Understanding aspects of communication within an academic context often presents a challenge to many – learners and teachers alike. Given the growth in university enrolments over the last 20 years or so, and the global reach of tertiary education (172,297 international student enrolments in 2006, (Australian Education International, 2008)), an understanding of the discourses present in this environment is increasingly relevant, and must take into account the diversity of those involved in education. Learning discourses and the discourses of learning addresses these elements and presents the issues of discourse socialisation, investigating the various ways that interaction between teachers and learners in an academic environment takes place.

This edited collection of papers is presented in three parts looking at the concept of discourse socialisation within academic communities. The first part looks at the wider issues involved in academic discourse socialisation, in addition to addressing the link between academic and professional discourses, while the second part focuses on second language contexts, investigating English academic discourse socialisation of overseas students. Finally, in a diversion from the previous chapters, the third part investigates the socially mediated aspects of language learning inside and outside the classroom context, highlighting the concept of discourse socialisation outside the academic and professional contexts.

In the initial section of this collection, the papers treat discursive practices in academic discourse (chapter 1, Duff) and then move on to a discussion of the balance between academic and professional discourse and the various ways that this can be integrated into the curriculum. Moore & Hough (chapter 2) assess the impact of increasing focus on graduate attributes as part of curriculum development, finding that the subsequent emphasis on ‘skills’ has somewhat overlooked ‘content’ knowledge. Pinder (chapter 3) analyses the way in which professional discourse can be elicited in assignments, and acknowledges difficulties with current practice, and the paper by Price (chapter 4) further examines the difficulties students face when dealing with discursive practices that straddle both the academic and professional contexts. In the final paper of this first section, Gilbert
(chapter 5) examines issues of socio-cognitive complexity in her study of undergraduate student construction of academic texts, noting the similarities and differences found in two students’ construction of arguments. While the final chapter seems to meld more appropriately with the second section, it does draw out the pertinent question of the socio-cognitive aspects of constructing academic discourse. On the whole, however, the questions highlighted in this section are of fundamental importance to those who work across disciplines that involve training students in two varying types of discourse (professional and academic), and raise several issues connected with the teaching of such disciplines within an academic environment.

The second section of Learning discourses and the discourses of learning further expands on discourses and looks at case studies of international students and their socialisation into English academic discourse. The focus within these chapters is on studies that examine how academic discourse socialisation is experienced through differing points of view. Introductory chapters by Marriott (chapter 6) and Willoughby (chapter 7) highlight some of the planning and policy issues in Australian universities and in an Australian high school, respectively. The papers that follow illustrate experiences of international students with Australian universities particularly with respect to interaction within the academic context, presenting successful (Yoshimitsu, chapter 8) and not so successful (Nemoto, chapter 9) participation. The final two chapters look specifically at discourse socialisation in the medical school context, investigating the role played by peer networks (Wakimoto, chapter 10) and problem-based learning tutorials (Imafuku, chapter 11) in facilitating socialisation into academic communities. These chapters highlight the difficulties that international students have interacting within and integrating into the academic/professional discourse within universities, however, one can’t help but feel the ‘native-English speaking’ population has been somewhat omitted. As Duff points out in her paper: “...we know that native speakers vary considerably in their discursive and communicative competence and thus in their ability to write well, to present well, to teach well, or to relate to others well” (p. 01.6). This point is acknowledged within the literature (Morita, 2000; Jacoby & Gonzales, 1991) and it would have been appropriate to see native speakers equally investigated within this section, as novices in academic socialisation. In addition, the areas of study treated within this chapter are also somewhat narrow in scope—focusing only on those students studying arts, economics, international studies and medicine. While it is accepted that not all subjects could be represented, this section could have benefited from a wider view of detailing research in at least one other subject area.
The final section moves away from the idea of academic and professional socialisation to concentrate on language learning and the social mediation of the process within, and outside of, formal learning contexts. Yet, with no introduction to the chapters (other than the general introduction provided by the editors to the collection), this section in particular is difficult to place within the context of the previous papers. Spence-Brown (chapter 12) examines learners’ motivation and their engagement with tasks, and the impact of social and individual factors in group activities is investigated by Shima (chapter 13). Kobayashi (chapter 14) looks at the effects of the mentoring process on second language composition, while Kurata (chapter 15) and Masuda (chapter 16) investigate the influences on language selection in social networks and language exchange partnerships, respectively. The final chapters by Ryumon (chapter 17) and Bradshaw (chapter 18) seem to be somewhat out of context of the others in this section, dealing with washback in assessment and gendered second language classrooms respectively. While the aspects of language learning dealt with in each of these chapters are certainly worthy of consideration and investigation, their role within this collection is somewhat difficult to understand.

In spite of the difficulties in aligning the final section with the overall approach of the first two parts of this collection, the volume is one that is comprehensive in its treatment of issues related to academic and professional discourse socialisation. The challenges set forth in the papers examining the links between professional and academic discourse, and the subsequent case studies highlighting how students react to these challenges, serve as an appropriate and timely reminder of the centrality of discourse socialisation within the academic environment. The volume will be of interest to lecturers working within fields with a focus on academic literacies, as well as for those with an interest in discourse analysis. It will suit both lecturers, researchers and postgraduate students alike, and will be a starting point for many in the consideration of the impact of discourses in teaching and learning, particularly within the Australian context.

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REFERENCES

