions were attended by both new and experienced students at the same time, which was not always seen as productive:

> *Because we would have a library session in each block, other people would say: "I'm in my eighth paper and I don't need a library block!" But some people are also coming in for their first paper. So, again, it should be optional.* (Jennifer)

Library staff had differing views on the adequacy of provision for web-based students. Some librarians showcased recent progress such as links within a course where students could make contact with library contacts or resources at point of need: *All the time you're working you can link into the library. All the courses have an online library course* (Library J).

One librarian, however, felt that web-based students could be disadvantaged compared with their on-campus counterparts:

> *For distance students there is the fact that they are out of sight and out of mind in a sense, and they can't come to the library helpdesks or make appointments, or come to workshops or whatever, and then also they're not sort of mixing, perhaps, with other postgrads in a live situation.* (Library R)

Some areas were likened to a wilderness as far as distance students were concerned:

> *I guess there needs to be a university-wide initiative for something to improve the lot of distance students. At this university, I think we do it on an ad hoc basis, and maybe we need a project that pulls together appropriate stakeholders, that could come up with some real plans for distance students.* (Library R)

Library services for web-based students appear to be in a state of evolution. Lamond and White (2008), for example, question whether there is equivalence between web-based and campus-based students, citing the disadvantage of front-loaded sessions where students are provided with as much information as possible at course commencement. Because the information is not at point of need it may not be retained. This criticism is offset by examples of integrated online provision (Gunn et al., 2011) which show the potential to embed subject-specific assistance. Induction sessions raised student awareness about digital resources, provided a grounding, and updated students' information literacy knowledge. While a one-size-fits-all programme attracted criticism, the organisation of library sessions at induction within discipline areas established links and increased the likelihood that students would approach their library liaison contacts at relevant points in their courses.

Socialising to foster a sense of belonging

Induction represents an opportunity to encourage interaction. Socialisation is valued because of its pedagogical potential. When students project themselves socially and emotionally, cognitive development and critical thinking is facilitated (Arbaugh, 2008; D. Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2005). The literature also emphasises that collaboration fosters the development of active, independent learners (Cercone, 2008). Time to socialise at induction allows beliefs, values and expectations to be clarified in an informal setting.

> *I think that when you get together it's quite important not to have the whole time set up with things that the lecturers want to teach the students. I think that it's quite important that the students have time just to sit and talk and ask questions about the way they see it rather than just to be told stuff.* (FG1)

Staff promoted development of personal contacts to ease future online interactions, especially where learning and teaching was based around social constructivist principles and where interaction helped students to learn. Online communications were nurtured when photographs of course members taken at induction were put up online. Some coordinators introduced a "class café" concept where students could socialise informally online from within their course. At this time students were also encouraged to find someone living in their home area to form coffee groups, or to set up Facebook pages. In these ways informal supportive interaction was encouraged as another tool to help online distance students manage the highs and lows of study-related matters.

Induction prepared students to begin a course with a reasonable level of confidence:

> *All you can really do in your face-to-face sessions is to try to cover a few themes so that they don't walk away with a load of stuff in their heads, most of which falls out. They walk away with the link.* (FG1)

From the staff perspective induction was a key support strategy to facilitate the transition into study. The event provided students with an overview of technology, support services and academic expectations. Induction was also the place where a sense of community began. Students' perspectives and their reflections on induction are discussed below.

5.2.2 Student perspectives on induction

Student reflections on the induction experience varied greatly from *fantastic* (Hazel) to *uninteresting and paralysing* (Jennifer). Four students who did not attend an induction prior to course commencement recalled feeling disadvantaged as a result. They mentioned beginning on the back foot, missing out on general information such as who to contact for advice, and lack of a sense of community. Two students who attended induction after completing their first course commented that the experience was still beneficial. These sentiments reflected staff convictions about the benefits of induction, so much so that students on one course were talked through the online environment by phone when they could not attend in person (CC5). However, this level of accommodation was rare.

Familiarisation with technology

As technology competency was a key underpinning skill, prior experiences of students often determined their responses to technology sessions. One student observed *there were people at all different levels. Some people were ready to fly and some people were circling a bit* (FG3). Students used computers and the internet at work and at home, but often found applications in the study situation were still a challenge:

> *I can work in Word, in spread sheets and I can email, but the LMS's, either BlackBoard or Moodle, those are the two I'm familiar with, they have lives of their own.* (Sophie)

Students who spoke in terms of having to learn about technology in the study environment from scratch wanted to know about DFs, blogs, wikis and similar tools, as well as the overall LMS. A *proper demonstration* (Sage) was expected. For those on a steep learning curve, confidence with computer usage often needed to be achieved before focusing on other topics. Even if students were highly motivated, the technology aspects of the online environment could be overwhelming at induction: *Perhaps it could be said that is why we engage at this level, because we are on a learning curve. We are putting ourselves out there.* (Sophie)

For students who were grappling with features of the LMS, it seemed less meaning was attached to other sessions. Some students found that anxiety about coming to terms with technology meant the significance of other sessions was not grasped:

They say with a wry smile ..."I urge you to use Endnote" and so forth. You haven't got a clue what it [Endnote] is and whether you will even use Endnote, or how important it is. A lot of the material that was introduced in the block course was a mystery and remains a mystery, I have to say. (Sophie)

For these students other sessions were perceived as extras and created anxiety when mastery of the LMS was uppermost:

I think at induction time I would make it clear that there were some sessions that you really need to go to: meet the tutors, meet the students definitely. And then I would have some additional tours that were optional. The library, student support and referencing tours I would make optional. (Sophie)

Because of students' differing abilities, the emphasis on developing familiarity with technology meant that confident users of technology sometimes felt disappointed by what was offered. They emphasised that technology was not a barrier but already an integral part of learning and the study environment:

I've just bought a roving modem to accommodate my roving lifestyle and I apply my knowledge of technology to: copy readings and course instructions to USB, take notes using a PDF reader, organise and maintain my files, access articles and run in and out of the library .... I'm still getting used to BlackBoard after using Moodle. I use various items: computers, a laptop and a portable hard drive to accommodate my situations at any one time. (Joanne)

Staff acknowledged diversity and the varying level of student abilities. Yet, in practice, all students were put through the same introductory technology sessions. Consequently these sessions were often unproductive for those who were experienced:

I was a little bit frustrated at the very first orientation where it felt like we spent three days learning how to learn in an online environment. That all just felt a bit like, you know, that could have been tailored better on the programme if it had said "if you think you are a confident user you don't need to do this", because obviously it is going to be a complete waste of time. (Jane)

However, other introductory sessions were well received. In particular, students appeared to appreciate a focus on academic literacy requirements and on an overview of their course.

Academic writing requirements

Specific information about assessment formats and expectations was eagerly sought, including information on course learning outcomes, timetables and assessment information. As far as writing was concerned, students readily identified higher expectations for writing: *It's quite a jump from bachelor-level writing to postgrad writing, I think. But the time will tell with my marks* (Hazel). The type of assignment could also be important:

> *If I knew it was essays, I'd think, "Oh that's fine, I'm okay with essay writing." I might waste a bit more emotional energy if they said I had to make a presentation because I don't like public speaking, though that's not necessarily an easy thing to do by distance.* (Elizabeth)

Students appreciated the focus on assessment expectations. Information was presented through lectures and strategies such as interactive sessions and provision of acceptable and unacceptable examples:

> *We worked in very small groups and we had five sample essays to look at and we had to compare them. And we looked at a referencing page and had to spot the errors, and that was quite interesting; you could tell people were at different levels. I have used APA before so I think I had an advantage over some of the others.* (Hazel)

Exemplars helped to establish the expected standard, an aid to students who had difficulty remembering expectations from previous study. Some students mentioned they would have liked more of this type of information:

> *For example: Here is how you write a literature review, here are three examples; this one's a C, this one's a B, this one's an A and that's why. You know, just enough because you don't want to spend hours reading it all. You just want some examples of why this one's a good one, why this one's not so good and what's expected for the different grades.* (Edna)

Induction was the time to pass on course expectations. Coordinators often stated that all the information about assessments and written requirements was included in the course documentation. Some students disagreed with this, however, and said that detail was often lacking. Students wanted these details, such as whether draft copies would be marked, if bullet points were acceptable and whether to write using the first person. As Hyland (2002c, 2009b) notes, detailed knowledge about the use of conventions, such as self-mention, demonstrates an appreciation of the need to demonstrate familiarity with

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disciplinary practices. Induction opportunities provided one avenue for coordinator preferences to be conveyed, and for students to learn ways to make further enquiries as their course progressed.

Another expectation was that timetabled events would be discussed at induction. However, some students felt that the dates of these events should be published earlier, preferably before induction, to enable forward planning. A few students explained that they requested more specific information where course outlines provided for the public prior to commencement were not sufficient. They wanted to make an informed decision and cited the cost to enrol, career change decisions, and the commitment required to study at postgraduate level as reasons for this request. The refrain of being time poor was repeated here. Where students had prior commitments, for example, it was considered that one week's notice about upcoming events was insufficient, and indicated a lack of understanding of the external commitments of many part-time postgraduate students:

> *It tends to be that we have to enrol and that we have to go to an Open Day. I find it really hard when you get the course outline just when you're starting the paper and then you find on opening a paper, the seven-week paper, on the Monday, that there is a live Elluminate chat meeting two days later in the evening. And, to me I thought that was grossly inadequate notice, especially when people are shift workers in the health sector. I think that should be communicated way ahead of time.* (Elizabeth)

Students also wanted to know about core requirements in time to build gaps in personal knowledge of academic requirements so that they could make the necessary practical arrangements:

> *What would have been nice would have been if it said in the paper description and the online information, "A basic requirement of this paper is that you have an understanding of the use of Excel in order to formulate XY scatter graphs", for example. So I wouldn't have spent the summer running around with the boys. I could have actually spent some time learning how to use Excel.* (Richard)

In some cases the combination of insufficient advance notice, short course timeframes and lack of accessible online academic support meant students felt they began at a disadvantage. They considered that assessment outcomes were compromised as a result. In other areas such as development of socialisation aspects, however, induction was a valued strategy.

Developing a sense of community

In line with the literature, most students valued opportunities to develop a sense of community (Mann, 2005; Rovai, 2002). Induction was an opportunity to establish personal contacts:

> *It's good to know that you are a part of something and you've got support and can see faces and put faces to names. Then when you are online you know who you are actually talking to. And it is great to be able to talk to others and to know that you might be going through some of the same little difficulties, or have the same feelings. Yes, the induction course was excellent.* (Mary)

Socialising began a process of community building and replaced face-to-face classroom exchanges, a practice which was reassuring to people who initially felt out of their comfort zone in the university environment. Talking with people who were enthusiastic, keen and excited created momentum which could carry over into the course.

Facilitation of a group dynamic during induction assisted the process of developing interactive learning practices online, and helped to forestall a sense of isolation (Mann, 2005). Communicating with people one had already met in subsequent online activities such as wikis or critical discussion groups seemed to be easier. This was because the interactions involved real people compared with *just sending an email into cyberspace* (Hannah). Meeting with course coordinators was another significant advantage because induction provided the opportunity to discern specific requirements:

> *Induction was the time you got to meet your lecturers. You got to see how they want things done, you know, what they emphasised and what they didn't emphasise. They go into what you are going to be doing. Once you are online and at your computer those little things come back into your mind.* (Mary)

Criticisms of induction

Overall, students' perspectives on induction varied. Many had taken time off work or had used annual leave days to attend. For some the event was a major experience. One student recalled that induction was her first occasion to visit the capital city. Students expected their induction experiences to be purposeful. Feelings of stress sometimes resulted because too much information was provided, or because experienced students had to sit through entry-level technology or library sessions. If they were not learning, students would have preferred to be back at work. Sessions rated as ineffective included

those perceived as being poorly organised, anxiety-producing because of information overload, or lacking in relevance. An example of irrelevance was a basic housekeeping session filled with personal anecdotes which took 25 minutes, and which was followed by morning tea:

> *So tell me where the toilets are. That's great, that's really useful, and then let's get into the stuff. You know, we sat there, we wasted time and then it was morning tea. I just think it's entirely insulting.* (Kylie)

Long delays with computer logins on more than one occasion were another cause for disappointment, accompanied by a perception that staff lacked expertise or were not fully prepared. At other times, when sessions finished early or where presenters failed to show up, student groups felt they were fobbed off with extended lunch hours:

> *Rather than go and come back from lunch early we were told to have a one and a half hour lunch break. To me that is a waste of time. I've taken a day off work and a day off my annual leave to go to school. I don't want a long lunch break and I'd rather have a thirty-minute break. It's a waste of time.* (Lucy)

Where induction was a single event with no follow-up sessions, staff tended to pack in as many sessions as possible. From the teaching perspective the relevance of sessions was often assumed to be self-evident; from the learning perspective the applicability of some sessions was sometimes missed or not explained. Students displayed the goal-oriented characteristics of many adult learners, wanting to link events with their personal aims (Knowles et al., 2005), and expecting induction to focus on course requirements. Sessions which appeared unconnected to course outcomes were not necessarily regarded as fruitful:

> *They didn't want to help us in our assignments because there was one of these presenters from overseas, and I was thinking, "How does her talking have relevance to our study?"* (Sage)

Criticism was also centred on sessions in which a lack of choice was provided for those who had already mastered the basics:

> *I don't think they set very high standards because as I said, the orientation is mostly about online learning you know. If you get through that you should be fine. I mean, stuff on how to format documents in Word. And I'm going, "I am just a little bit insulted by this."* (Jane)

There appeared to be limited planning to extend the more proficient students. One staff member touched on the implications of a diverse intake of students and the need for all students to have their needs considered: *Those 10% that you are talking about, who despite everything will learn and go on, they still deserve to be stretched* (Advisor Y).

At times, when the reason for a particular session was not clear, students were sometimes reluctant to speak out. Some chose not to say anything because it might be considered disrespectful:

> *It seems they have not done their homework properly, I feel. But we didn't say anything because we were students, of course. Because, if you're my professor I would keep listening to you. Maybe if I know you're going off the point I wouldn't say because you're my professor.* (Sage)

In other instances students were willing to comment but found that because of the power structures involved there was no formal channel for input into ways induction could be improved. Sometimes the experience was uneven, so that one session was enjoyed while another was merely tolerated. One student described her overall orientation experience as *paralysing*, apart from a session where the lecturer was a good presenter: *I was furious; I was absolutely furious. I could have been painting and it would have been more interesting* (Jennifer). On reflection, she felt that an evaluation of the session at the time would have been useful:

> *That's another thing I would say is lacking, in that, wherever else you go you do an evaluation at the end of the day and give them feedback, and there's none for this. I mean, there is at the end of the course – there is an evaluation which comes out at the end of the course – but nobody's interested anymore.*

Findings indicate that students valued well organised, purposeful sessions where their individual needs were considered and where the relevance of activities was explained. Some students also indicated that induction should not be a one-off event but should be accompanied by ongoing support strategies until a level of independence was achieved. These participants reinforced the concept of ongoing scaffolding within course design. In addition, there was general agreement about the importance of developing personal, self-management qualities to enhance the web-based study experience, a category which is discussed in the next section.

5.3   Category 2: Developing self-management

Self-management refers to the way students approach the different challenges they face in their academic journeys. According to Candy (1991), self-management is part of self-directed learning and involves "the manifestation of a certain independence of mind and purpose in learning situations" (1991, p. 411). In the web-based postgraduate context, self-management includes organisation of the physical setting at home, the online learning environment and decision making in relation to learning. In line with the literature (Forrester et al., 2005; Motteram & Forrester, 2005), students in this study were expected to rapidly move into study mode, especially where courses are of one-semester in duration. As web-based learners, students have to take responsibility for certain actions in order to learn (Darden, 2014). At home, for example, they need to decide when and how long to spend on study. Web-based learning also involves working collaboratively in order to build an online community (R. Garrison, 2006; Palloff & Pratt, 2003), a requirement when learning is based on a situated, constructivist model where meaning is socially negotiated (Jonassen et al., 1995; Lave & Wenger, 1991). Additional qualities include self-belief and persistence, because of the steep learning curve which is often involved in the transition to online study.

While there are differences in learning styles and preferences (Jeffrey et al., 2006), strategies which foster student-to-student online collaboration through computer-mediated communication (CMC) enhance course effectiveness (Arbaugh, 2010; R. Garrison, 2006). For students used to a passive style of learning involving top-down instruction, web-based learning involves a pedagogical change as the course coordinator's role is no longer that of an instructor but that of a guide, whose role is to assist students to become more self-directed (Cercone, 2008). However, as Anderson, Rourke, Garrison and Archer (2001) point out, there is still a role for intellectual leadership where teaching presence includes instruction and an expert role of scaffolding students. This role was also communicated by some students, such as when they wanted coordinators to take a stronger lead in DFs and not leave discussion mainly to students.

Students also referred to personal management and qualities needed to balance multiple commitments and challenges. They described changes to routine at home and the need for persistence. Students also needed to muster the confidence to ask for support from

their course coordinators and from peers within their courses, as well as utilising wider academic support systems such as the digital library service. Although self-assurance improved over time (Muilenburg & Berge, 2005), initially some students found that reaching out for assistance was a challenge.

Qualities for self-management: being your own personal trainer

Students emphasised the need to be a self-starter and one's own *personal trainer*:

> *I think that home distance learning is a bit like home gym. You've got to be motivated and you've got to be your own personal trainer to get in there. Yes, so you are your own personal trainer and you've got to get on that treadmill. You've got to get working and if you're a person who needs to go to the gym and to be yelled at by the gym instructor, you don't do distance study.* (Elizabeth)

They described a sense of urgency about *getting straight into it* (James) because course requirements rapidly become time-consuming and challenging:

> *It's totally your own self-management and self-reading and things. It's a bit scary at times. You get those red lights. Will you be able to do all the criteria? Will you be able read all those required readings? Are you doing sufficient reading?* (Mary)

Early morning was one time to carve out space to read or to go online. One student admitted to being *one of those* who put a sign up on the study room door so the family would not interrupt (FG3). A student on shift work used a different strategy: *If I can't sleep and I feel awake it's time for study. I even take my text book into bed before I go to work, and read* (Amy).

It was apparent that students who prepared ahead gained benefits. Organised students requested resources early so that set texts were readily available and reading was well underway prior to assignment writing. While others were in the deciding stages, those who planned ahead might already be structuring their assignments. Apart from assistance at induction, students also explored ways to bridge the gap between their earlier experiences of academic writing and present requirements, concerned that their skill levels had dropped. One university offered two online introductory courses where students could revise critical thinking, critical writing and critical reading skills (U2). All host universities provided online academic resources which fitted the skills and

academic socialisation levels of the academic literacies model described by Lea and Street (2006).

Once study began, students expected to take responsibility for their own learning:

> *I think we were pretty much informed from the beginning that our lecturers were there to support our self-directed learning. I think they were there for us, but it would be my own learning and they would be there to support me.* (FG3)

Being an independent learner sometimes meant dealing with shortcomings in course organisation. Students found that they met unexpected challenges where delays caused difficulties when working to a tight schedule. Two students reported that course documentation was not ready on the commencement date. Both students had tertiary lecturing experience and understood lecturer workloads. Even so, one described the situation where a paper was not ready to roll on a due date as *slightly unprofessional* (James). The other student, who had taken study leave especially to work through a short-term paper designed to be self-directed, described the holdup and lack of planning as extremely frustrating:

> *If they want us to be self-directed and work at our own pace they need us to have all the modules open. I felt the paper was being directed by them.* (Elizabeth)

Although most courses began in a timely manner and had course pages which were well organised with key information readily available on an LMS course home page, this was not always the case. Some students referred to time-consuming problems when site navigation was not always sequential or clear, resulting in difficulty finding key information such as course outlines or weekly readings. While many of these issues were resolved after the first few weeks, other students described longer-term problems where course organisation was chaotic, time-wasting or demotivating. One student spoke of confusion when assignments were discussed out of sequence, while another was bemused by DF entries which had not been updated from the year before:

> *There are still comments from last year. That's quite confusing because you look at them and you go, "Ooh, people are already talking about this topic", and then you realise that they're from last year. And you sort of think, "This is sloppy, you've had all this time to improve things."* (Alice)

These perspectives are important because negative emotions that result from such frustrations may influence students' ability to think freely (Hartnett, St George, & Dron, 2011) and may contribute to attrition rates (Muilenburg & Berge, 2005). Hara and Kling (2000) argue that students may not have an opportunity to openly express their frustrations during course participation because of the tendency for students to be polite to their course coordinators and because of their awareness of the power differentials at play. While student difficulties may be managed better where facilitators are more experienced, there is value in recording less positive experiences, since sustained dissatisfaction may be an obstacle to web-based learning. In addition, students had to contend with family and financial issues, which are discussed next.

Stepping into study and being your own personal trainer included organising efficient study strategies to balance learning requirements with work, family and financial commitments (S. Wilkinson & Folley, 2014). Alongside development of personal and peer support systems to support learning (JISC e-learning working group, 2007), other issues could be challenging. For some, monetary concerns threatened study aspirations due to lack of job security or ongoing expenses. Two students had interrupted their study because of redundancy. Other students reported that, to save printing costs, they were reading more and more on screen, printing selectively, or using a PDF reader to take notes online. Appreciation was expressed when hard-copy documentation was provided, or readings were available on CD, especially for students who were working with a limited internet allocation.

Dealing with technological issues

The importance of collaborative endeavours was apparent in the student narratives, but at times students had to be able to manage the challenges they encountered on their own. An area that caused a large number of problems was technology, with students often relying on their personal support networks for help as well as institutional support. However, in the long run, they had to come to grips with the technology themselves.

Less confident students spoke of needing technical support until they became more experienced. For some, access to the internet was a difficulty. Three students stayed at work after hours to study, because the internet could not be accessed from their home. However, most students worked from home and became more confident with the web-based learning environment after the first few weeks, following a pattern reported by

Muilenberg and Berge (2005). Nevertheless individual students provided varied examples of stress-filled situations at different stages of their web-based experience.

One student began studying with a computer accessed by the rest of the family. She was soon prompted to buy a computer just for study, however – a decision which was *definitely helpful* (FG3). Several students emphasised the need to frequently save work to alternative locations after experiencing major issues where computers unexpectedly crashed or other technical problems compromised study. Another student, working overseas, related her difficulties downloading information, describing a situation where she was working on a public computer located in the town library. Towards the end of one course a student reported extreme anxiety created by multiple stresses surrounding an e-assessment taken in the home environment: *It was rather nerve-racking as I was worried about power cuts, the computer crashing, internet failing and viruses* (Kylie). She went on to cite the disadvantages of sitting the assessment at home rather than in a dedicated central facility, including the time and cost of repairs to ensure her computer would function properly, and organising the workspace to be uninterrupted for two hours amidst *neighbours and kids*. In spite of a practice session beforehand, a stress factor during the actual assessment was the use of timed responses with no facility to return to or change an answer. The literature projects a more positive response toward e-assessment (JISC, 2007), but the misgivings described by this student raise the question of fairness. Conditions when operating from home are not the same for everybody and e-assessment in these circumstances could be more about technology management than course content.

The communication potential of technology through emails, DFs or wikis was another area of concern where students did not feel sufficiently confident with negotiating the technology demands. Following induction, less confident students spoke of extreme anxiety once back home. Students had walked away with raised awareness about requirements but further assistance was often needed. Ironically, CMC, which is intended to enhance communication, could be a barrier for students unfamiliar with the technology (Forrester et al., 2005). In this regard online support systems incorporated into course design were welcomed, since student dependence on other people for support was reduced where online help was embedded.

More confident students proactively utilised university websites for general academic information as part of the shift towards digital literacies (Goodfellow, 2011; Lea & Jones, 2011). A few referred to the wealth of information available on YouTube and through open-access websites, or described using the internet to look up APA referencing. However, students were more likely to use their own university's online support systems:

> *I went off to the website and they've got a little bit there, they've got some information on how to write a literature review, which was my first assignment that I had to do; so luckily they had information about that, so I followed those guidelines, basically.* (Alice)

Some students worked strategically and restricted themselves to resources and information supplied within their course, tailoring their work to meet specific requirements. Their perspectives demonstrated the importance of access to support within the course (Forrester & Parkinson, 2006). One way to provide support was to encourage questions using a variety of methods. Students could seek assistance either individually with the course coordinator, with nominated support staff, or as part of CMC, where collaborative interaction provided scaffolding (Ludwig-Hardman & Dunlap, 2003).

Finding, selecting and using library resources

Finding, selecting and using resources independently is often a core requirement of applied, professional practice, as well as a generic attribute for lifelong learning (Jeffrey et al., 2011). While some courses provided set readings, most also included an assignment requiring students to demonstrate they could use databases and access their own resources. Occasionally, students seemed unaware of the need to use credible, peer-reviewed literature. A lecturer explained:

> *I tell my students I don't want them referencing websites. I want them to find the original research, and that's challenging for them. They're not used to going back and finding original research, understanding it and understanding the statistics that go with it. But once they do it, that's when they feel very empowered because they can then go on and apply it.* (CC7)

For some students, finding their own material was often a new experience:

> *The biggest difference for me with postgrad was we were given some reading material. And I remember quite vividly, in one of the first papers, it*

was like, you can't use anything you've been given; you've got to go and find your own material. And that was quite stressful, finding things, especially for the blog, that other people hadn't used, that were up to date and relevant. (Jane)

Librarians reported that it was sometimes assumed that postgraduate students would already be familiar with the digital library. However, students often described using information literacy skills, accessing databases and using information from e-books or journal articles as a step up to the next (postgraduate) level. In addition, those who had been out of higher education for some time had to familiarise themselves with the modern digital library:

> *You get a pamphlet from the distance library but you think of the library as ordering books. And you use your previous education as your point of reference.* (Elizabeth)

This student represented those who last studied when resources were mostly available as hard copy. Other students, who had studied more recently, reported that they had not used electronic library resources as undergraduates. Librarians reinforced this, reporting occasions where lecturers had declined opportunities for students to have embedded library sessions because resources were already supplied. When students were provided with readings, there was no immediate relevance attached to having embedded library sessions, although there were longer-term implications:

> *Even the undergraduate students who go straight on to postgrad don't necessarily have those skills because, in fact, where will they have got them? Okay, you didn't do them in your course; why would you expect all your colleagues to?* (Library K)

These perceptions have parallels in the literature. Rempel (2008), for example, argues that information literacy can be neglected at postgraduate level and that when one-off library sessions are provided they do not provide sufficient coverage. Other researchers express concern about catering for distance students (Johnstone & Krauth, 2002; Lamond & White, 2008). However, as already stated, students who attended information literacy sessions were encouraged to make further contact with a liaison librarian if they needed help when library-related assignments were due.

Feekery and Emerson (2013) emphasise the importance of explicit and timely teaching of information literacy skills, rather than assuming that students will be able to acquire

them on their own. Many students also remarked on the ease of access to resources made possible with the advent of the digital library. However, as Secker (2004) cautions, initially they are faced with an "access paradox" (p. 55) because, along with the availability of information, students need to be able to find, evaluate and select quality resources.

While librarians expressed a preference for face-to-face consultations, they were also used to assisting web-based students at a distance. Some librarians used email instructions, while others assisted telephonically, staying on the phone and talking the student through a process. Some also used shared computer screens where this technology was available:

> *Being able to go online with them and talk to them at the same time and have that sort of shared experience …. Apart from the odd technology thing, by and large it does replicate the face to face experience because it's live and it's real.* (Library J)

Course coordinators and library staff spoke in terms of a productive relationship. Some course coordinators took personal responsibility for talking their students through a process such as developing a research strategy. However, the usual pattern was for students to be referred to a librarian who was familiar with the discipline's requirements. In many courses links enabled access to library guides from the course interface. Course coordinators also described design features where students could actively engage with librarians from their course in real time. On these occasions librarians were timetabled into the course programmes for a set period of time and were available to deliver presentations and answer student queries about assignment requirements (Library U; Advisor Y). Some courses also included embedded tutorials on library-related aspects such as finding books or using EndNote, strategies which demonstrated cooperation between library staff and course coordinators (Gunn et al., 2011). Having found, evaluated and selected resources, the next step for students was to produce an assignment based on the readings.

Accessing on-course help

Web-based course management involves a range of support roles from course structure and design, facilitation, promotion of a sense of community, and management of technical issues (Berge, 2008). While some areas, such as technology aspects, may be delegated to support staff, the student often turns to the course coordinator for support

in the first instance. Anderson et al (2001) include facilitation and direction of cognitive and social processes as part of teaching presence. Along with Salmon (2012), they emphasise the role of providing intellectual leadership through presenting content, summarising discussions and providing feedback. Coordinators often explained how they scaffolded learning using step-by-step processes which progressively built towards an assessment task. In addition, students on some courses accessed tutors or course-specific contacts who helped with academic matters, as well as with technology. Several coordinators also spoke of creating an environment where if students didn't understand something they could ask:

> *One of the things that I'm trying to get them to do this year ... Oh it's early days yet, but I'm trying to get them to use BlackBoard to tell me things they don't understand in the readings, and then that's what we focus on in the class discussion.* (CC4)

Students expressed appreciation where comprehensive support was provided:

> *I have to say that our lecturer had set up support within the course itself online, core information on how to do your assignments, research modes and also people you could talk to. We did have access to course papers and we were made aware that the library was there, as well as student services. So that was quite well gone over. And, for me, people at my work site were really helpful. We had people within our work group who would help our learning through the library, and there were some student mentors. I had a mentor who would take me through computer systems. There was a lot of different support.* (FG3)

Where expectations were clearly articulated in course documentation and through on-course initiatives, students could seek information to clarify requirements. However, where lines of assistance were less clear, power issues could intrude. There were reservations about seeking assistance and some students were unsure about contacting their course coordinator:

> *The whole power relationship is one that I am careful of. Should I email her again? I've already emailed her once; I don't want to be a nuisance. I don't want her to think that I'm calling on her time, expecting too much. Will she give me a lower mark because of that?* (Sophie)

Coordinators varied in the type and extent of help and support they offered. This difference was well illustrated by the following comment of an academic advisor:

> *Different lecturers have different expectations just as different students do. And, some people might see themselves as old school in the sense that it was sink or swim when they went to university so that is how it should be now.* (Advisor D)

However, a noticeable trend in response to the varied nature of the student intake was for course coordinators to request mini assignments early in a course as a way to check student writing. They could then assess student needs in time to bridge any gaps between a student's writing and the level and style needed to achieve course outcomes. Some coordinators even responded to student needs in person. This assistance was usually offered when initial work indicated the student was in danger of not meeting the required standard. One course coordinator stated: *I will do anything to try and help them through the next assignment ... to get in there in some kind of way* (CC5).

Other course coordinators took a more hands-off approach. They directed students with writing issues to seek the assistance of academic advisors, arguing that, at this level, students should take responsibility for their own academic literacy requirements:

> *Because they are postgraduates I think they have professional responsibilities around study. Postgraduate study is learning the discipline of thinking and critical thinking and there is an expectation that if they are unfamiliar with writing that they go and seek support.* (CC10)

The assumption that postgraduate students should have the initiative to seek help aligns with the concept of self-direction. As described by Brockett and Hiemstra (1991), self-direction is an evolving process of assuming personal responsibility. Garrison (1997) argues that self-direction includes a collaborative relationship between teacher and student: "Facilitators provide the support, direction and standards necessary for a successful educational outcome" (p. 23). Students may need this support to become self-directed, especially those who have the added barrier of cultural differences to overcome. As one academic advisor noted, *Students won't always ask because they feel they will be disrespecting the supervisor* (Advisor Y). Further assistance is offered by academic student services, a system adopted by universities in the United Kingdom (Lillis & Scott, 2007) and Australia (Chanock, 2003) as well as in New Zealand (Emerson et al., 2002). For many students, academic advisors still have a very important role to play.

Consulting academic student advisors

Academic student advisors identified web-based postgraduate students as a group with particular needs, since many students could not easily access on-campus academic support because of work, family or distance constraints. However, some students did access on-campus programmes and successfully prepared for study by attending presentations on topics which explained generic expectations, such as those for reading and writing skills:

> *One thing I must say, I love the [academic support] programmes that they offer. It's actually important that you all attend the programmes to get your head around the writing skills, the way of writing, the demands of the university. And it also saves time because you've got so many things to write about, think about, and do.* (Mary)

Other students who were able to attend were less proactive, regarding academic support as an extra or deciding to wait until the results of the first assignment were available. Perhaps if course coordinators were more aware of the help that could be offered they would proactively encourage such students to seek assistance. At one university where students were told to take advantage of all that was offered, two students reported approaching support services to see what they had to offer (Hannah; Evelyn).

An aspect of the student advisor's role was to inform students about the academic literacy requirements involved in moving to postgraduate level. Advisors pointed out that more was expected in terms of research, writing and independent study compared with undergraduate work. There were also challenges:

> *They decide they would like to do formal postgraduate study. That's when they start to struggle, because they're not aware of all the work involved, and the standard of writing that is required. We find that they are inclined to struggle. They've not had that smoother transition, if you like, in contrast to the students who have been studying almost all their lives.* (Advisor L)

Postgraduate students often found writing and referencing challenging:

> *We look at their writing, not so much to comment on the content, but the manner of presentation, the flow, the coherence and all that, as well as the structure. So that's what we provide and, I guess, we make them aware of what postgraduate study entails, and the level of writing, the standard of writing that is required in contrast to undergraduate.* (Advisor L)

Academic advisors, like librarians, expressed a preference for face-to-face interactions where possible, even in institutions where online services were well developed. They focused on working for the student, citing confidentiality, respect and assisting with a student's needs at that time:

> *If it is another enquiry about referencing, because that is what the concern is for the student, it's important, whether or not I've seen it 10,000 times before* (Advisor D).

Developing student confidence was also a key focus. Advisors commented that successful students used the services regularly, attended workshops, and requested feedback on draft assignments (Advisor D; Advisor J). Advisors assisted students with generic requirements and provided reassurance (Chanock, 2007). While mechanical matters were often a focus, advisors stressed that they were not an editing service and worked to develop the higher-level thinking skills associated with postgraduate academic literacy. They retained a focus on traditional academic writing, mathematics and assisting ESOL students, but rarely mentioned digital literacy formats as part of their work.

Advisors also expressed an awareness of differing interpretations between disciplines, but spoke in terms of being in a *central position* (Advisor P) where they provided advice on standardised genres. Students were also reminded to check with their supervisor in case there were additional requirements: However not all advisors appeared to be aware that transfer of knowledge was a significant obstacle:

> *I mean, the basic principles of good writing should apply. There may be variations in their disciplines but the principles should apply across the board, right? So they should be able to take what they get from these sessions, or whatever, and say, "Okay, yes I can see how I'll use that in my context."* (Advisor J)

Often the advisors' roles were made more difficult by the actions of course coordinators and supervisors. For example, some students were asked to go to the student support centre without being clear about the reason:

> *Sometimes I get the impression that even the supervisors don't know what they want, and I got into trouble a few times because I gave them [the students] suggestions for improving their work. They go off and the supervisor isn't happy with that!* (Advisor L)

A common situation advisors had to manage was when postgraduate students were asked to write an essay without any on-course preparation. One advisor described an apparent lack of coordinator support as *abandonment* (Advisor P). Another commented that:

> *[Lecturers] pretty much throw students into the deep end and say, "Write an essay." And then, I have quite a few students coming in, "I've never written an essay before, I don't know." That's pretty much it, yes, and I think that's why we're here now*. (Advisor L)

Different positions were adopted by academic advisors. Some exercised a collaborative relationship with teaching staff. These interactions were evident where academic support was integrated into the discipline programmes, and allowed for conventions and values to be contextualised as situated social practice (Crosling & Wilson, 2005). Often the affordances of the internet were utilised (Gunn et al., 2011).

A second position was where the advisor worked alone but was confident about managing student concerns and course coordinator comments. One stated that feedback on assignments usually aligned with what she would have written:

> *Aside from the content, if the lecturer said, for example, "You need to develop this idea", well, that's the sort of thing that we can pick up on as well. If I can see that and what they're saying then I kind of think, "Well yes…."* (Advisor J)

The third position was where student advisors felt they were isolated, a separation due to their physical location along with other factors such as their classification as general staff, heavy workloads and misunderstanding about the nature of their work as remedial (Chanock, 2007). Moreover, because of confidentiality, advisors did not check back with coordinators about student concerns. Some students wanted their visits to be secret because of their sense of shame (P. Strauss, 2013). For students in this study there was sometimes the perception that student support was where the failures went, a legacy from remedial classes in the school environment (Advisor D). One wonders if the lack of synergy between lecturers and advisors contributes to the fact that few students in this study actually sought the assistance of the advisors.

The institutional positioning of academic advisors and their work at the margins was also evident in this study (Beetham et al., 2010; Emerson et al., 2002). Strauss (2013) refers to a silo mentality between support advisors and course coordinators. In spite of

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the desirability of increased communication (Chanock, 2007), coordinators worked with staff support advisors rather than with student support personnel (Advisor D). Curiously, this lack of interaction between academic advisors and teaching staff was not always seen as a problem:

> *I don't think I've ever met up with a paper coordinator, to be honest. I think the exchanges tend to take place either over the phone or by email. In fact, it's very rare that I even meet somebody. I don't want to turn up there and talk for an hour about something that's actually of no use to anyone.*
> (Advisor J)

Advisors talked instead about their own time pressures, the importance of having matters in hand, and being confident about their roles and what was required of them. In this regard, the specialist nature of academic advising was identified:

> *Lecturers have a sense that there is something missing but because they are not English teachers, or writing teachers, they can't necessarily frame their comments in a sufficiently helpful way. They know the writing isn't working but think that someone can help the student to work out exactly what it is. And I do see that as our role.* (Advisor D)

Arguably institutions should provide a comparable service to all students accepted for enrolment, including those on web-based programmes. One institution, in its teaching and learning policy, committed itself to providing equivalent staff and student support for teaching and learning across papers "irrespective of mode or location of tuition and study" (Massey University, 2013a, p. 1).

> *It's using technology, so we are providing students with the same as what they would get face-to-face for students who come in here. So it comes down to what your preference is. Is your preference to have an interaction like this? Or is your preference to have somebody who makes notes on the side of your page, which is effectively what you're doing when it's online?*
> (Advisor J)

The preference of some advisors was for students to come onto campus and to attend in person if possible. They felt that explaining about referencing could be extremely long-winded using email and that without visual cues it was difficult to know the level of explanation needed:

> *Ideally we try to get the students to come into us if they're distant students who have come back to do postgraduate studies. It is easier face-to-face. Some of them do try to make the effort to come in so that we can talk to them*

one-on-one. You can clarify points; otherwise you could miss this using email. (Advisor L)

The process of expanding the range of online resources was ongoing but unless specifically approved by their course coordinator, students did not often use open-access academic support resources such as those offered at other New Zealand universities or available on YouTube. They preferred to rely on resources offered within their own institution, often at point of need. Students were guided by the course coordinator's recommendations, a finding echoed by Goodfellow (2011). However, this dependency is not surprising, since coordinators determine whether students pass or fail.

Academic advisors believed that more local students should use their services. However, while students might agree in principle, some reported not being sufficiently organised to get assignments completed in time for a draft reading. Moreover, appointments with student advisors needed to be organised in advance. In the absence of a drop-in option where students could have a brief interaction to check on minor assignment details, they found that there was often a three-day wait for an appointment.

Another finding was that web-based students were selective in their use of resources. Because of time pressures, online resources were sought at point of need with a preference for utilising resources offered by the student's own institution, a practice which was more likely where links were easily available. This was demonstrated by one university reporting a 52% increase in online visits to teaching and learning resources in the first semester of 2012 when students were provided access from links within courses (Ellis, 2012a). Integration between course and institutional materials at point of need also suggests a trend towards greater contextualisation and embedding of materials within disciplines (Chanock, 2007). On some courses students could link to sessions on critical thinking, critical writing and critical reading. They could follow prompts and practise the relevant skills. However, such tools were not uniform across all courses.

As far as help with assignments were concerned, only three of the universities provided explicit detail about the support they offered and how it could be accessed. In two universities, students needed to make contact first to find out about the assistance offered. In fact, all student support centres offered web-based assistance and provided feedback on emailed student drafts. Students also contacted advisors for other reasons. They had concerns about plagiarism, referencing, feedback on assignments and

interpretation of statements such as *not critical enough* (Advisor P). Others sought reassurance that an assignment question was answered, or that writing issues commented on by markers were accurately addressed.

Students who used the service appreciated the support offered by academic advisors. Once contact was made, advisors encouraged students to email a draft copy and assignment outline. Feedback could be returned as a Word document with tracked changes. Where the service was part of students' self-management strategies for developing academic literacy they mostly reported a high degree of satisfaction, especially for assistance in assignment writing. One exception was a student who used a pre-reading service and found that the advice she received was not what the course coordinator actually wanted. This incident demonstrated the potential for misunderstanding where student support services work in isolation from academic teaching staff and where guidelines are not explicit. On this occasion, general principles did not apply because the course coordinator had different preferences. At times reservations about the effectiveness of one-off presentations provided by the academic support unit were also expressed. One student found that attending a session on writing a literature review built confidence, but that applying the principles in a new context for a much bigger task proved difficult, suggesting that another learning step was required.

Interacting in the web-based environment

As discussed in the section on induction, a sense of community is a prerequisite to participatory online learning (LaPointe & Reisetter, 2008; Rovai, 2002). Self- and group reflection expressed through online communication is part of critical thinking and the knowledge-building process (Salmon, 2006). Allied to successful DF interaction is a sense of purpose and direction which is part of self-management (Candy, 1991, p. 411) A strong theme which emerged in this study was the importance students placed on interacting with their peers, and the value of learning based on collaboration.

One of the most common ways lecturers foster such interaction is through DFs (D. Garrison et al., 2001). Asynchronous DFs, which operate on a delayed time thread, are often used for interactions as they have the advantage of allowing students to interact without the constraints of time or place (Hew & Cheung, 2010). Some courses also used synchronous DFs which required students to commit to regular sessions. Communication formats, such as blogs or wikis, were also utilised for particular

activities such as discussion around case studies. The advantages and drawbacks of DFs were presented in section 3.5, including their potential to improve students' writing abilities (Lorenzi et al., 2004), the quality of student postings in relation to frequency (Hew & Cheung, 2010), and potential challenges such as student resistance to participation (Goodfellow, 2004b). There is, however, a gap in the literature about whether students themselves see DFs as useful for constructing knowledge.

Students reported posting information to DFs to share different perspectives and learn from each other, following constructivist principles (Hew & Cheung, 2010). Where interaction was based around reading, students were expected to demonstrate understanding of the main ideas in a text, as well as to present their own arguments or points of view through written interaction (Littleton & Whitelock, 2005). One course coordinator reported that DFs worked really well, once protocols and expectations were set up: *I don't do a thing in this paper. I get them to do all the work just by the questions I pose to them* (FG2).

Interaction could also involve live sessions using Adobe Connect or audio conferencing. These events included PowerPoint presentations and provided students with an opportunity to dialogue, learn from discussion, and respond to the coordinator's focus for the session with comments and questions. Students reported favourably on the process once they became used to it. They had an incentive to keep up their weekly readings and were motivated by the expectation that they would actively participate. As the facilitator noted:

> *The idea behind using an interactive technology is that it's not just an online lecture. If we wanted to do that we could just record somebody. The idea is that we're interactive with students. They can ask questions and discuss issues.* (CC4)

Where asynchronous DFs were used, the majority of students and staff valued the opportunity to co-construct knowledge, conveying the value of DFs for their academic literacy development. When they worked well, students were interested and involved:

> *I couldn't wait to see what someone had written. It was so exciting. I might get home 7 or 8 at night and I would be on the computer until after 10 or 11 because I was just so interested in what people were writing, and saying and wanting to contribute. Yes, it was an absolutely wonderful learning opportunity.* (Lilly)

Some lecturers found DFs a useful indicator of student understanding:

> *Last week somebody posted a message and said, "I'm really having trouble understanding the distinctions between these three concepts in the textbook." One of the other students pitched in and I thought, "Right, I need to make sure I talk about that."* (CC4)

DFs also offered opportunities for students to engage with the kind of language they would be required to use in their assignments:

> *All the online stuff, all the get-togethers are really helpful. They are helpful in regards to academic literacy because you learn the professional jargon a little bit better as well. You can ask questions and you don't have to be isolated; you experience the feeling that your studies are a little bit more meaningful.* (Denise)

There appeared to be general agreement among students that the lecturer's role was key to the successful functioning of DFs for academic purposes, an aspect that qualifies the optimistic perspective of Denise and a viewpoint which is borne out by the literature. Salmon (2012), for example, identifies the importance of the e-moderation role and R. Garrison and Arbaugh (2007) emphasise the need for a teaching presence. Some students felt that where the coordinator did not participate students were more likely to opt out. For those who understood the concept of online teaching and the idea of having a sense of community there was an expectation that the course coordinator would have a presence:

> *I think the facilitator is absolutely it. And I think the position where the lecturer has put herself – the way she has positioned herself to one side – is doing a complete disservice to the whole notion of online teaching.* (Nadia)

This perspective was backed up by another student who had positive experiences with coordinator support:

> *The lecturer usually started the feed. The lecturer was definitely part of the forum, not just classmates. And she did give feedback on the actual forum.* (Julia)

Responses indicated that input varied between coordinators and courses. Coordinators might follow up where students were not participating, provide assistance, or go online on a weekly basis to provide encouragement and an update. Sometimes the coordinator posed questions which were organised and specific, so that students did not get off

track. In these situations, because there was a clear purpose, students largely managed themselves. One student was satisfied with his experience because the course coordinator stated at the beginning that the DF would be self-managing, unless there were problems. The student felt that the DF worked because activities and questions were carefully designed so that they were relevant and applicable to their course learning outcomes. Coordinators who saw teaching and learning as a co-constructive endeavour used DFs as opportunities for sharing ideas, aiming to build both knowledge and a professional community of students. They argued that the sense of community developed on DFs scaffolded student learning and helped to develop a community of practitioners which carried into students' professional lives.

However coordinators also faced a number of challenges in facilitating successful DFs. One of the most difficult aspects was simply persuading students to participate, where there was no incentive such as marks, and where students viewed DF usage as unnecessary, a challenge also mentioned in the literature (LaPointe & Reisetter, 2008). In addition, both students and coordinators felt that a critical mass of people was needed to create sufficient impetus for interactions to become self-generating. DFs were less effective where there was low participation, and where there were few people posting there was no energy. One student commented that it was *really frustrating when what happens is you start off on discussion forums and then no one responds and it tails off* (Sage).

The same student argued that it was the coordinator's job to keep students engaged in the DF, once again reflecting a preference for student-coordinator interactions (R. Miller, 2005). However, with multiple responsibilities involved in maintaining a teacher presence, it is recognised that maintaining student engagement is no easy task (Swan et al., 2009). For example, students could decide to opt out even if DFs were assessed:

> *There was one student in particular. Even though there was a 10% summative for participation online, she just chose not to do that. She accepted the loss and she had quite independent strategies.* (FG2)

The question of whether marks should be allocated to DFs was also controversial. One coordinator from a fully online course expressed the view that DFs should not be assessed*:*

> *If there's no mark if they won't do it, I agree. But I'm not putting anything on the discussion because I don't feel discussions should be marked.* (FG2)

Where DFs were marked the trend was to reward students, often for participation.

The reality is that if DFs are unmarked or unmoderated they are likely to be of little value in developing student learning, since interaction is likely to be minimal. For DFs to be utilised to their full potential and to have a real purpose in academic literacy development their use needs to be clearly explained. One compromise is to moderate a percentage of DFs as a formal genre for co-construction of ideas, vocabulary and writing development. As Goodfellow (2004) argues, reading and writing online constitute literacy practices which parallel traditional classroom procedures, and provide an opportunity to socialise participants into the required literacy practices. However, the medium used needs to be structured to meet this aim.

As mentioned in section 5.3.5, a recent trend is to use the marks once allocated to DFs for an early mini-assignment. However, a number of students will not participate in DFs without an incentive such as marks. In spite of the difficulty of creating a sense of community, the importance of a well organised forum that is enthusiastically supported by students cannot be overemphasised.

Unfortunately time pressures on both students and lecturers often compromised the quality of DFs. Staff members spoke about becoming more instrumental, with assignments being simplified, word limits lowered, and spaces for comments being reduced. In the online context participation in DFs by lecturers was often less frequent. This approach was seen to be a result of attitudes in higher education institutions that value research over teaching. Members of one department were told *not to neglect teaching but just to make sure we keep it simple, that we don't get too bogged down in the teaching because research is more important* (CC3).

Another coordinator remarked:

> *The official rhetoric values teaching, the main thing that is really valued is publishing in highly-ranked journals. If you are writing it feeds your teaching. But it's a real quandary because using the web- based environment can be distressing, if you don't know how to do it properly, and hugely time consuming. You still have to produce the course but now it's online and we are expected to interact.* (CC9)

The student experience could also be affected by these time constraints. One coordinator described simplifying DF requirements:

> *I used to put in systems to make them read each other's blogs and so on, but now basically there are workload issues. They usually only have a basic entry in a blog. It doesn't get a really good discussion going; they're usually just ticking a box.* (CC5)

Another issue that affected the success of DFs was the composition of the student cohort. One of the milder criticisms was that groups could be too like-minded where members came from a similar professional background:

> *I think that I understood that you were supposed to provide your own kind of perspective, but the problem was that we were probably all on the same wavelength, so if you made a criticism or had a concern, or a critical reading, then someone else would have the same too.* (Julia)

Other participants were made uneasy by the didactic tone adopted by some of the group:

> *The way I was reading my discussion forum, it's heavy stuff, man! I would like to have it more light and social, like talking in a simpler way and not with referencing. Just help each other, but not with that heavy stuff.* (Sage*)*

However, as indicated earlier, the students were on the whole positive about DFs, particularly where there was a high level of discussion, resulting in sessions that were described as relevant, exciting and motivating.

Engaging in group work as part of web-based learning

Group tasks were another area that allowed for collaborative endeavours. The ability to work collaboratively is important for future professional careers (K. Morgan, Williams, Cameron, & Wade, 2014), but students' experiences of collaborative activities drew mixed reactions. Responses appeared to depend on the way initial membership was determined and the personalities involved, rather than the actual task.

One student described her experience of collaborative work and feedback suggestions as valuable applied learning. An outcome of the course for her was a shift in practice from working in isolation to working collaboratively. The benefits of working with others were described as *rich professional development* (Sophie). A group of four students worked together using Skype video conferencing sessions. The work was seen as a good learning opportunity, the one drawback being that the group did not see the activity

itself as being properly valued because of the university's emphasis on individual achievement:

> *The university only allows 15% of the mark for the collaborative part of it and 85% of it is independent. So the whole structure of the university marking system is set up to be independent.* (Edna)

Not all experiences were positive, however. A member of one group at a block course responded negatively to being coerced into a group situation without consultation or preparation:

> *To be honest, there was a lot of unrest in the block courses last year because you had to do group presentations and people loathed and detested the interaction because you didn't choose who you were in a group with.* (Kylie)

Similarly, another student objected to being arbitrarily paired with another course member where their outlooks and expectations differed:

> *I just focused on medicine in Bro Town. I surveyed the students: 'What do you think, what would you like to see in health care for Tongans and Samoans?' So, I thought, right, Bro Town. And they love Bro Town. We did a lesson all about it. And they loved it. They thought it was hilarious. And she just kept writing, "This is insulting, this is degrading to women." And I thought, "Oh, for goodness' sake, this is the context that they live in." You know?* (Alice)

The issue was that the two participants worked with different sets of social values and different communities of students, considerations which were not worked through by coordinators. Clarification and justification of the aims of the project, as well as a detailed evaluation guide, might have avoided difficulties. Participant responses indicate the importance of social and interpersonal considerations in constructing small groups, along with development of a shared purpose and a sense of collective identity (Oliveira, Tinoca, & Pereira, 2011). Low levels of rapport and of ongoing collaboration and sharing were recounted by another student in an online activity where she felt that she was seen as an outsider because she had enrolled from another discipline. Having to find strengths to add to the group and to work to a time limit because of personal circumstances created constraints:

> *I didn't enjoy it, and at the end when* we *handed our work in, it was something that had been designed by a committee. And it had that vaguely disjointed look. And it's hugely frustrating because you know it could be*

> *better but, if you do that, then you're trampling on someone else's work.* (Anna)

These conflicting responses convey the challenges involved in online group work, especially when working in a limited timeframe. The processes of group formation are complex. Staff development in group work processes is advocated (K. Morgan et al., 2014) and students also need an understanding of such processes because professional workplace practices increasingly require online communications across time and place. Oliveira et al (2011) emphasise the importance of course coordinators in guiding participants towards constructive work patterns involving social and interpersonal skills. Theoretically, web-based learning provides opportunities for active knowledge construction by groups who work towards a common goal based on agreed contributions (Rovai & Jordan, 2004).

Induction began the preparation of students to work collaboratively by developing a sense of belonging and responsibility towards fellow students (D. Kennedy & Duffy, 2004), but these qualities also needed to be nurtured in subsequent DFs. Researchers strongly support interactive construction of learning using web-based technology. Garrison (2006) advocates reflection and discourse to capitalise on the potential of DFs, along with the establishment of an informal support network.

Developing informal support networks

Another aspect of self-management and socialisation was the cultivation of informal alliances. Students on a course could be in the same town or workplace and could form a coffee group which could meet regularly. Others communicated via Skype or email. One student commented:

> *There's three other people here [at work] doing that paper. I think sometimes you need to have a conversation. I think there are times when the subtlety is in the little undercurrents that you think about when you're in conversation and you can deal with them straight away. The [ideas] don't evaporate like they do when you're writing.* (Alice)

Some students could also access support for study at their workplace. One tertiary teaching hospital for example had arrangements in place so that a student could request assistance with computing, assignments, or with information literacy (Amy). Often close friends or partners were also academic colleagues. They helped with getting started in activities such as downloading technology or PDF files:

I must admit all that stuff was all new to me. My husband has a degree in IT so I would ask him how to do things. It was trial and error. Like when I had a brief lesson in the library and finding articles. (Elizabeth)

Partners might also help with essay writing or offer suggestions to gain clarity on an assignment. These students benefited from the integration of study and family life through support offered in the home environment (M. Moore & Kearsley, 2011). However, some students elected to go it alone or were unable to find support. The lack of a confidant could mean there was no opportunity to discuss a close analysis of a reading or assignment requirements. There could be additional, disciplinary requirements alongside generic approaches to assignment writing which were not always apparent (Lillis, 1999). One student, who had decided to work on her own, bought a book on literature reviews not realising that the assignment did not quite fit the established genre:

My lit review didn't actually say what I wanted it to say. Anyway, I didn't do very well. I got a C or C+ or something. And, the lecturer was quite hard but fair. But, I remember I cried and I thought, "I can't do this anymore" when I got my first assignment back. I wanted so much to do really, really well and it was such a blow. (Hannah)

Students cited the advantages of having a support network with opportunities for extended discussion where gaps in understanding could be more fully explored. Socialisation was often the foundation for students to gain reassurance and feel less alone. Students who became isolated sometimes found it very difficult to keep going. One student, who subsequently withdrew, described her sense of loneliness and lack of underpinning support at a critical time:

I was given some buddies but they were not on the paper and not available. And I felt very lonely. I was also very busy at work, and then when I went online, no one responded to my online questions. (Edna)

For this student situational factors including the failure of responses from either the course coordinator or fellow students influenced her motivation to learn (Hartnett et al., 2011). The lack of social and relational support associated with persistence and satisfaction was missing. Ludwig-Hardman and Dunlap (2003) link student isolation to attrition and failing academic achievement. Dzakiria (2008) also acknowledges the impact of loneliness and the need for non-judgemental support. Edna's withdrawal demonstrates the critical need to address feelings of isolation. Academic advisors in this

study were aware of the importance of support networks, commenting that postgraduate students often went through periods of self-doubt if they received low marks, particularly after the first assignment. This was often exacerbated if students had had earlier academic experiences of success. Other students took advantage of personal and institutional support, including web-based options, which helped them overcome concerns and continue their studies, a finding shared by O'Donnell et al (2009).

Capitalising on the communication potential of technology

Not all students were challenged by technology demands. Many were very familiar with the technology, and some expressed disappointment that lecturers did not make optimum use of the resources available. Where the course focus was online learning some courses were described as *nowhere near what it could be and they're really behind* (Jane). For students who were looking to utilise their study experience to explore online literacies, there were expressions of disappointment where courses were presented as traditional formats placed online:

> *We could have done something that was multimedia and become a bit more media savvy. I think it's a question of engaging with the technologies that are there. We're being forced into engaging with traditional technologies and not being allowed the opportunity*. (Nadia)

Many students expected to engage with the interactive aspects of technology such as using Skype, Facebook and YouTube rather than having experiences limited to discussing readings on voluntary DFs:

> *I find it very ironic that they talk about the social aspects of learning and the benefits of social learning, but most of their learning is still quite dismal. We have discussion forums but no one's thought to be quite innovative so that maybe we all Skype or something and actually do something like that.* (Jane)

Students were critical of the sustained dependence on printed text as the way to provide content. This practice was tolerated but did not escape notice:

> *I feel that what I'm working with online is a hard copy that's transferred to online. That's how I feel. So it feels like there's a bit more communication, but basically they've just given me my hard copy version and put it online and I can access it.* (Carol)

Sometimes a text-dominant course was made more interesting with additional material such as YouTube videos, case studies and relevant websites. Students who were also educational practitioners often made comparisons with their own practice:

> *Well what I do for my own content delivery is I use a lot of animation. There was not much on my course. There were hyperlinks but nothing to YouTube.* (James)

These expressions of frustration or disappointment illustrated that staff expertise with technology was still developing. However, there was not necessarily a clear divide between staff and students, since familiarity at this level depended on prior experiences (G. Kennedy et al., 2008). One student, for example, had a bachelor's degree in information technology. Similarly, one staff member was experienced with technology and would include a particular communication format if students made a request (CC4). However, other staff commented on the pressures involved in putting courses on line. They often spoke of needing more professional development and resourcing, especially in terms of time. Being time-poor meant that many lecturers were not able to devote enough time to course development, something that was noted with disapproval by students:

> *I bet it's the same [as when it first began]... I bet it's absolutely identical. I don't think it's changed at all, I think it's really outdated. I think it's been set up a long time ago and the coordinator just lets it tick over and I think it's cheap.* (Nadia)

This section illustrates conflicting responses to course design, as well as the importance of allowing staff the time and opportunity to develop their own online capabilities. This will not only improve the quality of online courses, but also put staff in a position where they can help students negotiate problems with technology.

Student and staff responses indicate that technology, as part of the "Digital Turn" (K. Mills, 2010, p. 246), is an evolving tool of teaching and learning. Some students were content to participate in course activities approved by the institution (Goodfellow, 2011; Lea & Jones, 2011), while others were critical of the conservative nature of their digital literacy experience, and expected universities to take a more innovative approach to teaching and learning enabled by technology.

At the same time, support mechanisms and strategies provided by staff assisted many students to transition from a sense of inexperience to confidence and independence. Students often needed assistance to adjust to the web-based medium (Huessi, 2012). They benefited from induction, ongoing availability of support, and scaffolded approaches to course design which addressed gaps during different stages of their learning experience (Forrester & Parkinson, 2006; Ludwig-Hardman & Dunlap, 2003).

5.4 Summary and discussion

5.4.1 The induction process

This chapter has focused on returning students' transition into postgraduate web-based study and analysed insights based on the identified categories of managing the gap at induction and developing self-management abilities. Students undertake their academic journeys as members of a diverse group with differing prior experiences, knowledge, goals and expectations (Heussi, 2012; O'Donnell et al., 2009). The induction process, which is one approach to managing the gap between students' qualities on enrolment and those required to meet learning outcomes, has been viewed through the multiple perspectives of the participants. Successful induction programmes conveyed academic and technology requirements as well as student support mechanisms. In addition, socialisation and development of a sense of community (Salmon, 2006) provided the base for constructivist knowledge building.

Induction as empowering

In spite of individual criticisms, most students found that induction was a valuable tool. Induction differed across courses according to needs. Consequently, induction reduced academic challenges for learners, a finding that is supported in the literature (Motteram & Forrester, 2005; Salmon, 2006; Wozniak et al., 2009). Participants valued the chance to have expectations explained, and to question course coordinators about requirements. The opportunity to establish links with other students, and support staff was also highly valued.

Students reported positively where they were exposed to a range of teaching and learning approaches which included both lectures and group sessions where participants could discuss course requirements and learn from each other. Meeting other students and staff provided motivation and students conveyed satisfaction where they could

return home knowing there were specific people to contact for support and advice. As may be expected, however, reactions to induction were influenced by expectations. Some students felt that individual needs could be more efficiently catered for, since the one size fits all model created anxiety for less confident students and frustration for those who had already mastered entry level skills. The challenge for induction was to cater for the range of abilities amongst attendees, all of whom expected to gain benefits from their induction experience.

The benefits of socialisation

Induction helped students to feel more confident, to dispel feelings of isolation (Moule, 2007) and to gain a sense of the institutional culture. Student responses confirmed that induction lays the groundwork for social presence. In addition, social interaction at induction allowed participants to begin developing a cognitive presence (D. Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2005), important in a constructivist approach to learning which employs CMC (Hung & Chen, 2001; Rourke et al., 2001; Rovai, 2002). Favourable student reactions where DFs worked well indicated the value of nurturing social relationships (T. Anderson & Dron, 2011), although coordinators also reported that developing an online community takes longer than a one-semester course. Students, however, reported that they looked forward to regrouping on future courses within a programme.

Negotiating the technology challenge

Course coordinators reported an overall improvement in their students' familiarity with technology compared with five years ago, and most students said that they were comfortable with email usage and workplace programmes. However, a significant number of students reported anxiety and low self-efficacy negotiating the LMS during the first three to four weeks of a course, while two course coordinators considered that students' technology skills remained patchy and unpredictable. Students who faced unfamiliar technology applications recalled feeling anxious because of the fast pace of information delivery.

Findings demonstrate that coordinators and support personnel accepted that lack of confidence, insufficient training, or lack of technical support may be a barrier to learning, a position supported in the literature (Wozniak et al., 2009). Ongoing assistance for web-based students is often needed because information is not retained.

Students expressed satisfaction and a sense of security when provided with opportunities to connect up with support staff in the areas of administration, information technology, academic support or library services. Those who were helped from a distance reported positively, citing instances where they were talked through an issue by telephone, email, or shadowed online.

Initial technology problems, once overcome may still be replaced by other issues later in the course, as new requirements are introduced. Student dependence on other people is reduced where online help is embedded. Such assistance often takes the form of dropdown menus at point of need where students can resolve an issue independently by clicking on a link (Ellis, 2012b; Rempel & Davidson, 2008). These tools, where embedded in a course, allow the focus to move from technology concerns to course content and assignment requirements.

Learning about academic literacy requirements

Many students emphasised the importance of early access to academic requirements and expectations. Along with access to course documentation students emphasised that they preferred to ask questions about assignment expectations and course coordinator preferences in the face to face environment. Their desire to adopt an acceptable identity in terms of assignment requirements reflects the relations of power in the higher education context (Gee, 1996) and indicates the discipline-specific nature of written course requirements (Hyland, 2009b; Lillis, 2006).

Other, less confident students, wanted to know about other study activities they were about to undertake and what would be expected of them. Explanations such as how to approach weekly readings could assist students to study more effectively. Some students reported that, initially, they had not appreciated the need to prioritise key readings when working within a limited time frame. Their experiences suggest the value of guided instruction for transitioning students who are still moving from dependence to independence (Dzakiria, 2005).

Induction also enabled participants to grasp a sense of online activities such as wikis or blogs or DFs. Students wanted to know their purpose, the role that the course coordinator would play and whether participation was mandatory. In some courses there appeared to be little encouragement for students to participate in DFs. Instead the LMS was limited to use as a repository, with space for questions and emails. It is apparent

that a range of teaching and learning styles are used in the web-based environment which students must adapt to (Lea & Street, 1998). Where online interaction was minimal, it appeared that students were expected to take a cognitive, more solitary approach to study.

Students themselves appreciated the experience of a range of teaching and learning activities at induction, including lectures, direct instruction and interactive activities. At times, however, students were critical when the relevance of events such as visiting speakers or Endnote sessions was not explained. It appears that staff need to understand that the benefit of such sessions may be obvious to them, but not to their students. It is even important to articulate the relevance of information literacy and the digital library since students may not appreciate that they may have to find their own resources using the digital library.

Introducing library support and information literacy at induction

The first point of contact with contemporary library services was often at induction. Librarians often saw these sessions as introductory, broad–brush, and a time to allay anxieties. Librarians emphasised their support role, encouraged students to make contact in future, and demonstrated the services which were available to web-based students. Librarians in all institutions reinforced the desirability of integrating information literacy support into courses at point of need. Because of varying individual needs and differing course requirements, one to one research consultations were also promoted. Students needed to be organised and self-managing to make productive use of these opportunities.

5.4.2   Developing self-management

The second category of developing self-management emerged from an examination of ways that students purposefully organised aspects of their physical and web-based environments. Self-management also includes proactively taking advantage of available support mechanisms. Student perspectives were presented along with those of course coordinators, academic support staff and librarians. Complexity is apparent in the range of interactions and responses evident in processes involving the use of DFs, on-course activities and institutional support strategies. Both staff and student perspectives were characterised by difference because of differing experiences, expectations and pressures

involved in the task of rapidly developing student skills from induction through to the completion of a course.

Students in this study overwhelmingly stated a preference for interaction, not only with fellow students but also with their course coordinator. Their aim was to bridge gaps in their understanding, to have a sense of rapport, and to build knowledge through discussion and interaction. The value of informal support, the availability of academic advisors, and awareness of online resources were other supporting strands. At the same time, tensions were apparent amongst students, course coordinators and academic support staff. These reflect the process of ongoing change in higher education, which both students and staff must negotiate. The categories of managing the gap through induction and developing self-management underpin the findings surrounding the two categories which are explored in the next chapter: developing student reading and developing student writing,

Chapter 6 Findings and discussion: Part 2

This chapter considers the categories of developing critical reading and developing critical writing which build on the categories presented and discussed in Chapter 5: managing the gap through induction and developing self-management qualities. Critical reading and writing emerged as key academic concerns for participants because of their dominant place in course activities and role in demonstrating the acquisition of knowledge through learning outcomes as indicated in section 2.5. The literature often characterises reading and writing as interrelated processes (Ackerman, 1991). However, it cannot be assumed that all postgraduate students on enrolment understand the processes of critical reading and writing.

6.1   Category 3: Developing critical reading

In this section I describe the experiences of the student participants in this study as they engage with critical reading. Course coordinator participants articulated the need to develop critical reading amongst their students, but there was often a gap between student readiness and course requirements.

Experienced course coordinators appreciated that students had different levels of reading readiness and that both home and ESL students could have difficulty. There was also variation within different groups of students. Although one ESL student stated that she did not need help and had done plenty of reading back home, the majority of such students clearly faced greater hurdles. One course coordinator suggested that such a student might need to read a text *four or five or six or seven or eight, or ten times* (CC5) to understand the content. Many home students also found the amount of reading required was demanding. They often described the texts as dense and difficult to comprehend, reinforcing the view that extra instruction with critical reading is often needed (Phakiti & Li, 2011). Some coordinators acknowledged that ideally a paper on reading for research purposes would be included in courses, but in reality*, there's too many conflicting needs already within our masters programme and so people are saying, "No, no, we haven't got time*" (CC5).

The amount and complexity of the reading material was clearly problematic for students. Staff expressed their own concerns about students needing to read critically

and to engage with course content and weekly reading quickly. Part of the problem was that critical reading is a developmental process which takes time. As one coordinator noted about her own reading experiences:

> *I have to say that for a very long time the only question that I had was, "What does this mean?" .... And it's taken me years and years and lots of post graduate study here and there to look at something and to say, "Well, that's relevant and that's not."* (FG1)

A further priority was to keep students reading on a regular basis: *My sense is that most students don't read ahead; they just do what they have to do for the week* (CC4). Readings organised around regular DFs or conferencing sessions kept students up to date, scaffolded the critical reading process, and encouraged sharing and interactive construction of ideas. Where readings were not scheduled on a regular basis students admitted that it was harder to develop a routine *because you're working from home and working in your other life, and not expected to turn up for classes and things like that; it's very hard to stay on task and keep up with it* (Carol).

Those facing challenges with reading included participants who already had a degree but had been out of study for some time. This situation was acknowledged by course coordinators:

> *Then you get to know whether study has been recent or a long time ago, and there could be issues about coming up to speed. For example issues to do with reading for content, reading a large amount really quickly or reading for meaning, because some of the readings are so dense.* (CC9)

Students faced an often arduous process when stepping up to reading research based articles. Reading specialist literature was a change from reading textbooks with their helpful characteristics such as contents pages and indexes. Research articles were a recognisable genre and were also more dense and often more specific and detailed. Students also needed to make comparisons between different writers' points of view. Alongside printed texts there were other texts such as PowerPoint presentations, videos, and specialised images such as x-rays, electrocardiograms, or graphs, all of which needed interpretation. Students might be expected to engage with a range of text types alongside traditional genres such as the essay, indicating that reading activities have expanded to include multiple media (Lea & Jones, 2011).

It seemed that the main way students consolidated their reading was through scaffolding strategies employed by course coordinators. A variety of approaches was employed. A number of coordinators made use of questions to guide student reading, which students appreciated because questions kept them on track, providing a weekly focus for discussion purposes or a series of questions where responses could be submitted online. One student described missing reading-related questions when they were not used in their following course, since the questions guided note taking and DFs and could prompt students to seek clarification. Another, more focused strategy was to ask students to carry out a mini literature review. This could involve accessing texts independently from the digital library prior to evaluating and comparing them. Alternatively, readings were supplied so that the focus was upon content and the act of critical reading:

> *They can choose from the prescribed readings to critique them, and that's trying to get them into analysing if they are just used to describing.* (CC6)

Some coordinators used asynchronous DFs for students to engage in critical discussion and raise issues as part of collaborative learning. However, not all coordinators put the same emphasis on using DFs to help students to discuss readings. One observed, *we don't require a huge amount of interaction. Often a lot of it is lonely reading stuff* (CC5).

There was variation in the emphasis on interaction and the way DFs were used. One course did not use DFs at all because the coordinator worked part time and felt that she could not do justice to the monitoring requirements. However, the course included two block sessions where students could attend and engage in face-to-face interactions, a teaching approach which the coordinator preferred as a way to explain more difficult concepts and to be able to check that everyone understood. The first session focused on developmental aspects of critical reading such as case studies requiring problem identification and extracting information. At the second session, held towards the end of the course, the emphasis shifted to the higher level skills of integration of information and linking evidence through critical reading and analysis. A key point was that students were taking part in a developmental process:

> *They come in with their thinking in boxes. By the second part they realise, "Hey, things can't fit in boxes" and they are feeling very uncomfortable about how to bring all this together. By the time they finish the paper they*

have all the information integrated into a productive format. It is a huge change. (CC8)

Overall, coordinators were confident that their courses provided the means for students to actively engage in the critical reading process, with one remarking:

Once they do my paper they would know how to access the library. They would know how to find original research and critique that and be able to summarise the advantages and disadvantages or risk benefits of any intervention. (CC7)

6.1.1   Student perceptions

The students who understood that critical reading involved expressing opinions and asking questions of the text were those who had more recent experience at postgraduate level. Of the other students, four expressed uncertainty about knowing what to do. However, none mentioned seeking explicit information about the nature of critical reading, text conventions or reading strategies which could contribute to a more informed approach. Generic resources were readily available. They included information from university websites, beginning with reading strategies for getting started. Some sites also allowed students to interact with online texts. Information about critical reading, as distinct from reading strategies, was also available. Students could, of course, seek more personalised help from academic support centres, but this was not mentioned, except in connection with literature review writing.

Experienced readers and writers selected and implemented appropriate strategies within a discourse context. They indicated that they understood critical reading as a constructive process of meaning making (Nelson, 2009). Descriptions of the process included expressions such as having an opinion, making links between texts, discussing multiple perspectives, balancing one text against another, identifying an argument, and reflecting on purpose. Students who demonstrated this level of understanding were comfortable with postgraduate expectations. However, they reiterated that it took years to understand how to be critical and to make links between texts. Some students mentioned difficulties with specialised reading requirements such as managing inferential statistics, and commented that limited training was offered when studying through the web-based medium. Overall, however, they were well aware of the connection between reading as a vehicle to construct knowledge for writing or for an oral presentation, both of which incorporated critical thinking.

Required readings, also known as set texts, were usually accessed through course webpages. A variety of text types was used, including the occasional textbook, with one student observing that *this is really nice actually, to read from a book* (Denise). There was an occasional sense of cynicism at resources being *sort of spoon-fed* (Joanne). However, most students welcomed resources which were conveniently packaged and accessible:

> *I love the fact that I haven't had to go to the library for all the resources, because they're all there although I wanted to do that, you know, it's easy to be given a whole stack of resources and a purpose for reading them, so that's fine.* (Nadia)

Students also reported on concerns at different stages of the processes involved in critical reading. The procedure for accessing texts from the learning management system was easy for some, but for others was a source of anxiety:

> *A tutor will say click on such and such and this will give you a window that looks like this. So you click on it and your window does not look like that. You've gone somewhere else. You've done what she says, you've followed instructions and it has not produced that reading, or that window. You can't find the reading. The reading is for this week. What do you do?* (Sophie)

Anxiety lessened once procedures became familiar, with one student commenting: *You realise that you are in the course, you have managed to break in and, wow, I am actually in there* (Sophie).

Once access was achieved, the focus shifted to the reading process. Experienced students reported they were already able to engage in critical analysis of texts. They knew how to skim the abstract, introduction and conclusion of an article for relevance. Students with this level of confidence, like Lucy, could deal with *tons and tons of* reading: *In my case it was not too much of a problem because I am a superfast reader. I just swallow, I am able to read and quickly get onto the next one.*

For others, the development of critical reading skills was a longer-term process, acquired over time and assisted by regular reading and follow-up activities. Many students were perplexed by the sheer quantity of reading and time required. They also spoke of the challenges of academic vocabulary and having to take notes and to mind map to understand. Some students described bewilderment at the amount of reading expected:

When I first started postgraduate studies I couldn't see the trees for the forest. You know, the volume, and what it's about. And I would do the reading and I would highlight some areas but it was just so overwhelming. (Zoe)

A student support advisor reported on volumes of feedback from students around the amount of reading, the nature of reading and *that whole aspect for students coming back to study, talking about this wading through, trying to make sense of it* (Advisor Y). This was echoed from the student perspective by Sophie:

So you try and you are getting all these readings and you are printing off a hard copy of reading after reading and you are thinking: Is this what masters study is about? I won't be able to keep up.

Students often commented that people writing online programmes overestimated the amount of reading which students could get through:

We might get given half a dozen readings in a week and for each reading you get better at it. But, if each reading takes you overall a couple of hours, from the first reading through to the revisiting and checking back on your ideas and things like that, that's lot of work just for the reading side of it, let alone responding to questions or prompts from the web- based activities that are set up. (Carol)

In order to manage tight timeframes, students appreciated guidance on essential readings:

As I say, time is of the essence. So if we have to look at everything and discern for ourselves what is important and what isn't, that is very time consuming. (Sophie)

By comparison, other students would have liked to be able to find their own readings. Course coordinators wanted students to limit their reading to set texts, to be content-focused, and not to be side-tracked because of the limited time available with single-semester courses. One student expressed disappointment at being discouraged from finding and including readings which offered alternative perspectives, also noting the difficulty of attempting to negotiate or clarify this possibility in the online environment:

I actually got irritated by having certain readings that I thought were academically quite sound being put down. I felt almost personally put down and I didn't like that at all. And I felt that it was the sort of thing that in a face-to-face environment I would have had the courage and the energy to say. (FG4)

Students distinguished between undergraduate and postgraduate reading demands:

> *In my first degree it was all about reading the book that the lecturer had written, memorising the information, and then going in and taking the test.* (Lilly)

They saw postgraduate study as a step up because of the emphasis on developing information literacy competencies, on research, and on the integration of varied perspectives, rather than the undergraduate experience of repeating what was read. Concerns ranged from understanding the content to the critical reading and integrative processes such as developing a sophisticated literature review. Requirements varied but a literature review was often commented on as a new genre. Some students found the steps involved could be a challenge:

> *With something like a cholesterol drug, if you're doing proper evidence based research you need to show people your research tree and which words were used. It's quite methodical. To do proper, evidence based review in medicine is just massive.* (James)

The process was hard because of uncertainty about the level of depth needed, a difficulty exacerbated by the fact that there was no face-to-face contact. Because the student had declined to attend induction, citing cost, distance and time off work, he was uncertain as to whether it was appropriate to contact the course coordinator for advice, an issue which could have been made explicit through course handbook material.

6.1.2   Student strategies

Experienced students enrolled with a range of existing strategies accumulated from experience, a characteristic which Rosenblatt (2004) refers to as the "linguistic-experiential reservoir" (p. 1367). Typically they used strategies such as skimming, scanning for relevance, highlighting main points, note taking, and summarising. Note taking during reading was frequent, and students stressed that interacting with the text helped them understand an argument and maintain concentration. Most found that working with hard copy was preferable to reading on screen. As one student pointed out, hard copies were a realistic option because the readings were primarily traditional academic journal articles which were not written for the online medium: *They are not online texts, they are printed texts that have been put online and that's different to doing online reading of webpages* (Nadia).

Highlighting and notes in the margin of hard copies were often used. For those who chose to read online, an online equivalent could be used. Some PDF readers allowed highlighting and the addition of sticky notes. Alternatively, students copied and pasted into a Word document, and used strategies such as adding notes in a different font. Possible quotes were sometimes recorded for future use. The key point was that some form of interaction with a text was essential for later recall. For one student, this advice was passed on by other students and gratefully received:

> *Any reading that you do, make notes on it. Don't just read and put it behind you. As soon as you read you must write, even if it is just two sentences. Write something down: how you felt; the one idea that sticks in your mind. Otherwise you will just have to read the whole thing again.* (Hannah)

Three students also mentioned using the bibliographic software Endnote to record their notes. Another described using a sheet of A3 paper to build and mind map relevant readings, focusing on significant points for an assignment:

> *On the sheet of A3, I download and number my papers, as they come off the printer sort of thing … I would then put "Paper 1 was relevant" … but what I read in the first paper will have a totally different bearing by the time I've read the 80th paper.* (John)

A natural extension of note taking was *to make a start on writing* (Hannah), calling to mind the expression, "One person's reading is another person's writing" (Wallace & Wray, 2011, p. 11). Coordinators assisted the process where they introduced readings in a progressive manner so that the content of readings built towards assignments. Students were required to summarise, comment, and finally present the information as an assignment:

> *And at the end of all that, what did he ask us to do? He asked us to write an essay on strategies and methods to do with the topic. And, I didn't have to do anything. All my work had been done. I had two, four, six, eight [points] and then had to organise them into an essay. It was the easiest essay I ever wrote.* (Lilly)

In order to complete written assignments, students needed to be able to develop cohesive arguments though reading and note taking. Where DFs were operating, part of this process was participation and collaboration in response to readings. DFs were a way for participants to construct ideas through their own texts by responding to the work of others (Nelson, 2009).

6.2   Category 4: Developing critical writing

Students read in order to write (Wallace & Wray, 2011). One student advisor articulated the relationship between the two in the following way:

> *With reading and writing, one depends on the other. If they don't read well and are finding it very hard to get through course readings and that sort of thing, it is very hard to write.* (Advisor P)

Course coordinators consistently expressed their commitment to developing critical reading, thinking and writing requirements expected at postgraduate level. They looked for students to demonstrate these abilities in writing:

> *What it comes down to is that this is a university and a good standard of English and conceptual understanding is required. We can accommodate if it is not perfect, particularly the English, to quite a degree actually, but if students are not able to think conceptually and analytically then it's very difficult.* (CC9)

Critical thinking included attributes such as having a sceptical, reasonable and reflective approach to reading and writing (Scriven & Richard, 1987), along with an ability to analyse, synthesise and evaluate opposing arguments (Paul & Elder, 2008). Qualities relating to academic literacy, such as an ability to engage in critical thinking and analysis, may be traced back to standards registered on the New Zealand Qualifications Framework (NZQF, 2011). Student outcomes for the award of postgraduate certificates, diplomas and masters qualifications at Levels 8 and 9 of the NZQF have been defined (NZQA, 2013b), and have filtered down into course handbooks and student assignments. Evidence of advanced knowledge, critical evaluation and analysis is threaded through successive levels of documentation at institutional, programme and course levels. While disciplinary differences remain, Table 6.1 below demonstrates that key words used to define levels of intellectual engagement are integrated into university documentation.

Table 6.1 The integration of academic standards defined by the NZQF (2011) into university documentation

Masters degree: Level 9	Course outcomes: Level 9	Student assignment: Level 9
<u>Evidence of advanced knowledge</u> about a specialist field of enquiry or professional practice Mastery of sophisticated theoretical subject matter <u>Evaluate critically</u> the findings and discussions in the literature Work independently and <u>apply knowledge</u> to new situations Engage in rigorous intellectual <u>analysis, criticism and problem solving</u>	The student will be able to: <u>Critically demonstrate</u> how contemporary theoretical developments might… Do a simple ethnographic analysis of… Demonstrate <u>critical insight</u> into the unique issues… Demonstrate <u>a critical understanding</u> of…	**Assignment 1 example**: Investigating principles of teaching and learning The goal of this assessment is to <u>isolate some fundamental principles</u> with regard to teaching and learning using a weblog-annotated bibliography. **Assignment 4 example:** Write an essay that <u>critiques</u> a formative/summative tool you are using: Outline the context, Identify some issues involved with its use <u>Critically evaluate</u> its effectiveness.
Source: NZQF (2011, v.2, p. 23).	*Source:* Student handbook – masters degree	*Source:* Student assignment questions – masters degree

Course coordinators used less formal language, but it was evident that students were judged on their ability to demonstrate these qualities in writing. Consequently, one of the challenges was to move student writing to the required level. In the early stages of a course, writing ability could be similar to reading, where an initial emphasis was often on mechanical aspects. A step up to postgraduate writing and the use of a wider range of genres was part of the postgraduate transition. Duff (2007) argues that, regardless of their linguistic ability, all newcomers undergo a process of socialisation into academic culture. Wingate and Tribble (2012) concur, observing that all students need support with academic writing. Participation in web-based academic activities in order to become familiar with discourse conventions was part of this process of apprenticeship (Lave & Wenger, 1991). As one student noted:

> *Being at home with my computer and my opportunities, and working with words that are so much different from ordinary speaking. It's a totally different world.* (Sage)

6.2.1 Working with words and diverse genres

Student perceptions about writing were often determined by their background experiences and degree of confidence with university study. In contrast with students who were struggling with the transition, a quarter of the students interviewed were already familiar with the institutional culture and broad postgraduate expectations. Their understandings had been gained through degree-level lecturing experience, participation in an earlier postgraduate qualification, or employment in higher-level education. They had a foundation in academic literacy areas such as referencing, reading and use of written genres, as well as an awareness of the critical aspects of thinking, reading and writing. A few students also reflected that, over time, the readings required for their postgraduate study enabled identification with academic language which they could then use in their own writing – a reading-writing connection (Nelson, 2009; Wallace & Wray, 2011). For those with a background in academic writing, the step up to new formats and the process of becoming familiar with postgraduate-level discourse was more rapidly achieved:

> *I think that the first thing was an annotated bibliography and I hadn't done that before, where you have to read articles and comment on them. So, that was a different structure for me but it worked out okay.* (Julia)

However, other students faced numerous challenges. Sometimes there was an expectation that students either enrolled with the necessary literacy skills or that they should pick up skills quickly *because you're asking them to be professional* (CC10). While students acknowledged that they should take responsibility for their own learning, differing prior experiences meant that students brought different bodies of knowledge to their study (Ivanic & Lea, 2006). In the postgraduate, web-based context this often meant a steep learning curve, an experience which was acknowledged by some course coordinators, especially when unfamiliar text types were involved:

> *We assume the students have already been exposed to the kinds of writing skills. Report writing is often different though. They are, I think, a little bit more perplexed by the written report. So we do have a resource that they can use that was created in-house about report writing.* (CC3)

The resource mentioned in the above quotation was part of a package of support and scaffolding which built from earlier induction activities. Students were encouraged to discuss their assignments in weekly synchronous DFs, where course coordinators were

actively involved. In this course tutors were also available to assist with emailed queries, often responding within the hour during work hours. Even so, an extensive gap between course expectations and students' understandings about critical writing was still possible, and was demonstrated when a student anxiously asked how she would know she had the right answer:

> *And when I said to her, "There is no right answer", you know, "the answer is better if you have good evidence to support what you're saying, if there's a logical structure, but there is no right answer." And she looked very perplexed because she had never … maybe she hadn't had to write an essay before.* (CC3)

Of the 10 course coordinators interviewed, two offered writing instruction at an individual level, while the majority provided feedback but also directed students to academic support advisors for further specialist support. Students were challenged when, in spite of having an undergraduate degree, they had moved from one discipline area to another, so that new genres had to be mastered. One commented:

> *I've never learnt to write essays. I could write using an experimental format, but when I did my first paper I actually got in touch with the learning academic support people and said "Help!" I knew because of reading the study guide that I didn't know how to put forward an argument, and then write the middle bit, and then at the end, write the summing up of my argument.* (Anna)

Another stated:

> *I never had to write a lit. review in my science degree. My partner has done a lit. review as he has an Arts degree, and he said what we were being asked to do was not a lit. review. A couple of friends also said it wasn't a lit. review. So, I looked up lit. review on the net to try and to get my head around what we were being asked. It was not that different, but we were given one set text and basically it was 17 chapters written by different authors and we critiqued them. We skimmed the whole thing from our own perspective.* (Evelyn)

Student comments demonstrated problems which could arise when generic terms were used loosely and when assignment expectations were not fully clarified in the formative stages. Lillis (2006) has advocated dialogue during the production of an assessment as a way to introduce students to the conventions of a particular context, a practice which could be time-consuming and was not fully utilised, but which was possible with the communication affordances of the internet. Some coordinators, for example, encouraged

student interaction and queries about assignments, stepping in to respond where the students could not work out issues themselves.

The situated approach to learning, as distinct from separate, standalone instruction, reflects Hyland's (2007a) view that instruction in the discipline speeds up the learning process and helps to bridge the gap between prior and present learning experiences by clarifying requirements. Other authors have also argued that there are advantages to explicit teaching, and that an apprenticeship model based solely on learning through immersion is a lengthy process and of limited usefulness when a short timeframe is involved (Skillen, 2006; Wingate & Tribble, 2012). Students recognised that requirements varied between contexts, and they wanted conventions to be made explicit to avoid making mistakes, a practice which follows the academic socialisation level of the academic literacies model (Street, 2009b).

Coordinator preferences sometimes caused problems for their students, especially where requirements differed between courses within the same programme. While some prerequisites were discipline-specific (Hyland, 2009b), other writing expectations were perceived to be "idiosyncratic" (Ivanic & Lea, 2006, p. 9). Features of writing for the course coordinators included the number of resources required, whether to use quotations, bullet points, the first or third person, and whether or not to have an abstract. These details also tended to centre around surface features and the mechanics of writing (Lillis, 2003). Such practices were not focused on critical writing but followed a study-skills level of practice when considered from an academic literacies perspective.

Comments came from students across all programmes about inconsistencies between courses and varying standards. Those course coordinators who were apparently demanding a higher standard than other coordinators, commented that students seemed unaware of mistakes when structuring an essay, referencing, or committing unintended plagiarism. Students who had already completed other courses expressed confusion:

> *It is interesting when you look at marking criteria and standardisation across the programme. So, for instance, I've done two papers and in that third paper that I did I got pulled apart on referencing. Yet, the referencing I did was not pulled apart in the first two papers.* (John)

Students who had fewer problems negotiating the changes between different contexts realised that there was not always a standard approach, even when coordinators used

terms which appeared to convey generic meanings. They utilised different opportunities to seek clarification on preferences, whether at face-to-face meetings, through documentation, or through ongoing interaction. However, for other students these requirements were less obvious and not always articulated. From a situated perspective, lack of dialogue prior to assignment writing limited opportunities to distinguish discipline or coordinator requirements. With hindsight, one student also mentioned that following marking matrices closely worked well in some instances but not in others, because *it was the standards that were behind what was written* (Maria). Street (2009b) draws attention to the hidden features of academic writing which tend to remain implicit. These subtleties underlying generic lists which set out the structure of dominant models of student writing were unlikely to be obvious to all transitioning students.

Problems could be exacerbated for ESL students or for those with no experience of university study. One student conveyed the tension at commencement of study:

> *If only I had understood what I had to do before I started. And, also, not understanding a lot of the terms, I did lots of notes and then I had to look up what they meant afterwards. I didn't know the terms because I didn't [learn to] study in English in the first place. I have to relearn again. And that takes me time to learn it. It takes a lot longer for me.* (Amy)

Strategies such as looking up words in a dictionary were sometimes of limited use because they did not place a word in context:

> *It is still harder for non-English-speaking people than for English-speaking people to understand what it is really about. A dictionary isn't enough because you have to listen and grow up with the words and then you understand how they are. If you've never done university study, you don't know the terms and what they mean.* (Amy)

Another ESL student recalled that she last wrote short English essays at secondary school and now *all of a sudden here we are required to do 5,000 [word essays] – it's 10 times more* (Grace). However, this student described overcoming the issue through acquiring a strategy that made the task seem manageable:

> *I found a way. But I now realise that writing 5,000 words is not that hard any more. A trick that nobody else ever tells is dividing the essay up, putting out this framework. So you count the introduction and conclusion as 10% each to deduct from the work.*

Grace mentioned that she gained assistance through student support, observing that course coordinators did not see teaching writing as their role, a perspective which was echoed by others: *The tutors are not there to fix your writing, I guess that is fairly clear* (Lilly). However, the amount of lecturer input in assisting students was often an individual decision.

These perspectives demonstrate that approaches to student writing were predominantly at the level of skills and socialisation. Students were embarking on a journey and progressing through stages, which Lillis and Scott (2007) have described as "identify and induct" (p. 13). Students concentrated on meeting learning outcomes, and dependence on writing to demonstrate these learning outcomes predominated.

Assessment activities usually depended on writing, even when course outcomes were not entirely based on traditional essayist literacy. Students were regularly required to access the evidence, use appropriate referencing and complete a piece of academic writing. Different assignments with different purposes ranged from conventional genres to professional and vocational forms, often with an applied focus. Hybrid texts associated with digital technology also existed alongside traditional essays, reports, theses, literature reviews and annotated bibliographies (Lea & Jones, 2011). The intertwining and supporting influence of emergent technology was demonstrated through online submissions and multiple choice assessments. Presentations, supported with PowerPoint, could be delivered via Skype and followed by written submissions. Assignments often reflected workplace requirements as part of academic literacy development (Lea, 2013). One example was a summative assessment which included a diagnostic-reasoning framework based on professional competences:

> *For the final assessment they go online and there is a case scenario online. It's a three-hour computer lab. They have to collect different aspects of the data. I monitor it as I can see a printout of where they have gone at the end. And they then write up their clinical notes. They make their own diagnoses for problems of the patient without being prepared for it. They write their own plans*. (CC10)

This activity had relevance to the students' professional lives. A similar work-based focus applied in another course:

> *For their final assignment they have to come up with something that will be useful in their practice area. It's hard, actually. It is not an essay, it's like a*

proposal for teaching and learning … it's a plan, really, for changing some kind of practice or for developing professional skills. (CC6)

Further examples of an explicit link between course content and working life occurred where student work was archived on a website for future reference. Students could access their shared contributions after the course finished. In the same course, a significant departure from the traditional concept of the written essay was the use of a portfolio approach. The coordinator pointed out that those students did not necessarily have to write to demonstrate learning outcomes:

> *We say to students: if you want to present your evidence orally, just record it and pop it in your file in your portfolio. You don't have to write it. We're not interested in that. Actually, we are interested if they have met their learning outcomes based on the competencies of this paper.* (CC8)

The traditional approach where text-based instruction and assessment was the key way of providing evidence was also criticised in another course: *My web face [computer screen] doesn't reflect the visual nature of our study. It's words, words, words. Where's the inspiration?* (Advisor Y).

In this instance the course design was successfully reconceived into thematic sections, where students could negotiate a pathway of varied activities linked to learning outcomes, and where their progress was charted in a journal.

Variations on traditional forms of assessment were influenced by the revised university role in the contemporary world. Changes included new genres brought into the institution for professional courses, and digital and multimedia texts. A further consideration was that students expected their study to be relevant to their workplace. At times traditional written genres were under pressure as the best way to display evidence of learning outcomes:

> *I honestly think that the term academic literacy is a very fluid one and it's a social construction that will evolve over time, and what one person might think is academic literacy … you know, if you ask some of my colleagues what they think academic literacy is, some of my colleagues who are really involved in current innovative theories of learning will have something completely different from some of our traditional professors.* (CC8)

There was a rich range of coordinator perspectives on this issue. While often framed by disciplinary and institutional requirements, coordinator responses demonstrated that

academic literacy does not always follow the autonomous model (Street, 2006) but is situated and has the potential for change. Student perspectives on negotiating the academic literacy demands associated with writing are presented in the following subsection.

6.2.2   Writing practices and assessment

Over time students were able to meet course expectations. Several students observed that they began using the language of academic articles in their own writing as a result of reading and coming to terms with discipline-specific language. For some this process was a lot easier than for others. One student with a background in teaching academic literacy noted:

> *I worked it out. Like I said, I do the readings. It has all that implicit information in it. I read one. Oh, that's a weird way to write. I read two. Oh, these guys have something in common; they write in a similar way. A hundred readings later, I can see what's going on here. I can see the pattern. I don't know why, or who came up with the idea. I can see the pattern. I can see what it is. It is professional. The lecturer looks at your writing and says it is professional.* (Lilly)

In the above quotation Lilly demonstrates postgraduate attributes of critical thinking and analysis. Students who already understood the concept of critical thinking appreciated how to approach readings and what to do with them. They commented that they should have an opinion and identify and consider different points of view. They knew that academic writing involving an argument had no definitive or right answer. They had knowledge of academic writing expectations such as the requirement for statements to be supported with evidence and examples. In this sense all arguments were contextualised by the literature:

> *It is important to do critical thinking and to have strong opinions as long as you can back them up with thoughts that have been thought before, and written about. So, it's a little bit of a selection process. You select the research that has been done already, to justify your opinion.* (Denise)

However, despite these positive comments, there appeared to be a great deal of dissatisfaction for other students, who perceived that their own personal insights were disregarded. They felt they had to stay within the frame where opinions were already stated and contextualised by previous writers. One commented that student writers *were*

just chewing on the others' chewing gum (Sage), expressing frustration at having to keep entirely within the frame of readings:

> *But what are their parameters of my judgement, my skill? Their parameters are: She's done enough of reading. Okay, she's put down all those great authors and readings. She's got 10 references. So, she's got excellence. She's done her readings very well. But then I'm not very happy. I mean, I opted for masters, but now I'm thinking I won't be putting anything new into it.* (Sage)

Students wanted to evaluate their readings in terms of their own experiences and not just restrict their comments to comparisons between different writers. This reaction is often commented on in the literature. Stierer (2000) distinguishes between the different stances which are required when writing, depending on the genre. Students may be able to adopt a reflexive, personal stance, such as in journal writing, or be expected to take a detached, objective stance to their reading and writing, such as in a traditional essay. One student with lecturing experience explained the tradition of an impersonal stance:

> *What you have written is basically your opinion until you attribute it to someone else. To be perfectly honest ... we're not so interested in what you've got to say. We're interested in what you've learnt about what others say about this topic. So, find some people who agree with your opinion if you want to express your ideas.* (Elizabeth)

Although these comments were directed at undergraduate students, the same philosophy appeared to apply to masters students. Despite the fact that students hoped that their opinion counted, they had to cope with the entrenched convention of supporting claims with evidence from existing literature, and tension occurred when students did not realise that there was this expectation. They did not appear to understand that contributing to the discipline meant basing new knowledge on previous knowledge (Street, 2009b). Students could have benefited from conventions being made explicit as part of assignment preparation. Instead, they often found out through feedback on an assignment, when it was too late to make the necessary changes.

From an academic literacies perspective, it appears that the students' sense of identity was threatened where the opportunity to refer to their professional experiences, albeit unsubstantiated by the readings, was denied. Because assessment is a high-stakes activity, power relations are also involved, so that student criticism was often covert. It might be opportune for universities to consider Canagarajah's (2004) concept of safe

houses where students can comment in an area free of surveillance, or Lillis's (2006) notion of allowing dialogue to challenge, discuss and to clarify conventions. In other words ways should be found to allow students to voice their opinions without fear of incurring their lecturers' displeasure.

Another area where criticism emerged was where there was little negotiation around topics. Depending on course requirements students appreciated the opportunity to alter topics to accommodate an area of particular interest. At times there was frustration when this was not possible:

> *I just thought the way that whole question was framed wasn't terribly good, wasn't challenging sufficiently for the really exciting concepts that are around, that I would actually like to investigate. And there is no possibility in the course, of going and renegotiating the assessment tasks so that you can create your own.* (Nadia)

Once again course coordinators varied on the matter of negotiation of topics. One lecturer acknowledged prior experiences and differing interests of participants. She demonstrated flexibility and ensured that assignments were adaptable*: We do it together and write it up so there is no ambiguity over what is to be done* (CC9).

At times students were content with the topic but wanted to bring in wider considerations and explore more content:

> *But the content … I feel like I'm regurgitating the same information each time. It just seems to be, okay, this is what they want to hear, I'm going to give it to them. This is what they want to know, I'm going to give it to them. And it's quite a different focus each time but it's still very, very narrow.* (Jane)

Student questions indicated their wish to exercise personal agency, querying whether they could adopt an evaluative pose (Street, 2009b) or disagree with a perspective by drawing on evidence from other readings. In some cases, however, writing was a process of curtailing one's voice (Cadman, 2000).

6.2.3   Scaffolding academic writing

Expectations for writing were already signposted through documentation in handbooks and through induction activities. Assistance might also be provided through exemplars (CC8) or through provision of a summary of how successful students from previous

years managed their assignments (FG2). An important consideration was for lecturers to build on expectations conveyed at induction sessions:

> *I think scaffolding should be ongoing. I think it should be part of every activity. I think it can't be given all at the beginning. It has to be reinforced, built into every level of course design because the thing about scaffolding is that you start with a lot of it and then you dismantle it, when the building stands up by itself.* (FG1)

In practice, all coordinators used a suite of activities to support student understanding and development of writing as part of this process. Different strategies included interaction through DFs, integrated writing sessions, face-to-face learning at block courses, formative tasks and information literacy assignments.

Assistance with development of academic writing was a focus for many participants. It was clear from student comments that they welcomed feedback on their writing and advice as to how it could be improved. Coordinators acknowledged that for online students it could be more difficult to gain greater understanding about an issue. One commented:

> *I think we need to say somewhere that we require quite a lot of different kinds of genres. We require students to write reports of practical things to download; we require students to be reflective; we require students to be analytical and we don't always distinguish some of those things for them.* (CC5)

Another coordinator recalled her concern and sense of responsibility about how to maintain the standard of writing in her discipline when the course first went online in 2006:

> *Most of the students have taken my paper for the first time. So it is up to me to pick them up on the plagiarism and to get their writing back into what's expected for the scientific methodology.* (CC7)

This coordinator took a personal interest in ensuring that students were given a clear outline of expectations. In some courses technology provided another avenue for individualised assistance. Dropdown menus and hyperlinks could take students directly to assistance at point of need:

> *We have hyperlinked tutorials if they're stuck. For instance, for "What is My Portfolio?" they can just click on a link which runs as a short tutorial. Or, "I'm looking for a journal article, what do I do?" They can just click on the link. So most people can navigate their way around that.* (CC8)

In addition, most coordinators realised the importance of being available to advise students. Their experience was that some students began with little understanding of postgraduate writing requirements. Coordinators described some assignments as *appalling* (FG2), *100% cut and paste* (FG2) or *heavily plagiarised* (CC7). Other assignments bore no relation to course content or were essays written in a social science style when a scientific methodology was required (CC7). *I did a little estimation of the 28 students, and of that intake 8 would have failed* (FG2). To counter this, formative assessments were sometimes set between two and six weeks into a course and timetabled to provide early feedback;

> *With a 10% assignment it's got enough marks to make you feel that you should be doing something about it, but if you bomb it, and you get four out of ten, nothing is going to collapse. You're not out of control at that point and you don't feel too far behind the eight-ball.* (CC5)

The assignment types varied. One coordinator asked for a writing and referencing assignment two weeks into the course (CC5) while another asked for a small literature review four weeks into the course (CC6). Contributions to wikis and blogs were also requested (CC4). In a further example, a block course was followed up with a formative, applied assessment:

> *That [assignment] is worth 10%. It's a clinical note, handwritten and it is a check that they have collected and analysed data using the framework, and made a plan of care. This is very short and there's a short section on physiological concepts they have to apply to their patients. And there's no referencing.* (CC10)

Feedback on this task was given in preparation for a more detailed assignment involving evidence-based rationale and referencing. For this final assessment students would work with online materials in a computer laboratory, present their work as an essay, and submit the assignment online (CC10).

6.2.4 Developing writing through feedback

Some coordinators referred to the value of feedback to alert both themselves and their students when the standard of writing needed development:

It's a lot of work but the feedback that I give those students is so important. Four I referred [to student support] because they were so appalling ... they were nowhere near the level for postgraduate study. (FG2)

Students wanted course coordinator input at the planning stages of assignments. They felt let down when interaction and coordinator guidance was not offered. Lack of formative feedback and waiting until the summative assignment results was described as:

A bit like after the horse has bolted. Research I've done in the past has been a lot more collaborative in the design part to avoid mistakes, so this time around I have walked into those mistakes and then felt as though I'm paying a price for it. (Maria)

Some students described an attitude where a summative assignment would be returned *if you wanted it* (John). Feedback on summative assignments was considered important because *you have put your heart and soul into it and you want to improve* (Nadia).

Students also wanted to know why they got a good mark. Accordingly, students distinguished between marking with words circled or crossed out to make *one feel even more inferior* (Hannah), and having the mark explained.

It was evident that coordinators who provided personalised, ongoing support to students who needed assistance were very much appreciated. Of course students sometimes found feedback disturbing, but there was a very real understanding of its importance in clarifying needs, especially when comments were followed up with further discussion:

We went through the paper and where I'd gone wrong; and when we went through the paper I could see why I'd failed. I was bitterly disappointed but, equally, I could see what I'd done wrong and had a much better understanding of what they were really looking for. (John)

One coordinator described a sequence which began with electronic feedback provided by markers to a class of around 100 students. Students with very low marks were contacted by the coordinator. For *around half a dozen students whose marks were between 45% and 49%* (CC7), a consultation with the course coordinator, either by phone or in person, was made prior to the second assignment: *So I try and fit it in over an hour to an hour and a half. So that seems to work* (CC7). Students having difficulty meeting the standard were also asked to submit their draft for the second assignment, another strategy which demonstrated ongoing support. The coordinator estimated that

less than one percent would have difficulties by the end of the second assignment. This example demonstrates the discipline-specific nature of writing (Lea, 2008; Lea & Street, 1998). On this course, generic rules were not easily transferable because an applied, factual and quantitative approach to writing was required.

An additional challenge for course coordinators was to counter plagiarism. Some coordinators expressed the presence of long-standing misconceptions:

> *A lot of students seem to think that you can write, you can copy a sentence down provided you reference it, but with no quotation marks. Where they've got that idea from I don't know, but many tell me, "But that's how I've written assignments all the way through my [named discipline] course."* (CC7)

To reduce the possibility of plagiarism or copying, quotes were discouraged and readings were related to case studies. These additional requirements reinforced the discipline-specific nature of student writing.

A sampling of student essays with their marking criteria demonstrated that feedback followed the usual pattern of comments on assignments, accompanied by a marking matrix. Two different response styles to student feedback were evident. The first feedback style was characterised by brevity, with limited advice to students about improvement. Question marks in the margin or personal responses such as *I disagree* (Carol) had no supporting explanation. A comment such as *Is this your usual writing style?* (Zoe) was not considered helpful. In another instance a high mark was awarded, but there were no supporting comments for further improvement, although the marking matrix was used (Maria).

The second feedback style was considered valuable, where comments were focused on the quality of student argument and analysis. Scripts were marked using Word's tracked changes and comments functions. An overview, with suggestions for improvement, was also provided on the cover sheet. Suggestions included ways to strengthen an argument and the need to support statements with evidence from the literature (Carol). The student was also advised to explore the topic from a range of viewpoints (Lucy), not to use resources which were not peer-reviewed (Lucy), to use recent rather than dated resources (Hannah) and to unpack key terms and phrases rather than treat them as self-

explanatory (Laura). Comments such as suggestions for further reading were valued because they provided a stronger base for the next assignment (Hazel).

6.2.5　Utilising generic institutional resources

Further assistance could be accessed from university websites which provided information to assist student study together with writing support pages and library webpages. The sites also gave contact information and detail about student support services, along with a vast number of academic resources. Print-based texts, video, interactive resources and links to YouTube were readily accessible, although where student logins were required it was not possible to ascertain the level of resourcing offered. Library websites offered a wealth of information, including liaison librarian contact, guidance for developing a search strategy and assistance for web-based distance students. Online tutorials on a range of academic literacy-related topics were also available and included bibliographic information and information such as ways to get started on computer programmes (U1; U2; U4).

However, from a transitioning student's perspective, these large websites could be overwhelming. Finding a pathway to resources could require guidance until students were sufficiently confident to track down specific information for themselves. Most sites provided contact information to assist the process. One institution reported that the most frequently accessed resources were for information on referencing, assignment types, and general academic writing (Ellis, 2012a), and these were often linked to from within course programmes.

Even with a plethora of resources it was not always easy for students to make use of the support offered. Lecturers often focused on content, did not necessarily expect to teach writing, and might not have the skills for essayist literacy teaching (Advisor D). An academic literacies approach argues that treating the development of academic writing independently in student support services marginalises writing, implies that course content is more important, and often ignores contextual and disciplinary differences identified in the literature (Baynham, 2000; Hyland, 2002c; Thaiss & Zawacki, 2006). At the same time, this study provides evidence that student support sessions were of value and that some coordinators were willing and proactive about shaping generic principles to course-specific requirements. Students who took a multipronged approach and who described making use of a range of resources reported benefits over time.

Coordinators also acknowledged that writing required ongoing support, perseverance and time to develop. One commented:

> *It's a bit like bike riding. Unless you can actually do it in a safe and small environment, and then get a bit of formative feedback and then do it some more, it's quite hard to be told how to do it.* (CC5)

Clearly there is a role for academic learning centres, and students reported positive experiences after attending on-campus generic presentations provided by student learning support advisors that included how to structure selected genres and how to apply language strategies. However, one-off sessions needed to be followed up. Learning support advisors routinely advised students to check with their lecturer because it was accepted that generic requirements should be further shaped to the discipline and that coordinators might need to explain these variations. Otherwise the student would be unaware of differences except through a process of trial and error.

Academic support sessions provided confidence, made writing tasks seem possible, and acted as links to prior experience – where students could attend them. One student expressed the feeling of several participants in reflecting that she came away thinking *this is a really good model. I can use this!* (Maria). Subsequently she found that she was less effective at putting learning into practice and that the information was less manageable than expected. The experience demonstrated that information from separate training sessions was not easily transferable to a specific discipline context. Students found that contextualisation of writing demanded practice (Hyland, 2002c; Lea & Street, 1998), a finding that aligns with James (2008), who emphasises task similarity and linking to background topic knowledge as ways to enhance transfer.

A challenge for distance or working students was that those who did live within a comfortable travelling distance rarely attended academic support sessions. Students could, however, utilise writing support assistance by emailing assignments with queries, a useful alternative. The usual pattern was to receive feedback by email as tracked changes and suggestions for improvement, although the whole assignment would not be marked. In spite of this option, many students did not use the service and reported other preoccupations, such as problems with technology, poor self-management or a habit of waiting until results from the first assignment were returned to find out if they needed support. Some students also benefited from block course sessions held towards the end

of a course, often at the level of grammar, language, citation conventions or construction of genres, a pattern at the skills and socialisation level of the academic literacies model (Lillis, 2006).

6.2.6   Student writing: Critical or conformist?

An academic literacies perspective considers the influences of power and authority in meaning making and identity (Lea & Street, 1998). Where writers do not conform they are often positioned in deficit as outsiders (Viete & Phan Le Ha, 2007). While some students conformed to the writing practices and values of their discipline and of the wider institution, others were ambivalent about making this investment. Resistance, often studied amongst ESL students (Canagarajah, 2004; Norton & Toohey, 2011; Viete & Phan Le Ha, 2007), was powerfully demonstrated by home students in this study.

Two participants found little encouragement to explore a viewpoint from a critical perspective or to explore practices, power relations and contested positions between students and teaching staff (Lea, 2008). Restrictions on alternative viewpoints and the need to stay within safe boundaries echoed the conservative, pragmatist approach where students were socialised into existing academic structures (Pennycook, 1997). These students were aware that texts were being used to emphasise particular viewpoints and vested interests (Luke, 2012), but their own sentiments were not encouraged:

> *The power structures are really worrying because that is where your stuff's being marked. So you're working with somebody who's a supervisor, and if you're sort of critical of the bigger picture, you could put your marks at risk. And so you go with the system.* (Alice)

Institutional practices determined what counted as knowledge (Lea & Street, 1999). Students expressed frustration where they felt critical perspectives, as distinct from their ability to write in the discipline style, were suppressed:

> *If working in the social sciences is about exploring and about finding out and about uncovering and being that sort of social watchdog, or whatever one's supposed to be, well then, the process is quite substantially shut down by academia. It's doing it to itself. The extent to which they want to be criticised isn't great.* (Alice)

Students demonstrated a critical awareness of discrepancies between theory and practice. One student pointed out that academic thinking lagged behind real-world

events in her field, where theoretical applications did not always apply to marketplace reality. However, even when her opinions were supported by evidence in the literature and by actual workplace practice, they could still be disregarded:

> *I have also encountered that if you are bringing up a strong opinion that is, in fact, backed up by the literature or research, then I have the feeling you get either ignored or not acknowledged, or perceived as a freak! (laughs) And I'm not sure why they do this, I'm not sure why. Does that have something to do with the tertiary education in New Zealand which is very strongly linked to industry as well?* (Denise)

The perception was that vested interests, such as those representing close links between university and industry, could discourage independent thought. Similarly, a reluctance to challenge the dominant discourse at university reflected the wider issue of the ability of higher education students and staff to exercise the traditional role of academic freedom. In an accountability culture, it is arguable that the role has been curtailed by the competing discourse of neoliberalism, where the emphasis is on "learning for earning" (Zepke, 2012, p. 162) and a model where the students' role is to acquire qualifications for the workplace and not to question the status quo in education. Even so, one exception demonstrated that not all educators sought to suppress analyses on power structures, or to oblige students to align their arguments with a particular perspective:

> *They [students] need to understand that society is hierarchical, that some have more power than others and that this is manifested in education. I try to encourage them to take risks. It's not about pleasing me at graduate level – or shouldn't be – it's about them challenging their thinking and working with the positions and analyses. That leads to critical questions about whose knowledge is being empowered. For me, that is the basis of university study and it is more advanced at the postgraduate level.* (CC9)

The students with an interest in the functions of literacy sought to apply a critical literacy perspective and to question the norms, values and power relations embedded within discourse through their writing. Goodfellow (2011), however, suggests that the traditional role of universities to critique issues of public concern has been diluted to soft interpretation, which is limited to taking an objective stance and providing evidence from a range of viewpoints. Notions of critical literacy in this study remained largely theoretical. Students found that what counted as acceptable knowledge was determined by the social identity, power and control exercised by the course coordinator (Lea &

Street, 1998). Coordinators were unwilling to encourage critical reflection on and discussion of power issues in education unless that was the purpose of the course. Students who wanted to evaluate the theoretical propositions in set texts in relation to wider perspectives were discouraged from doing so, even when observations were supported by the literature. One group of students experienced dissatisfaction where they were unable to bring their perceptions based on professional experience into their writing, even in relation to course literature. Their experiences demonstrate that novice writers' identification with a discipline takes time. Students gradually become more comfortable using disciplinary conventions and ways of writing (Burgess, 2010). Such power and identity issues are acknowledged by Stierer (2000), who identifies this tension between academic and professional writing in education. Students who wish to engage with texts at an individual, applied or political level may feel disempowered, a perception which several students suggested was in the interests of those in power.

6.3   Summary

This chapter has focused on the categories of developing critical reading and developing critical writing as key components of the student journey. Participant perspectives confirmed the developmental nature of reading and writing and indicated that the predominant approaches were based on skills and socialisation. Students enrolled at different levels of preparedness in spite of their postgraduate status. They were expected to move quickly through different stages of reading and writing and to demonstrate critical thinking attributes through reading and writing. In Chapter 7 the four categories analysed and discussed in this and the previous chapter are integrated under the core category of "Managing the gap". Findings are presented as an integrated explanation or theory and suggest ways to enhance the returning postgraduate student experience as they move through their transition journey.

Chapter 7 The academic literacy journey- Strategies for developing student independence

7.1   Appropriate provision for returning web-based students

The phenomenon of postgraduate web-based students returning to study is contextualised by structural conditions occurring at the international, national and institutional levels of society. As outlined in chapter one and chapter three, the changes in the nature and function of New Zealand universities in the 21st century have been influenced by technology development, widening enrolments, internationalisation of the student body, and the role of universities as key drivers of economic wellbeing (Findsen, 2012 ; Roberts, 2009). These changes have a bearing on the increased enrolment of mature, part- time, web-based students in New Zealand, who are often women, and who need to integrate work with study (Ministry of Education, 2012b). The insights of the participants which illuminate their transition experiences in the postgraduate web-based environment are the focus of this study.

In spite of the possible assumption that post graduate study represents more of the same for students (O'Donnell et al., 2009), the data exhibit a consistent theme of a gap between students' abilities on enrolment and their readiness to meet postgraduate learning outcomes. The broad patterns which have emerged from participant perspectives justify recommendations to improve their transition experience.

A theoretical model with the core category of *managing the gap* has been developed from interpretation and discussion of the data in chapters five and six, and represents the perspectives of the three groups of participants in this study. Four interrelated categories summarise the enabling responses to the academic challenges which postgraduate students face when they return to study in the web-based environment. The first two categories, *induction is empowering* and *developing self-management* have a close connection. The institution provides support through induction, and the students, in turn, need to negotiate the interface between their personal lives and the academic demands of their courses, seeking help if they require it.

These two categories provide a base for the ongoing practices involved in teaching and learning. Therefore they underpin *developing critical reading* and *developing critical writing,* which are clearly interrelated in a reading writing nexus (Nelson, 2009), where

reading is the product of another person's writing. All four components are interdependent and contribute to *managing the gap.* Collectively they address the research question to explain how postgraduate, web-based students' academic experiences throw light on appropriate educational provision for this cohort. The model, as discussed, is contextualised by wider structural conditions. Each of the categories is now discussed in relation to the core question.

7.2   Managing the gap

7.2.1   Empowerment through induction

Induction is empowering highlights the value of induction in catering for the social, technological, and academic challenges students face as they begin the transition into study in the post graduate, web-based environment. While induction can be a powerful enabling tool for students, it is not easy to design an intervention that caters appropriately for diverse student cohorts. Overall, the evidence suggests that early and ongoing encouragement from staff is needed to assist students to take responsibility for their individual learning needs by asking questions and requiring answers.

The data indicated that a one size fits all approach to induction did not meet students' needs because of their wide range of abilities. Staff wanted to cover as many topics as possible, but less confident students, it appeared, could be overwhelmed. Some students found that the combination of learning the technical skills to navigate the LMS and receiving large amounts of new knowledge resulted in information overload, creating anxiety and barriers to learning (Chen et al., 2011). In addition, these students complained that they were not able to practise their newly acquired technology and library skills sufficiently. This meant that, following induction, when they returned home, the online environment proved very difficult to navigate. The students wanted the opportunity for more practice during induction in a supported, risk free environment where staff could assist (Salmon, 1998).

At the other end of the continuum, students who were confident users of technology expressed frustration when they had to sit though entry level sessions. Speaking on their behalf, one advisor cautioned that all students needed to be extended and that learning should not be restricted "to the less skilful or knowledgeable" (Wells, 1999, p. 249). The evidence suggested that the challenges of catering for both less experienced and

competent students should be addressed. There are a number of ways the problem could be tackled:

- Pre induction diagnostic assessment of technology and library skills
- Particular foci during induction
- Socialising with staff and other students
- A self-help booklet

Pre-induction

One recommendation is to implement a pre- induction diagnostic assessment. Students would be asked to complete a test of their online abilities or fill in a questionnaire to provide an indication of their level of skill, bearing in mind that people familiar with computing technology may still experience difficulty when using devices for unfamiliar purposes. The focus would be to identify whether students need to develop confidence with aspects such as problem solving with technology, the digital library, access and negotiation of the LMS, use of Word, or confidence with communication tools. The purpose of the assessment would be explained as a way to ensure that library and technology sessions were an appropriate fit to the level of student need. Students could then be advised about which sessions to attend, so that support was more targeted to their needs (Gaide, 2005; Ludwig-Hardman & Dunlap, 2003). Both technology and library sessions could begin with a common core of itemised requirements followed by division into entry level and higher level sessions which would be held simultaneously, in the manner of a multi-level classroom. Using library induction sessions as an example, after an initial presentation, students already knowledgeable in the areas being explained could be taken through data base searches or introduced to in-depth applications of a programme such as Endnote. Both groups of students, although operating at different levels would be exposed to skills which encourage independence (Lamond & White, 2008).

Data from student interviews indicated that even though librarians were aware of the need to establish the significance of information literacy as a graduate attribute, some students were more focused on immediate needs and did not see the relevance of library sessions if course resources were already supplied. One way to offset this criticism is to link library skills and services to immediate course requirements such as upcoming assignments. Some students also said that they were confused by terms employed

during training sessions, which indicated the importance of adapting language or explaining terms during induction. Misplaced assumptions that students at postgraduate level were familiar with expressions such as "bibliographic packages" could create challenges. Terms need to be carefully explained and a glossary provided, for example as part of an information booklet suggested later in this chapter. In spite of the challenges these sessions presented, librarians noted that students who attended induction were more likely to re-establish contact and seek help at a later date.

Particular foci during induction

The foci for induction include social, technology and academic challenges. Along with the use of technology to access the library and manage information literacy skills, students need guidance to develop confidence in access to and negotiation of the LMS, and use of communication tools such as email, social networking sites and online forums.

The data showed that this cohort did not always make use of resources available on university websites. This tendency of distance students not to take advantage of targeted institutional support, has been identified in the literature (M. Brown, Hughes, & Delaney, 2015; M. Brown, Hughes, Keppell, Hard, & Smith, 2013). It is recommended that students view generic academic resources available on the institution's website rather than just be told about them. Access might also be enabled through links already integrated into course material, or through the main university website. Attention could also be drawn to the use of mobile devices or Facebook pages which increasingly provide links to resources (Ellis, 2012).

Students placed a priority on knowing about academic requirements and expectations for assignments at induction. Access to course handbooks and supporting information was usually made available, but students wanted more detailed information about the kinds of assignments employed, and welcomed the opportunity to find out about coordinator preferences. They indicated the importance of setting aside time in the face-to- face situation so that they could ask questions and have details clarified. Staff also emphasised the importance of explaining how academic writing needs to be presented, in the hope of avoiding problems such as cut and paste work or students submitting assignments with no relation to the assignment task. The opportunity to meet support

personnel, including academic advisors and tutors employed in larger programmes, allowed students to put a face to people they could approach for help.

Ways to present key messages at induction vary. Because of time factors, lectures remain a mainstay for conveying information (Nesi, 2012) but Forrester and Parkinson (2006) caution that information overload can result from passive delivery of large amounts of information. The provision of a range of approaches, including some workshops involving small groups, would add a student centred approach and foster connectedness as students discuss and explore skills which they need to acquire. Requirements and coordinator expectations could be clarified through discussion centring on samples of student work. Students could be given the opportunity to review and mark samples of written work by applying a marking schedule. Referencing requirements could also be introduced through asking students to spot errors on specially prepared scripts, while exercises on plagiarism would add another dimension. After students have been given an opportunity to complete the exercises, a lecturer or support staff member could work through the activities with them and discuss the issues raised. These exercises would then serve to contextualise information about plagiarism and referencing. Telling students where to access relevant online information while they are working on the exercises would provide a valuable opportunity for them to familiarise themselves with these websites and practise their skills.

The aim of the sessions would be to establish expectations and allow students to gain a realistic understanding about their current academic abilities. To avoid overwhelming them, it could be emphasised that the sessions were designed to raise awareness and that resources could be returned to at point of need. Timetabling to include academic advisors in the programme would promote their role as writing experts to assist students at the formative stages of composition. Other services, including draft reading of essays, could be promoted at this stage. Integrating academic support within the discipline and promoting the academic advisory service as a resource for writing development, rather than as a place to fix problems, could encourage more students to seek advice. Both during and after these sessions, time set aside to provide opportunities for questions would provide important spaces for discussion, not only about prescriptive, normative approaches to writing (Lillis, 2011), but also personal challenges involved in the sense of self when requirements conflict with the experiences students bring to their study experience (Burgess & Ivanic, 2010).

In some instances unexpected gaps in students' knowledge might be signalled and remedial measures put in place. In this study, course specific resources generated in response to gaps in student knowledge which were discovered during induction included information about report writing, citation preferences and specialised information literacy needs. Resources developed in response to these needs were uploaded to the web or placed on the LMS so that they could be accessed by students.

Socialising with staff and students

Socialisation opportunities provide a mechanism for establishing a sense of community and a way to enhance the student journey experience. One of the advantages of the induction process is that it provides an opportunity for students to establish networks and support groups at the beginning of their studies. The majority of students in this study expressed openness to interactive learning approaches. While some students were capable of adopting a self-sufficient approach (M. Brown et al., 2013), most students found it useful to engage with others. Interactive sessions and shared experiences during induction contributed to the development of a sense of community (R. Garrison, 2006; Motteram & Forrester, 2005), although there was evidence later that the momentum generated at induction was not maintained in every course.

Data showed that student to instructor interactions were greatly valued, a finding supported by LaPointe and Reisetter (2008). Opportunities to meet course coordinators in person helped students to make better connections with the online course process and to find out about course coordinator preferences. Creating a link with support staff, including administrators, technical staff and academic support staff, also helped to reinforce connections.

Practical activities enhanced a sense of community building (Ludwig-Hardman & Dunlap, 2003). Students advised that the small group exercises established relationships with people, who, in some cases, became part of their support network. One student mentioned that, during induction, she was already thinking about finding members for a group assignment later in the semester. Further activities assisted the process. Practise sending messages on the DFs, and putting photos online add to social presence because, at a later date, the photos remind participants of the person behind the online messages. It is recommended that both formal and informal students groups are established, whether face to face or through the use of social media. Ways to bolster students

through the highs and lows of study and to maintain engagement with learning include promoting Facebook pages and regular contact with a study buddy, examples of informal support systems which could be beneficial.

Another strategy which fostered community was to invite experienced students from previous intakes to share insights on tips, techniques and ways to cope with study. They relayed instances which showed the value of having informal support systems. One had established a coffee group, which met monthly, and which was still active three years later. Some provided advice about planning ahead, doing things in good time, and having personal techniques to manage large amounts of work. These included strategies such as advice about notetaking when reading, and ways to summarise content in order to be able to find information later. The success of experienced students, in spite of their busy lives, also provided an incentive and inspired confidence in the decision to study.

Self-help booklet

Students suggested that additional support in the form of a guidance booklet would allow them to carry on at their own pace. Booklets would complement course handbooks and documentation. Their production would depend on cooperation and input from staff participants, including library and academic support staff, as well as course coordinators. The booklets would need to be available for induction and, once developed, could be updated and available for subsequent student groups. Students could be emailed an attachment to download their own, or copies could be mailed out in time for students to use the booklets during induction. Booklets would cover information on the different sessions to help students decide which they needed to attend, along with glossaries, activities, links to relevant resources on the university website, and relevant contacts. The goal of the booklets would be to include step by step instructions for library and technology sessions, including screen dumps and visual prompts. In this way students would have more control over their own progress during these sessions which involved technology, which would also lower the barrier to learning caused by an inability to keep up with an instructor. Students could also work together, and the instructor would be free to move around the room. Other information in the booklet would include additional supporting information such as website addresses to relevant online support resources. Frequently asked questions accompanied by solutions for students to try before reaching out for assistance could be another

addition. Support contacts, already provided during induction, would also be in the booklet

After induction

Once the formal induction was completed, the booklets would continue to provide support to students during the first few weeks of course commencement. The induction experience should enable students to undertake course activities with more confidence. Achieving familiarity with the web-based environment allows students to have a stronger focus on study. However, following induction, ongoing scaffolding might still be needed (Wozniak et al., 2009). Both formal and informal support contacts could assist the process and carry the students through the initial weeks of their course. Induction as a strategy provides support for the student, but, as study begins in earnest a further factor is the personal characteristics which students demonstrate in the form of their own self management.

7.2.2   Developing self-management

The second category of *developing self-management* reviews the process of managing the gap in terms of student obligations. For learning to be maximised students need to demonstrate the personal characteristics involved in taking responsibility (Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991). They have already demonstrated independence and commitment by making the choice to study in the web-based environment (Darden, 2014). The next step is to manage the home environment and to make choices to support learning experiences.

Making choices to support learning experiences

The evidence provided examples of significant adjustments involved in organising study around work and family life, arising from the actual demands of web-based study. They included establishing routines and placing a priority on time management (Ludwig-Hardman & Dunlap, 2003). Universities often provide information about approximate study hours per week and draw attention to timetabling support through the use of assignment planners, along with insights and hints about study processes. If students are alerted to this advice, they are more likely to make use of it. Networking opportunities provided another tool to cope with challenges. It appeared that students were not always comfortable about seeking help from lecturers and afraid of being seen as too needy, so fellow students often were seen as the first port of call for advice. They

reported talking to their peers about difficulties they encountered and receiving practical advice on dealing with these challenges. Examples included establishing a routine around work, setting aside non-essential jobs, and delegating tasks if there was family support, so that study could take place. Recommendations to have a dedicated computer, printer and space for study, if possible, might be obvious to experienced scholars, but less so for the transitioning, web-based student.

Not all adults are self-directed, an aspect often attributed to lack of self-confidence (Darden, 2014; D. Garrison, Clevelend-Innes, & Fund, 2004). Apprehension and feelings of low self efficacy were sometimes demonstrated in students' stories of computer login difficulties, problems negotiating access to the LMS, and bewilderment managing the volume of reading. Data showed that anxiety arose from a sense of the unknown.

While the first few weeks of a course are recognised as a time when students may face anxiety, there can be other occasions where student confidence fluctuates (M. Brown et al., 2015). Students who demonstrated greatest satisfaction described having ongoing access to named support contacts and being encouraged to ask questions. In all courses instructor support was provided by email, or by phone for emergencies, with a preferred time for asking questions allocated in order to minimise the course coordinator's workload. A DF for questions and problem solving was also useful since students could often answer questions and support each other.

In a social constructivist environment, newly enrolled students could be described as being on the periphery of a community of practice, where shifts in identity occur as they become more involved (Tobbell & O'Donnell, 2013). If the community is primarily web-based, regular participation on DFs is a key tool to socialisation. Where forums were working well students spoke of developing knowledge through discussion of set readings, through synchronous teaching and learning sessions, and through writing. Only a small proportion of students considered they were self -sufficient learners who did not seek interaction with others. However, Brown, Hughes and Delaney (2015) suggest that it is not enough to trust to chance that distance learners will take opportunities to interact and to establish a sense of connectedness. This study also found that students needed to be required to participate in DFs if forums are to be effective as

base for cognitive and collaborative activities (D. Kennedy & Duffy, 2004; Oliveira et al., 2011). The role of DFs in relation to the student journey is now considered.

Using discussion forums

DFs were set up for academic and social purposes. They built a sense of community, fostered student interactions, and helped to avoid feelings of isolation (Mann, 2005; Salmon, 2006). Data revealed that both asynchronous and synchronous DFs were used to facilitate learning through the use of discussion. Focus questions for weekly readings on asynchronous DFs, for example, progressively developed students' knowledge for future assignments, extended learning when new ideas were discussed, and kept students' reading up to date. Some forums were established as a space to prepare for group activities. Others were used alongside communication tools such as content focused wikis. Where DFs worked well they had a clear purpose and included student to instructor contact, often through scaffolding practices such as provision of a framework for readings with weekly feedback. The instructor role typically included focusing students on key themes during discussion and responding to questions posted to the forum.

Some course coordinators based marks on forum participation rather than the quality of responses, often because an important aim was to foster the habit of interaction and dialogue, practices which would be useful in students' future professional lives. However, staff also cited time pressures and resource constraints in maintaining an active e-moderation role. There appeared to be an ongoing dilemma about how to manage workload issues and a lack of hours or resources, which might allow the role to be delegated to a tutor or another knowledgeable staff member.

Data revealed that DFs which were unmarked were not seen by students to have a real purpose. However, with one exception, students expressed their willingness to participate in active DFs. They wanted the early momentum which followed induction to be maintained, and considered that, to achieve this, marked forums and active facilitation were essential components. It appears that students also wanted a higher level of challenge. Some students considered that their exchanges were somewhat perfunctory, a problem identified in the literature (D. Garrison et al., 2001; Tallent-Runnels et al., 2006). Garrison and Cleveland-Innes (2005) argue that interaction on its own is not enough and that higher levels of cognitive engagement are required. They

contend that a strong online teaching presence underpinned by sound course design leads to productive dialogue, higher level thinking skills and co-construction of learning. Students need to be challenged to move beyond the comparison of differences to critically evaluate these differences so that once evaluation has taken place synthesis and negotiation for co-construction can occur (Tallent-Runnels et al., 2006).

A conclusion is that DFs, which have the purpose of developing higher levels of cognitive engagement, need to be part of course planning and include activities which will provide deliberate practice in development of both critical reading and writing. Course design aspects which might be employed include provision of a clear structure, guidelines about postings, the expected level of formality, minimum participation requirements, and netiquette. Consideration should be given to the quality of postings as well as the quantity, with suggested word limits, and a marking matrix provided (Salmon, 2012), so that students know the level of interaction required.

Course coordinators could consider allowing both formal and informal postings for flexibility. Where formal postings are part of the course, the aim would be to encourage higher level thinking skills such as evaluation, synthesis and drawing conclusions based on the evidence. Questions would be structured to scaffold learning and encourage critique or challenge. Mini assignments could be set which would contribute to the final course mark and be sufficient to make the effort worthwhile. As an example, a compulsory mini-assignment would consist of 250 – 400 words and be worth five marks. Expectations would be clearly communicated, and include evidence from course readings to support opinions, along with accurate citation practices. It is possible that the formal requirements could already be included in the induction booklet, since forum exercises would follow on from induction activities where samples of academic writing and referencing were introduced. The activity would involve two weeks. Students would post an initial response to a reading and share ideas. It is hoped that prior interaction and discussion in a constructivist environment would assist in scaffolding students for their formal posting exercise.

Informal postings could be less structured with students contributing ideas and evidence based on the readings, but also drawing on personal experiences. Course coordinators might also consider posting news items that had a bearing on students' professional practice, such as a change in regulations or funding in certain sectors. Students could be

invited to express their opinions online. Consideration could also be given to inviting students to suggest topics for discussion. For these informal DFs lecturers could ask for student volunteers to co-facilitate the discussions. This would provide students with the opportunity to synthesise and summarise the weekly discussion, providing evidence of co-construction of knowledge.

Students consistently expected that there would be a teaching presence in DFs, an expectation emphasised in the literature (D. Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2005; LaPointe & Reisetter, 2008; Rodriguez, 2014). Teaching presence might already be apparent in the organisation of forum design, but the teaching and learning value attributed to e-moderation activities such as commenting on, redirecting or summarising a discussion should not be underestimated. A weekly presence is recommended since the student perception, where student to instructor contact is valued over student to student interaction, is another persistent characteristic confirmed by the literature (LaPointe & Reisetter, 2008; Tallent-Runnels et al., 2006). As part of students' academic journeys, forums help to build knowledge through reading, written discussion and shared analysis of texts. Other strategies to assist *developing critical reading* are discussed in the next section.

7.2.3   Developing critical reading

Critical reading is of crucial importance in academic contexts. Whether using set texts or sourcing resources through the digital medium, reading is central to making choices (Lea & Jones, 2011). However, because of the close relation between reading and writing, reading is often not considered independently. McCulloch (2013), for example, notes that reading difficulties are often conveyed in terms of assessment feedback as writing related difficulties. Yet, some students struggle with the actual reading process, beginning with understanding what the text is about. As Elgort (2009) has found, students also need to have an understanding of critical reading so that they can distinguish that skill from summaries, personal viewpoints and the everyday meaning of criticism as disagreement. Because competence in critical reading goes beyond understanding to involve evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses essential to academic learning, it is suggested that, to avoid confusion, the nature of critical reading should be discussed and articulated at course commencement. Drop down menus or website links to a description of critical reading at point of need, where students can also return to the information, is useful for those who experience difficulties. The

challenges of students new to university study, or who have been away from postgraduate study for several years, suggest that such support mechanisms are needed as another aid to increase proficiency in critical reading comprehension.

Reading strategies draw on metacognitive processes. They may be described as "specific actions consciously employed by the learner for the purpose of reading" (Tercanlioglu, 2004, p. 563). These strategies might appear to be obvious and common sense (Lillis, 1999; Street, 2009b), but the data suggested that some students did not know how to apply effective approaches. Communicating the strategies skilled readers employ will enable these students to adopt approaches to support their reading.

Early advice as students begin with the process of text selection includes ways to efficiently evaluate a text to determine usefulness. Students need to know to use the structure of the genre to skim key sections such as the abstract or conclusion. They also need to have a purpose for reading, so this should be spelt out carefully by the course coordinator. In addition, students could be shown how expert readers change their reading strategies to suit the level of demand and the text (Horbec, 2012). A summary, for example, is less demanding than the processes of analysis and synthesis for a literature review or a response essay (Delaney, 2008). Consequently, strategies employed to assist comprehension include adjusting reading speed according to difficulty, guessing the meaning of words using context so as not to interrupt the flow of meaning, and re-reading texts to improve comprehension. Other practices which come into play include taking notes and highlighting important parts of a text. Highlighting, either online when using digital Pdf annotation programmes, or on print based paper, needs to be aligned with the purpose for reading. The evidence also reinforces the practice of taking notes during reading, as well as recording useful quotes and detail about a source text, because otherwise information is not retained. Since most students will come across specialised vocabulary, the development of a shared glossary jointly compiled by the students and their course coordinator, and available online, is another way to establish familiarity with disciplinary vocabulary.

Further support may be provided through the course coordinator. The critical reading experience can be scaffolded in a variety of ways, including the provision of links to student academic support services, or to the range of notetaking aids available on university websites. Some course coordinators may also model the process of critical

reading (Halpern, 1999). In conjunction with DFs, prioritisation of readings assists time stressed students. During the early stages of a course, provision of specific leads, such as drawing attention to different points of view between research articles, might provide students with the confidence to identify these different interpretations themselves later on. Over time, reading tasks which cumulatively build understanding towards assignments, assume importance because they scaffold students into these assignments. Other, more practical considerations include explicit instructions in course documentation and updated lists of student hints, tips and questions. Early access to reading lists also allows time to plan ahead.

Around a quarter of the students in this study could build on their prior knowledge and were confident about reading to construct meaning in a particular academic context (Spivey, 1990). They still experienced new learning experiences with unfamiliar genre, content and vocabulary. These students described postgraduate texts as a step up, but also demonstrated an intuitive grasp of the reading-writing connection (Wallace & Wray, 2011). Once access to the texts was mastered the focus was often about reading to prepare for writing. The underpinning assumption was that reading and writing were interdependent. More competent students realized that they could create their texts from "available designs" (Cazden et al., 1996), since they often identified the need to find new ideas from their readings. For them, reading to write was a two way process. They saw patterns as they read academic texts and identified conventions which were representative of their discipline, and which they could use as models for academic writing. A new text could be constructed by unpacking and reconfiguring source texts, building on this material and their own experiences to produce a new piece of work, a process Spivey called "transforming texts" (p. 256). Other students would benefit from having texts unpacked and disciplinary features identified. Hyland (2011) for example has drawn attention to rhetorical features peculiar to some humanities disciplines such as use of the first person and personal asides. These devices, used to invite a dialogue with the reader, might be appropriate in one discipline but might not be acceptable in another. The example serves to highlight some of the tensions in the current approach to developing critical writing using a separate student academic support system. There is also the need to look at ways to cater for non-mainstream groups such as the mature, postgraduate returning students and ways their web-based journey might be enhanced.

7.2.4   Developing critical writing

The category d*eveloping critical writing* has emerged because of the focus on writing as a high stakes activity. Student themes often focused on their written assignments (Lea & Jones, 2011). Data shows that formal essayist writing practices persist (Goodfellow, 2011) alongside newer genres associated with the professions and with digital technology. In spite of varied assessment practices, all courses in this study required demonstration of writing ability and information literacy knowledge using genres which drew on traditional essayist skills (Lillis, 1999; Street, 2006).

The evidence demonstrated that some staff expected that students would enrol with an existing background in academic writing or take responsibility and seek assistance from student academic support. Other staff, however, accepted the responsibility of assisting the students who needed help themselves, as well as providing scaffolding support through the DFs.

Academic writing needs to be systematically taught within a short time frame to meet the range of student needs in the contemporary environment (Ganobcsik-Williams, 2006a, p. 4). Unlike the WID movement emerging from the US (Bazerman et al., 2005; Russell et al., 2009), embedded practices have yet to become mainstream in New Zealand (Emerson & Pittaway, 2013). However, there is a growing body of evidence which confirms the benefits of embedding writing development skills in courses (Gunn et al., 2011; McWilliams & Allan, 2014; P. Strauss et al., 2009; Zepke & Leach, 2002).

Since the dominant approach to writing is from a remedial perspective, explicit teaching often occurs after shortcomings become evident (Lillis, 2003). While the benefits of student academic support workshops were confirmed by those who could attend, the sessions were optional, and many postgraduate web-based students could not go to these classes. Since disciplinary distinctions were involved, writing also needed to be shaped to the discipline (Hyland, 2002d; Lea & Street, 1998), a finding which was supported by the difficulty some students experienced in terms of knowledge transfer when information was taught separately (James, 2010). Finally, among some course coordinators, there was evidence of an attitude that writing issues were easily fixed (Emerson, 2012), even though other coordinators described critical writing as a longer term developmental process (Burgess & Ivanic, 2010). Although these findings are not new, they disturb an assumption that postgraduate students arrive with the requisite

skills and they are of interest because the problem of student writing at this level is yet to be fully addressed.

The student journey could be enhanced if a multipronged approach was taken to developing critical writing. This approach includes constant reinforcement. Conventions, citation practices, course specific requirements and coordinator preferences introduced at induction could be reiterated during the formative stages of assignment preparation when the information is needed, allowing time for possible mistakes to be rectified prior to marking (Street, 2009b). The student's attention might also be drawn to annotated exemplars and other writing supports stored online, available at point of need alongside relevant content (Chanock, 2004), and accessed through links and drop down menus.

A further way to manage the process of critical writing development is to encourage more interaction between course coordinators and student academic advisors on an institution wide basis (Chanock, 2007; Feekery & Emerson, 2013). Academic student advisors could be timetabled into web-based courses at relevant times, such as when students are preparing their assignments. Formative marking of an assignment could be encouraged as standard practice. A sequenced programme could also be developed to cover the stages of assignment writing, with the additional support of relevant media such as explanatory videos appropriate to the disciplinary context.

Collaboration is a way for embedded assistance with critical writing to become institution wide. Institutional support in terms of resources may be an issue where web-based students represent only a small subsection of the total student population (McWilliams & Allan, 2014). However, Gunn, Hearne and Sibthorpe (2011), who developed an embedded information literacy module for large online classes, point out that while extensive initial planning is involved, these modules, once developed, can be adapted for use in other faculty programmes. Such programmes, embedded and shaped to the discipline, include feedback provision through self-testing and cater for twenty four hour access, strategies which guide the student and which encourage self-management.

A final consideration is the place of critical literacy in web-based courses. Distinguished from critical thinking, critical literacy questions the power structures and normalisation of discourse which students are expected to acquire. While many students were

comfortable with a focus on socialisation into the discipline, questions of identity and power were issues present in student data, often as a response to feedback on assignments (Burgess & Ivanic, 2010; Lillis & Scott, 2007; Street, 2009a). One example was where students' prior experiences were deemed irrelevant. Perhaps a more productive approach would be to ask students to support their experience with evidence from the literature.

Only one course encouraged a critical examination of the current power structures. The implication on other courses was that students' marks were at risk unless they followed discourse norms laid down by the course coordinators, an approach which could conflict with a student's identity (Ivanic, 1997b, 2004). One solution could be to allow dialogue about writing conventions. This would increase understanding and enable students to explain their perspectives (Canagarajah, 2004). Harwood (2004) suggests that students should be advised to observe the rules such as those about plagiarism, supporting arguments with evidence and following referencing conventions. Having been exposed to enough knowledge of disciplinary expectations, the students could follow a critical pragmatic approach. They could explore the consequences of deviating from the prescribed discourse norms, and then choose whether or not to follow customary usage in areas such as use of personal pronouns (Benesch, 2001).

7.3   Summary

This study set out to consider how returning postgraduate students' academic journeys might be understood to throw light on appropriate educational provision for this cohort. A qualitative methodology was used where the three parallel streams of course coordinators, support staff including library staff, and students, provided multiple perspectives. Findings, expressed as a model involving five categories, reveal a complex network of actions, interactions and practices contextualised within the changed landscape of contemporary New Zealand universities.

The core category of *managing the g*ap captures the gaps in understanding and knowledge of requirements experienced by many students on entry (Ivanic & Lea, 2006). Four interrelated, supporting categories summarise recommended enabling strategies to assist students to succeed in the development of competencies when studying in the web-based environment. Recommendations for the first supporting category*, induction is empowering,* include development of a pre-induction diagnostic

assessment and an induction booklet, so that students' differing skill levels may be targeted in areas such as technology and information literacy (Gaide, 2005). Web-based strategies useful during induction include familiarising students with links to resources on university web sites, meeting support staff and making explicit the procedures for accessing assistance at a later date. Raising awareness of academic expectations through a mixture of explicit teaching and discussion is also recommended. Knowledge of requirements will also provide the basis for ongoing, scaffolded development of student competencies as a course proceeds. Fostering a sense of community can provide the basis for collaborative learning, If this community building is promoted and practised during induction it should carry into the web-based environment (Littleton & Whitelock, 2005).

Developing self-management, the second category, provides insights into the personal and academic strategies which should help students overcome challenges as they invest in their learning pathway. Students need to understand the importance of organising the home study environment as this is a crucial aspect of successful self-management. For web-based study, students must have self-assurance (Darden, 2014) so they can reach out and access support contacts, make use of the digital library, participate in DFs and engage with online assignments. Despite the emphasis on self- management, the regular online presence of the course coordinator to guide students through course activities is also recommended.

The third strategy *of developing critical reading* underlines the importance of viewing critical reading as a competency in itself. Students benefit from having reading strategies and the process of critical reading demonstrated and explained. In their online readings, links to online resources and/or dropdown menus provide further, ongoing support. It is also useful if course coordinators pose guiding questions for the various texts. These guiding questions can also form the basis of DFs, where exchanges between the students, and the students and the course coordinators, can build further understanding of the nature of critical reading and how it informs critical writing. Finally, students could be alerted to texts which display the established conventions in the discipline.

Developing critical writing is the fourth category and part of the interdependent processes of the reading-writing nexus (Wallace & Wray, 2011). Students may be

expected to engage with multi-modal as well as professional texts. Online glossaries help students become familiar with specialised language.As the dominance of traditional academic writing is still largely unchallenged (Goodfellow, 2011), employment of purposeful online activities will help scaffold students into written requirements. Writing development skills may be embedded within courses (P. Strauss et al., 2009), while online interactive tutorials (Gunn et al., 2011) are further enabling factors. At times, writing advisors and information literacy staff could have an online presence scheduled within a course programme to coincide with the formative stages of student assignments, while feedback on assignments after marking remains as a key tool to assist students develop their disciplinary writing style.

Chapter 8 Conclusion

8.1   Summary of the study and contributions to the field

This study has explored the academic journeys of postgraduate web-based students and their academic literacy needs as they transition into study. On a personal level I reflected on different experiences at university, including study in the new millennium. I noticed changes in teaching approaches, the increased enrolment of mature, diverse students, the growing vocational focus, and the learning opportunities available with the advent of online learning. As a web-based student, I found that study meant negotiating the highs and lows of academic work using the online environment. Excitement at being able to engage in DFs could quickly switch to dismay with problems such as technology disasters and difficulties accessing assistance. Consequently I wondered how other students regarded their web-based experience of transition into study.

As an educator, I sought an insider view of the teaching and learning processes surrounding academic literacy development using the web-based mode. I brought to my research several decades of experience in the New Zealand education system, acquired from different roles across primary, secondary and tertiary sectors. I felt that, as well as the student viewpoint, I could relate to some of the complexities involved in the different staff roles, especially with the shift to online practices within an era of widening participation.

One way to explore this complexity was to take a practical focus and seek multiple perspectives of multiple stakeholders, utilising a ground up, inductive approach focusing on meaning making and process. Such intentions were realised in my study topic, which set out to explore the academic journeys of returning web-based, post-graduate students and their academic literacy needs, and to gain a better understanding of their transition experience.

Alongside the influences from personal motivation, developing the literature review and the selection of a qualitative methodology, I chose the academic literacies model as the conceptual framework to inform my study. This was appropriate because academic literacies draws on new literacy studies (NLS), takes a socially situated view of literacy and embraces digital technologies which are now embedded across university contexts.

While academic literacies is sometimes criticised for its lack of practical application, the model accommodates different teaching and learning modes within the three overlapping levels of skills, academic socialisation and academic literacies. Armed with this framework, I was able to make sense of different teaching and learning styles as they occurred, and of participant perspectives across and within courses, as well as in wider institutional practices. The third level of academic literacies also provided for a critical understanding of the study experience and allowed for exploration of this contested space. The data captured power dimensions in lecturer-student relations, such as whether students could modify assignment topics and the difficulties of negotiating by email. Findings viewed from the academic literacies perspective also demonstrated the influence of what counts as knowledge on students' sense of who they are, and supports the view of identity as multiple, often conflicting and changing over time (Ivanic & Lea, 2006).

In order to uncover different understandings of appropriate educational provision, challenges and enabling factors were explored by studying the perceptions of the three groups of students, support staff including academic and library staff, and course coordinators, and noting how these groups relate to each other. The purpose was to gain a better understanding of their transition experience and to capture the enabling factors and challenges which impact educational provision for this cohort. It is hoped that the recommendations from these findings will inform educational practice and course design.

The thesis sought to address the following research question:

- How might returning postgraduate students' academic journeys be understood to throw light on appropriate educational provision for this cohort?

In addition to the main research question the three groups of participants were also asked the following questions to provide a focus:

- What do students perceive as the academic challenges and enabling factors they encounter when returning to study at the postgraduate level using the web-based off-campus medium?

- What do lecturers perceive as the academic challenges and enabling factors students encounter when returning to study at the postgraduate level using the web-based off-campus medium?

- What do support staff, including library and student support advisors, perceive as the academic challenges and enabling factors students encounter when returning to study at the postgraduate level using the web-based off-campus medium?

A grounded theory approach was selected because of its suitability for exploring the range of perceptions and experiences in practice based settings. Multiple perspectives were sought by employing focus groups and semi-structured interviews. The findings were integrated into a framework or explanatory model using five categories. The core category of *managing the gap is* supported b*y* four other categories:

- Induction is empowering
- Developing self-management
- Developing critical reading
- Developing critical writing.

The thesis makes a two pronged original contribution to the field:

1. The data collected provide the unique, informed perspectives and authentic voices of this diverse student cohort, especially in relation to the challenges of returning to study using the web-based medium.

2. Analysis of these data through the lens of academic literacies forms an empirical base for informed recommendations for teaching returning postgraduate students in this environment.

Findings from this study raise awareness of the difficulties facing many returning, web-based students as they transition into postgraduate study. Their distinct challenges distinguish their transition experiences from other levels of the education system. As discussed in the literature review, there is very little literature around the issues the cohort faces. This thesis adds an original contribution to the research in this area by developing a grounded conceptualisation of the transition process. These students enter a web-based environment which is often unknown, and, although short term, can be

compared with entry into an unfamiliar job. What is taken for granted by those already already familiar with the environment is incomprehensible to the newcomer. Lecturer assumptions of student knowledge of, and expertise in the online environment need to be tested. Students might have a great deal less or a great deal more familiarity than lecturers expect. In the same way that people in the world of work have to adjust to the knowledge economy and changed economic and employer perspectives, returning students also have to take on another identity as they reinvent themselves in an academic world that has been greatly changed by the digital environment and a neoliberal approach to education. Returning students with an undergraduate degree may well find that they cannot rely on past experiences, particularly if they last studied before the advent of digital technologies.

The study gives a rounded picture by incorporating the perspectives of students, lecturers and support staff in the model theorised as *managing the gap*. The four supporting categories which have emerged to conceptualise the transition experience all need to work together so that students can develop the independence and self-management qualities needed in the contemporary academic world. As the findings indicate, students who miss induction feel disadvantaged and still find the experience useful if they attend at a later date. Similarly, possession of self- management qualities provides the underpinning support for developing critical reading and critical writing. It is the interplay between these categories which influences the experience of a career as a student. If the four categories are not mastered, difficulties can arise. If self-management qualities such as motivation and persistence are not present, ensuing problems may influence success in the areas of reading and writing. The four categories are intertwined and support the transition process as students build their careers. The model, developed out of the data, provides important insights into the educational opportunities which should be provided for these students in New Zealand tertiary contexts. It is hoped that the contributions in this study have increased understanding of the student learning journey in this web-based environment, especially for those professionals involved in designing and implementing appropriate educational pathways for them. The creative conceptualisation of the cohort, as presented in the thesis, will, I feel, be of assistance to those embarking on an investigation of other issues in the postgraduate web-based arena.

8.2   Limitations of this study

This project covers a limited number of courses and participants from web-based programmes across five universities. It is unlikely to be fully representative of the post-graduate web-based student population. The findings and beliefs constructed from participants' reflections may not generalise to other courses. However, the qualitative approach provides a snapshot in time and an understanding of the practical experiences of participants' educational journeys. The study is based on the belief that knowledge is a dynamic process subject to ongoing change, so that results are provisional and open to modification as new knowledge develops (Corbin & A. Strauss, 2008).

Participant perceptions reflected their role as students, course coordinators or support staff. They were volunteers who were interested in my research, and willing to share their insights. At times however, participant insights could have been influenced by a sense of professional caution, although I found the process of simultaneous coding and data collection helped to round out themes and to pursue further queries in subsequent interviews. Another limitation is that the vast majority of participants were women. It would have been valuable if I had managed to add to the voices by persuading more men to participate, even though the higher percentage of women reflects the trend within postgraduate education. Students included those who were confident about their web-based learning experiences, but there were only two student participants who had actually withdrawn from their course of study. These two students added valuable insights, although participation of more students who had withdrawn from courses would have added significantly to information about the challenges for some members of this cohort. An occasion was lost when one lecturer mentioned that her particular community of students were technologically challenged but she did not want these students to participate in the research. Consequently there was not a great deal of input from those who had the greatest challenges, many of whom leave without explanation.

Potential bias has been managed by using the strategies suggested by Corbin and A. Strauss (2008). My expectations that there would be a cross section of preferences and ways of approaching web-based design were confirmed. I found that I could relate to the range of positions which course coordinators took to teaching and learning. It is possible that I could have been more rigorous in exploring the tensions between professed pedagogical approaches and actual practice in relation to the students'

transition experience. A final limitation was that course coordinators were reluctant to make complete sets of course documentation available. It was however, possible to obtain standard templates and guidelines about material which should be available to students at course commencement and to obtain samples of student work.

8.3   Areas for further research

Suggested areas for further research include exploring the perspectives of other cohorts of non-mainstream postgraduate, web-based, returning students in terms of the challenges and enabling factors which they might encounter. These cohorts include Māori and Pasifika whose cultural perspectives and situation on entry may not conform to existing assumptions. There is also potential for further exploration about the notion of diversity and how far different voices are represented and shape the New Zealand education system at the postgraduate level.

Future research on the successes and challenges of the web-based environment, and of knowledge transfer in the online situation from the course coordinators' perspective in the institutional context, would also inform teaching and learning. There were indications that resourcing constraints had an impact on teaching and learning so that research on how teaching staff are supported to manage ongoing change with web-based learning is a possibility for future research. Another related area is the role of the student advisors and librarians, and how far policy implementation allows for a collaborative, institution wide approach to enhance the web- based student experience. The value of increased liaison between student academic advisors and course coordinators to assist postgraduate web-based students also needs exploration. Because this will involve a change of mind-set about the role of academic support advisors and the place of writing instruction in the disciplines, existing literature on the New Zealand situation could provide a springboard for further research (Feekery & Emerson, 2013; Gunn et al., 2011; P. Strauss, 2012). The benefits of ongoing embedding of information literacy skills within courses at point of need, suggest that access through technology is becoming an enabling factor. The potential of the web-based environment to enhance experiences using these newer practices is also threaded through this study and offers fruitful ideas for teaching and learning.

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Appendix A   Ethical Approval

M E M O R A N D U M

Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEC)

To:	Pat Strauss
From:	**Charles Grinter** Ethics Coordinator
Date:	31 August 2010
Subject:	Ethics Application Number 10/174 **Post-graduate students returning to web based study: Academic literacy challenges and perceptual changes in the first semester.**

Tena koe Pat

Thank you for providing written evidence as requested. I am pleased to advise that it satisfies the points raised by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEC) at their meeting on 9 August 2010 and that I have approved your ethics application. This delegated approval is made in accordance with section 5.3.2.3 of AUTEC's *Applying for Ethics Approval: Guidelines and Procedures* and is subject to endorsement at AUTEC's meeting on 13 September 2010.

Your ethics application is approved for a period of three years until 30 August 2013.

I advise that as part of the ethics approval process, you are required to submit the following to AUTEC:

- A brief annual progress report using form EA2, which is available online through http://www.aut.ac.nz/research/research-ethics/ethics. When necessary this form may also be used to request an extension of the approval at least one month prior to its expiry on 30 August 2013;

- A brief report on the status of the project using form EA3, which is available online through http://www.aut.ac.nz/research/research-ethics/ethics. This report is to be submitted either when the approval expires on 30 August 2013 or on completion of the project, whichever comes sooner;

It is a condition of approval that AUTEC is notified of any adverse events or if the research does not commence. AUTEC approval needs to be sought for any alteration to the research, including any alteration of or addition to any documents that are provided to participants. You are reminded that, as applicant, you are responsible for ensuring that research undertaken under this approval occurs within the parameters outlined in the approved application.

Please note that AUTEC grants ethical approval only. If you require management approval from an institution or organisation for your research, then you will need to make the arrangements necessary to obtain this. Also, if your research is undertaken within a jurisdiction outside New Zealand, you will need to make the arrangements necessary to meet the legal and ethical requirements that apply within that jurisdiction.

When communicating with us about this application, we ask that you use the application number and study title to enable us to provide you with prompt service. Should you have any further enquiries regarding this matter, you are welcome to contact me, by email at ethics@aut.ac.nz or by telephone on 921 9999 at extension 8860.

On behalf of the AUTEC and myself, I wish you success with your research and look forward to reading about it in your reports.

On behalf of Madeline Banda, Executive Secretary
Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee

Participant Information Sheet for Students

AUT
UNIVERSITY
TE WĀNANGA ARONUI O TAMAKI MAKAU RAU

Date 16 March, 2011

Project Title

Post-graduate students returning to web based study. Academic literacy challenges and perceptual changes in the first semester

An Invitation

My name is Nancy Angove. I am a PhD student at AUT University in New Zealand. I am inviting you to participate in my research programme which will form the basis of a PhD thesis. Your agreement to take part will be greatly appreciated. Participation is voluntary and confidential. Your lecturer will not know whether you are participating in this research. You may withdraw at any time prior to the completion of the data collection.

What is the purpose of this research?

The purpose of this research is to capture your perceptions as someone directly involved in post-graduate, off campus, web-based study. The focus is academic literacy challenges and enabling strategies experienced by students returning after a significant gap of at least three years.

The research topic has come from my own experiences of the challenges and rewards as an off campus, online, returning student. As well as being the basis of a PhD thesis, I hope to use the data in referenced journals and for conferences.

How was I chosen for this invitation?

You were chosen because you are enrolled in post-graduate, off campus web-based study at an accredited tertiary institution. I do not know if you fit the particular profile. I would like to talk to students who are returning to study in the web based environment after a significant gap of at least three years. If you fit this profile I would be very pleased if you would consider taking part in a 45 -60 minute interview.

Post-graduate study is defined as study above a bachelor's degree. Web-based study means that you access online materials and resources and make extensive use of interactivity and communication tools. The definition also allows for face-to-face interactions such as participation in orientation or in block courses.

What will happen in this research?

Students, course coordinators and staff support members are part of a research process carried out in three parallel streams. You are invited to participate in a 45-60 minute semi-structured interview. This will be timetabled to suit your commitments. The confidential session is loosely based around questions designed to assist discussion. The idea is to get your personal insights about academic literacy challenges involved in the return to study utilising the web-based environment. The questions can be sent to you prior to the interview, if you would like to see them.

What are any discomforts and risks?

At the interview you are encouraged asked to answer from your own viewpoint. This is to capture the range of experiences and situations. While it may be comfortable to express positive findings, embarrassment may occur if comments imply criticism of programmes, people or an institution. You may wonder about information storage or feel discomfort at interviews being digitally recorded.

How will these discomforts and risks be alleviated?

While your participation will be greatly valued, the decision to participate is entirely separate from your actual course or programme requirements. A decision not to participate will have no impact on your studies whatsoever. You may also withdraw at any time. Privacy is protected through the ethical process which extends across the whole research project. Initial consent has been gained from AUTEC, the ethics committee at AUT University in New Zealand. Neither you nor the university you attend will be identified in the research.

Sessions will be digitally recorded. After the interview the recording will be transcribed and a copy of the transcript will be sent to you. At this stage you can make any changes you like to the transcript or you may decide that you do not want your interview to be used in the research. The transcript of the interview will only be seen by me and my two supervisors. No-one at your institution, except you, will have access to the transcript. Permission slips and information gained from interviews are confidential and stored in a secure location at AUT University. You may seek further information or clarification at any stage.

Although unlikely, if you experience adverse or unexpected reactions to the research process, arrangements have been made to approach student counselling services at your institution. The contact person is Stella McFarlane at the Health, Counselling and Wellbeing centre: stella.mcfarlane@aut.ac.nz

What are the benefits?

It is hoped that you will benefit through the process of talking about academic literacy requirements. This study expects to articulate, compare and to increase understanding of academic literacy challenges and enabling strategies from a personal perspective. It hopes to suggest ways challenges may be minimised. The research also hopes to capture as many viewpoints as possible and to identify common concerns alongside the range of individual perspectives. However I must acknowledge that this research is more likely to benefit cohorts that follow you.

As researcher, I hope to gain increased understanding of my own academic literacy experiences as an off campus, online student working on this PhD qualification.

At the national and international level it is anticipated the study will contribute to knowledge of those involved in post-graduate off campus web-based teaching and learning. At completion I will supply a summary of the research and the most important findings to all participants who indicate their interest.

Costs are in terms of the time taken to participate in the interview, which will be 45-60 minutes. If you decide to provide further feedback on the findings by email, this may also take time.

What opportunity do I have to consider this invitation?

Please email within a week to indicate your willingness to participate.

How do I agree to participate in the research?

Interview consent form will be emailed to you at that time, prior to the interview. The signed form will be collected at the interview.

Will I receive feedback on the results of this research?

What do I do if I have concerns about this research?

Any concerns regarding the nature of this project should be notified in the first instance to the Project Supervisor, Dr Pat Strauss, whose contact details are given below.

madeline.banda@aut.ac.nz **, 921 9999 ext 8044.**

Whom do I contact for further information about this research?

Please contact me if you have any further questions.

Researcher Contact Details:
Nancy Angove
rang@slingshot-co.nz

Project Supervisor Contact Details:
Dr Pat Strauss
Faculty of Applied Humanities
AUT University
Phone: 64 9 921 9999 ext 6847
Email: pat.strauss@aut.ac.nz

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 31 August, 2010, AUTEC Reference number 10/174.

# Consent Form	**AUT** UNIVERSITY TE WĀNANGA ARONUI O TAMAKI MAKAU RAU

Project title:

Post-graduate students returning to web based study. Academic literacy challenges and perceptual changes in the first semester

Project Supervisor: Dr Pat Strauss
Researcher: Nancy Angove

○   I have read and understood the information provided about this research project in the Information Sheet dated 1 August 2010.

○   I have had an opportunity to ask questions and to have them answered.

○   I understand that identity of my fellow participants and our discussions in the focus group is confidential to the group and I agree to keep this information confidential.

○   I understand that notes will be taken during the focus group and that it will also be audio-taped and transcribed.

○   I understand that I may withdraw myself or any information that I have provided for this project at any time prior to completion of data collection, without being disadvantaged in any way.

○   If I withdraw, I understand that while it may not be possible to destroy all records of the focus group discussion of which I was part, the relevant information about myself including tapes and transcripts, or parts thereof, will not be used.

○   I agree to take part in this research.

○   I wish to receive a copy of the report from the research (please tick one):

        Yes ○   No ○

Participant's signature: ....……………………………………….

Participant's name: ....……………………………………………………

Participant's contact details (if appropriate):

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Date: *Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 11 November 2009 AUTEC Reference number 09/206*

Suggested questions for interviews: Student participants

Research topic: Post-graduate students returning to web based study: Academic literacy challenges and perceptual changes in the first semester.

Dear Participant,

These questions are a guide only. Please add your own viewpoints or themes if they have more relevance for your situation. All responses are strictly confidential.

The questions focus on academic literacy challenges and enabling factors. Academic literacy includes writing, reading, critical thinking and speaking requirements needed to achieve learning outcomes for your course or programme. Academic literacy also includes wider institutional skills such as mastery of library information resources and technology usage.

Questions:

1. What are your views on academic literacy challenges as a postgraduate distance student?
2. What do you think of the perception of a jump in difficulty between bachelors and post-graduate study?
3. What do you think about orientation (introductory) practices in relation to academic literacy?
4. In what ways might technology assist student progress in academic literacy? (For instance through hyperlinks to just in time learning bytes or through use of online forums.
5. How might technology hinder student progress in academic literacy?
6. In what ways might Student Support help foster development of academic literacy requirements?
7. How important is discussion between you and a lecturer?
8. In what ways are skills such as finding and managing library resources online important?
9. What do you think about the university's writing requirements?
10. How important is feedback to on your assignments?
11. How might academic literacy needs change over the first semester (For instance technology and vocabulary concerns might be replaced by writing concerns)?
12. If English is not your first language, does this make any difference?
13. In an ideal world, what changes, if any, would further assist in addressing academic literacy challenges at postgraduate level?

What have we missed?