From place to place through space: The discursive electronic construction of identities of international students and Australian higher education on http://www.studyinaustralia.gov.au: Asian international students perspectives.

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The Argument

- Seven-pronged online Discourse model was negotiated by international students, which includes Welcoming Australia (as a country); Quality education; Educational experience (the product/services), Multiculturalism; Educational tourism (while-study); Education success, Migration (post-study).
- It also argues for the importance of (re)alignment in both identity construction in online space and the delivery of the electronically discursive identity map in the “meatspace” (Lankshear, 2007; Lankshear & Knobel, 2005) in Australian higher education landscape.
- Theoretically, it is argued that knowledge and power is electronically spatialised, Here in this website, it is argued for “a thirdspace” in marketing Australian online “eduscapes” (Luke, C., 2006), where new meanings, Discourses, Discourse models are generated/constructed and negotiated by stakeholders.
- The paper is part of a larger project on the discursive electronic construction of Australian universities, knowledge and international students.
Based on …

- The http://www.studyinaustralia.gov.au website case study and perceptions of 51 Asian international students. This is a federal education broker’s website.
- It is therefore suggested that a clicks-and-mortars or web transaction model, online customer relationship building through forums, web-enabled conferencing, facebook, etc. should be the mainstay of new times in international education business.
- For prospective students, they need to be “in sync” in their education imagination with the website resources that are e-depicted for them.
- For this, educational brokers, agencies and institutions can build on the students’ affinity space/identity while tapping onto technological affordance all at the same time.

Overview of this presentation

- Research questions
- Background to the paper
- Theoretical framework
- Findings
- Discussions
- Conclusion -Recommendations
The research question

- How are Australian higher education’ identities negotiated by Asian international students in the case of the federal education broker website www.studyinaustralia.gov.au?

Why now?

- The Australian international education markets contributing $10b to Australian national economy (Marginson, 2007), third in rank, after the commodities exports, much like the export of primary resources (wool, wheat, ore) on which Australian economy have been built.
- A third of Australian’s 240,000 international students are located offshore (Marginson, 2006)
- 78% of international students in Australia are from Asia (The Australian, 2005)
- Top 10 source countries are: China, South Korea, Hongkong, India, Malaysia, Japan, Indonesia, Thailand, USA and Singapore (AEI, 2005)
- The education products and services are delivered 24/7 via the computer screens
- Universities spend $250 million per year marketing Australian education overseas, which equates to about $3000 per student recruited (Cave, 2001)
What have been done?

- Mainly dealt with various aspects of international students’ experience: pre-purchase; while-here; post-purchase.
- Marketing and promotional narratives appeal to international students’ desire for ‘positional goods’ (Marginson, 1997) such as credentials, social capital of networks and relationships, cultural and cosmopolitan exposure, and the unique Australian experience.
- Education is conceptualized as a commercial enterprise (Marginson & Considine, 2000) that mass produces and niche-markets commodities (i.e., knowledge and student/positional goods) deliverable on-shore, off-shore, through any place-any time e-delivery, twinning programs, or corporate and collaborative university consortia (e.g., Universitas 21)
- Websites emerge as one of important info sources for international students (James et al. 1999; Lawrence 2000; Pimpa 2002)
- The Internet is not only the technological tool; it also defines what Markham (2005) describes as the context of social construction.

The theoretical and methodological underpinnings of the study

- Gee’s (1999, 2005) D/discourse theory. It makes conceptual room for the connections of language, discourse, identity, technology and interactions, in which language is both constructed and constructive
- ‘discourse’, with a ‘small d’, to signify language-in-use, ie. the website text
- ‘Discourse’, with a ‘big D’, to signify the combination of language plus the actions, interactions, ways of thinking, believing, valuing, etc.
- Discourses are ways of being ‘people like us’. They are ways of ‘being in the world’; they are ‘forms of life’ (Wittgenstein,1953) . They are thus always and everywhere social and products of social histories. (Gee, 1996, p. viii)
- Why Gee’s discourse theory? focus on identities, which is at the heart of Gee’s work on discourse, could profitably be applied to the case
- Philosophical hermeneutics (Schwandt, 2002). Within this framework it is contended that we human beings are self interpreting beings and that language constitute this being.
Gee’s (2005) two analytical tools, building task: identities

- **Discourses** (identify the Discourses in which stakeholders were members and understand how these Discourses informed their way of thinking, reading, speaking, etc)
- **Discourse/ Cultural models** (storylines that tell members of a particular Discourse what are relevant and typical ways of being or doing)

and linguistic details

- Supporting to make empirical claims, rooted in specific viewpoints between form and function in language.
- Looking at: utterance-type meaning and utterance-token meaning through: content words (nouns, verbs, adjectives, see if there is over-wording), functional words (personal pronouns and grammatical modalities).
Two supporting notion: Gee’s (2005) notion of semiotic social space (SSS)

- Gee’s (2005) notion of semiotic social space (SSS) of website:
  1. Portal(s) (offer access to signs and interactions with (website, blog, forums, etc): [www.studyinaustralia.gov.au](http://www.studyinaustralia.gov.au) is where students are e-socialising with Australian higher education.
  2. Generator(s) (give us a set of signs, contents and possible relations among them)
  3. Internal grammar (design of content)
  4. External grammar (patterns in people’s thoughts and interactions in regards to the signs)

and Gee’s (2000-2001) identity map


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>process</th>
<th>Power</th>
<th>Source of power</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N-identity</td>
<td>developed from forces</td>
<td>in nature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I-identity</td>
<td>authorised by authorities</td>
<td>within institutions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D-identity</td>
<td>recognised in discourse/dialogues with/of individuals</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A-identity</td>
<td>shared in the practice of “affinity” groups</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- acquiring a new discourse has relatively little to do with acquiring new grammar or vocabulary, but more to do with a whole way of interacting in the world in order to ‘pull off’ a particular identity.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Visitors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vietnam</td>
<td>10.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peru</td>
<td>7.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chile</td>
<td>6.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>6.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>6.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hong Kong</td>
<td>5.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colombia</td>
<td>5.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thailand</td>
<td>4.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iran</td>
<td>3.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indonesia</td>
<td>3.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saudi Arabia</td>
<td>2.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egypt</td>
<td>2.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brazil</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pakistan</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sri Lanka</td>
<td>1.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brunei</td>
<td>1.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Singapore</td>
<td>1.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bangladesh</td>
<td>1.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Palestinian Territory</td>
<td>1.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jordan</td>
<td>1.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malaysia</td>
<td>1.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Korea</td>
<td>1.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philippines</td>
<td>1.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
<td>1.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other countries</td>
<td>17.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Reach, traffic rank and page views
Source: www.alexa.com (August 1, 2007)

Reach for Studyinaustralia.gov.au:
Percent of global internet users who visit this site

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Yesterday</th>
<th>1 wk. Avg.</th>
<th>3 mos. Avg.</th>
<th>3 mos. Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.00115%</td>
<td>0.00175%</td>
<td>0.00175%</td>
<td>+23%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Traffic Rank for Studyinaustralia.gov.au:
Alexa traffic rank based on a combined measure of page views and users (reach)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Yesterday</th>
<th>1 wk. Avg.</th>
<th>3 mos. Avg.</th>
<th>3 mos. Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>54,547</td>
<td>51,186</td>
<td>55,975</td>
<td>+15,672</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Page Views per user for Studyinaustralia.gov.au:
The number of unique pages viewed per user per day for this site

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Yesterday</th>
<th>1 wk. Avg.</th>
<th>3 mos. Avg.</th>
<th>3 mos. Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>+7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Traffic graph last six years
Source: www.alexa.com (August 1, 2007)

Traffic Graph

[Image of traffic graph]

Australian International Education Conference 2007
www.idp.com/aiec
The participants

- La Trobe University: 20; Uni of Melbourne 17; RMIT 14; **Total 51**
- Male/Female: 18/33
- Countries: Singapore: 11; Malaysia: 13; Vietnam: 1 China & HongKong SAR: 15; India: 7; SriLanka: 1; Phils: 1; Indonesia: 1; Thailand: 1
- Age range: **18-22**
- Areas of studies: **bachelors** in Business/Commerce/Tourism: 21; Engineering: 5; Science: 5; Arts: 4; Architecture: 2; Health sciences: 7; Medicine/Biomedical: 5; Education: 1; International studies: 1

FINDINGS
1. Welcoming Australia

- “Welcome Asian” -Nikki
- “Look a the languages on the page”-Sarah
- “Asian got more languages on the page”-Sarah
- “Make you feel welcome”-Nikki
- “They want to speak to you in your mother tongue” –Joanna
- “Portray Australia as an accepting country regardless the culture you’re from”-Joanna

Visual cues, as experienced by them includes “Asian faces on front page”, “Asian languages”, “after you study” link on the website. The students all seem to believe that such message is reflected though information structure on the website from before the students coming to Australian shores to after they graduate from their studies.

The above responses from three Singaporean undergraduate students’ accounts amongst other students in the groups indicated that Australia is perceived and positioned as welcoming, particular to Asian international students.

2. Migration

The second prominent Discourse is recognised by several students in the Singapore batch of students is the implicit migration Discourse in the website text. As Joanna from Singapore voiced “They are asking us to migrate here”. Through information structure, continued Joanna:

- “They are telling you from secondary school how you can go all the way to degree, master’s, doctor whatever. It’s like quite hassle free, you must come to one spot, you can do everything in one spot and after that if you work here you can spend the rest of your life here.”, Joanna, S’pore

The identity of Australian international education here is enacted by Joanna as a convenient one-stop spot. It offers the migration possibilities in her educational investment and futures.
3. Quality education

- “I will be guaranteed a good education in Australia. They provide all the stuff and information like from undergraduate. I should go here here here. The next step hierarchy and stuff. It seems to me that well … my education path is there” Lipchin, Singapore
- Significantly, a number of students comment on the use of the reddish colour, the main colour of the website, to signify the seriousness of Australian higher education. The colour provokes the “seriousness about Australian higher education” Lipchin, Singapore. On another account from Tony, an undergraduate from Indonesia, red colour signifies success and victory, as shown in his comments “All the universities have many awards, the unis in Australia are high standard and very good for study”.
- Quality education can also be perceived through higher ranking, university with higher entry requirement. For Vicky and Nadia from Malaysia, “The higher the course fee, the higher the entry requirements, the better the quality of the university”. Interestingly, in their opinions, it is the higher course fee that defines the better university. In the same vein, Tarandeep from India has a point on the quality education is understood through “It is internationally recognized”. “So every single Australian University here is like accredited by the Government and everything …so it’s a good University. That’s the impression that I get. Yah yah …like you will have a quality education. If you come to Australia” Sarah, Singapore

4. Educational success

- It can usually be seen from the interviews that international students perceived the e-depiction of Australian higher education as bringing educational success to them.
- The educational success can be received as future career for some. “So it’s like they are trying to say like….hey you come to Australia. After you finish any of the Australian University you can work in Australia” Sarah, Singapore.
- “All the people from all over the world can find their position in Australia and they can study and they can have good lives in Australia”, Hui Feng, China. In other cases, it is the “opportunities”, according to Sabrina and “success” for international students. For Nambrata, the offer online is potentially “better than back home” in Sri Lanka.
5. Multiculturalism

- Most noticeably is the multicultural part of Australia and Australian higher education experience as portrayed online.
- There is a **good mix of people from different countries** and ethnic backgrounds. Many students quickly agreed on the manifestation of multiculturalism of Australia and its higher education. *“Lots of language there,” said Yi Cheng, Malaysia, signifying a multi-cultural country.*
- This is a very good strategy because it showcased the *“diversity of Australia”, according to Tony, Indonesia and “encourage other to come to study in Australia because there are many others, not just Chinese, Vietnamese there,” according to Tanuja.*
- It also shows a **vibrant, active community socializing** in a *“unique, multicultural study environment”, in Yi Cheng’s remarks.* Shelley furthered her understanding of the portrait of multiculturalism as *“there is no discrimination, all smiling and that the website has information in 14 languages”.*

6. Educational tourism

- Quite an implicit identity of educational tourism is up-taken by two students. According to Tarandeep, it signifies educational tourism when the website *“give information about cities, and links”*. The website depicts the **red colour in the background** and is read as *symbolism for the outback of Australia*, according to Tanuja.
7. Educational experience

- The educational experience is portrayed by Joanna as “Once in a lifetime experience” and that “it seems like it attracts us so much that you cannot get it elsewhere than Australia”.
- “Opportunity” is also taken up by students because it offers them “potentials and worthy”, with links to career opportunities after graduation, lots of clubs and societies to be members while studying, Yi Cheng and Hui Feng, China.
- To Tony, who is from Indonesia, he perceived it to be “innovative, with lots of choice, like tafe or university courses”.
- Other key perception on the educational experience is from Jasmine, China, who perceived it as “fun, and maybe well-educated and worthy”.
- She explains “because you will meet all kinds of people, you have a lot of friends from different countries, that’s why I think I gonna have fun”.
- For Yan Shen, who is from China, it is “caring”, “the website has everything and links to reading on ecard and visa sections”.
- Particularly, the reddish colour across the pages of the site signifies “passion” towards about students, young people. Many have said “the summery colour makes me read more and reminds me of the Quantas flight when I came to Australia.
- “Quality, protection, and safe country” also give many students the assurance that “when you study here, someone will help you”.

Discussions and conclusions

- The paper has taken “multiple contexts in which international students engaged in semiotic activities and has articulated how language, technology, discourse and interactions have fused to construct meanings in online space (Hagood, Leander, Luke, Mackey and Nixon, 2003).
- The seven Discourses and the Discourse model that students recognize, and pick out are important for the federal education broker in (re)positioning its products/services to prospective international students.
The identity map above constitutes the online part of marketing and promotional literature that appeal to international students’ desire for “student goods” (Marginson, 1997) in an increasing commercial higher education enterprise (Marginson & Considine, 2000).

Relating to online environment, educational services/products, while being at the high end of the tangibility continuum (Shostack, 1977), reflects ‘acts, performances and experiences which cannot be touched, tasted or taken home for a test-drive’ (McColl-Kennedy, 2003, p. 7). It is argued for (re)alignment of delivery from online space to meatspace (Lankshear, 2007; Lankshear & Knobel, 2005).

Implications: What it means for government websites of this kind or authors of institutional and other websites is that firstly, they have to fulfil what had electronically ‘packaged’, promised’ and ‘sold’.

Theoretically, it is argued that knowledge and power is electronically spatialised, Here in this website, it is argued for “a thirdspace” in marketing Australian online “eduscapes” (Luke, C., 2006), where new meanings, Discourses, Discourse models are generated/ constructed and negotiated by stakeholders.

Implications: for prospective students, they need to be “in sync” in their education imagination with the website resources that are e-depicted for them.

However, Luke warned that then global consumers ought to have (global) consumer rights and protections from ‘faulty’ products and providers (2006, p. 24) from what’s on the computer screens to what international students actually receive.
Implications: It is therefore suggested that a clicks-and-mortars or web transaction model, online customer relationship building through forums, web-enabled conferencing, facebook.com, etc. should be the mainstay of new times in international education business.

For this, educational brokers, agencies and institutions can build on the students’ affinity space/identity while tapping onto technological affordance all at the same time.

THANK YOU.