‘Re-constructing “culture of learning” – international student experiences in China and the UK’

The Future is Global
Preparing for learning futures: the next ten years.

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Study

- Shared research interest in international students’ learning experiences
- Funded with 2 University pedagogic research grants
- Cross-faculty and cross-subject collaboration
- Business and Creative Industries
- Different methodological approaches and different subject insights

Leading to …

Research focus on “cultures of learning” associated with China and the UK
Today

- Examine students’ perceptions of their own and host culture of learning in the context of student mobility.
- Explore the benefits of student mobility with a focus on enhancing intercultural understanding, a key global graduate attribute (HEA, 2014).
- Provide recommendations for programme design and study abroad initiatives, effective preparation for and capturing the learning from study abroad experience to maximise the benefits of student mobility.
Zhengzhou, Henan Province
Population 8,630,00 (2010)
Diverse conceptualisations of “culture of learning”, but typically it is conceived as …

• the expectations of learning and … concepts about what should happen in the classroom, especially regarding expectations of ‘good’ teachers, of ‘good’ students, and about asking questions in the classroom.

• Such expectations are key elements in cultures of learning (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996).
Some typical representations of the ‘Chinese culture of learning’:

- students ‘do not question accepted norms and ideas’ in the classroom (Turner, 2003) and teacher’s status and authority as a source of norms is central (Chee and West, 2004; Turner, 2006);

- influence from the Confucian heritage (Jin and Cortazzi, 2006);

- students have a reflector learning style preference which would mean that they could take less active role in learning, prefer to learn through observation and benefit from the opportunity to think before acting (Wong Pine and Tsang, 2000).
‘Chinese culture of learning’
Chinese university 2013
Literature

Some typical representations of the ‘British/Western culture of learning’:

• direct communication, low-context, make things as explicit as possible (Holmes, 2005);
• students address questions and puzzles in the classroom by interacting with the teacher (Holmes, 2005);
• teachers do not tend to give clear definitions of terms and concepts (Huang, 2005).
Insights from the debate between essentialist and non-essentialist perspectives (Holliday, 1999):

From an **essentialist perspective**, culture is …
- *a priori*
- objective
- usually at a national level
- relatively stable
- relatively homogeneous

From a **non-essentialist perspective**, culture is …
- emergent
- constructed
- across, within and / or beyond national boundaries
- fluid and dynamic
- complex
Strategic Relevance

HEA Strategic Plan 2012-2016

Support universities and colleges in bringing about strategic change to enhance the student learning experience.


‘providing and promoting opportunities for intercultural experiences within the curriculum, including increased student mobility’
Increased Student Mobility

Encourage UK/European students to take part (incoming student mobility already happening) – how do we do that?

Student mobility as part of programmes of study

Benefits beyond learning new skills/subject knowledge

Your experience?
Research Objectives

In this project, we examined the learning experiences of students (originally from China) studying in the UK and students (originally from the UK) studying in China by adopting a non-essentialist approach.

• We explored the students’ perceptions of the cultures of learning they experienced in both countries as they progressed through the study-abroad experience.

  i.e. how they understand their “home” and “host” cultures of learning and how these understandings might change over time of the study experience in the new learning context.
Methodology

Using individual experiences in a ‘small culture’ approach (Holliday 1999) we aimed to unpack the complexities and richness of ‘culture of learning’.

Sample

9 Chinese students in the Business School on pre-sessional English course and 9 UK/European students study abroad at a partner university in China (ZZULI) both for a period of 6 months.

Tools

Qualitative semi-structured interviews before and after the study abroad experience.
Journal of experiences (paper based or blog/visual)

Data analysis

Theme analysis guided by the literature on ‘culture of learning’ (Cortazzi and Jin, 1996).
Student Perceptions

We have identified change in and a diversity of expectations with regards to the same key elements of culture of learning:

• ‘Good’ teaching
• ‘Good’ learning
• Role of peers in learning process
• Role of assessment
• Preferred form of assessment
• Communication in the new learning culture – interaction with tutors and peers
• Use of language skills
• Personal development
• Independent learning skills.
Multiple perspectives in re-constructing “culture of learning”
Participants’ observations related to “culture of learning” before and after the experience of the new learning environment have evolved in both groups (Chinese learners and UK learners).

Expectations of good teaching

• from “lecture-focused” (Chinese sts) and “lecture-guided” (UK students) (Cortazzi and Jin, 2006)

• ‘The lecturers should teach you some kind of foundations. (...) The foundation should be settled by the lecturers then you can go on yourself.’ (UK student)

• to “self-study” central to the learning process (Biggs, 1996)

• ‘maybe twelve hours for the class and maybe twenty hours for myself, self study I think.’ (Chinese student)
FLOWER POT COMMERCIAL

- STORY IN PICTURES - CONTEXT - SOMETHING HAPPENS
- PERSUasive
- SHOW SPECIAL FEATURES - DETAIL - CLOSE UP
- TAILLINE WE CAN REMEMBER

- SECONDS

- SHARE
Expectations of ‘good’ learning

Participants’ perceptions of what constitutes “good” learning in both cultures of learning were rather diverse and individualised. It is therefore difficult to identify salient commonalities among their perceptions.

However, we noted some interesting points despite the small number of participants who mentioned them, for example:

‘Chinese culture of learning’:
• familiarity with a surface approach to learning (Marton et al., 1997) and an emphasis on relationship and effort-driven [only mentioned by (a few) Chinese participants];
• an emphasis on individual responsibility and transferrable skills beyond academic studies [only mentioned by (a few) UK participants].

‘UK culture of learning’:
• an emphasis on transferrable skills beyond academic studies [mentioned by (a few) Chinese and UK participants].
Expectations of peer learning

• Highly valued
  - Most Chinese participants and some UK participants shared the perception that they valued the “peer-learning”.

• Peer helpers in host places
  - All the UK participants identified their fellow students’ role as “helper”, which may be due to the language issue and cultural difference. This point was not mentioned by any Chinese participants.

  - Only some UK participants mentioned their fellow students as “a role of helper” in their home “culture of learning” while the majority of (both Chinese and the UK) participants saw their fellow students as “a role of helper” in the host places.

• Uniquely, some individual Chinese participants mentioned peer-competing, peer-influencing and emotional support from peers.
‘Thank god, the Chinese students helped us, we would’ve had no hope...They have made me aware more of how to treat foreign students when they come over.’

(UK student)
Expectations of assessment

Assessment for learning can be understood as any assessment for which the first priority in its design and practice is to serve the purpose of promoting pupils’ learning. It thus differs from assessment designed primarily to serve the purposes of accountability, or of ranking, or of certifying competence (Black 2003).

• Some Chinese and UK participants mentioned that assessment was a tool to measure the outcomes of learning, but participants held different opinions with regard to how useful or valid this tool was.
• Some Chinese participants tended to view assessment as the priority for their study.
• A few Chinese and UK participants saw assessment helped them enhance the learning.
‘In China you don't need to work hard every day, you just need to work hard before exam because teacher will give you everything before the exam and they will appeared completely the same in the exam. But after the exam you will forget everything.’

(Chinese student)
Summary of Findings

• Students’ perceptions of “culture of learning” seem to be fluid rather than fixed. They tend to evolve in response to the change of the learning context.

• The boundary between what is traditionally perceived as the ‘Chinese culture of learning’ and the ‘UK culture of learning’ seems more blurred than being clear-cut.

• Both student groups seem to develop similar perceptions to a certain extent through shared experiences of cultures of learning. The diversity emerging in ‘student experience’ seems more striking to us than the difference between ‘Chinese students’ and ‘UK students’ as two nationally distinct groups.

Your reflections – does this resonate with your experience? Any comments?
Zài jiàn!

I’m struggling to sum up the experience. It has had a profound effect on me as a person. I find myself a lot more patient in situations. I also feel that I have become a lot more confident when in stressful environments. I wouldn’t have learnt these things if it weren’t for the people that I met whilst in Zhengzhou. They taught me patience and generosity. I am forever grateful for that and hope to repay them some way in the future. It has been the experience of a lifetime and I’m so glad I decided to do it.

I love China!
Now that I'm back and settled back into life in Edinburgh, the life I lived in China seems not even real, a now very distant memory, but a memory I will never forget, and forever appreciate. I experienced a massive culture shock - a shock that I desperately needed, and with that shock came the best 5 months of my life so far. Thinking about it, the whole experience still blows me away, I lived in China. China! On the other side of the world from my family, friends and familiarities. And, I'm so proud of myself. Whilst living in such an intense environment where you are constantly faced with various challenges, I learnt things about myself I never would've before - things I liked and things I disliked, it was an incredible journey.
Recommendeds

Increased student mobility – effective preparation

• Raising students’ awareness of their own culture of learning

• Preparing students for the intercultural encounters
  – returning exchange students present a short video/slideshow describing their experiences studying and living on exchange.
  – buddy up returning exchange students with those about to go.
  – Hospitality of the host – can we reciprocate better?

• Ensure students are equipped / aware of sound independent study skills
Recommendations

Increased student mobility – capture learning from study abroad experience

• Record the experience of developing intercultural awareness and use it to enhance assessments from study abroad/ enhance CV, etc.

• Sharing the experience online
  – Are there implications of diluting the impact of difference for others?

• Visiting exchange students when they are abroad.
Increased student mobility – *capture learning from study abroad experience*

**Recommendations**

- **Student assessment and moderation of marks on students return.**
  - Project work and staff change each year so you cannot guarantee the same percentage moderation each year.
  - Staff value the opportunity to review work. It keeps them informed of developments on the overseas programmes and allows us to discuss with our counterparts opportunities to develop both our programmes.

- **Celebrate diversity in group work**
  - Break up clusters of students from the same university and to integrate them into a broader international student cohort.

YOUR VIEWS?
References

UKPSF: Exploring the benefits and challenges of student mobility

Area of Activity

A2 Teach and/or support learning.

A4 Develop effective learning environments and approaches to student support and guidance.

A5 Engage in continuing professional development in subjects/disciplines and their pedagogy, incorporating research, scholarship and the evaluation of professional practices.

Core Knowledge

K3 How students learn, both generally and within their subject/disciplinary area(s).

K5 Methods for evaluating the effectiveness of teaching.

Professional Values

V1 Respect individual learners and diverse learning communities.

V2 Promote participation in higher education and equality of opportunity for learners.

V3 Use evidence-informed approaches and the outcomes from research, scholarship and continuing professional development.

V4 Acknowledge the wider context in which higher education operates recognising the implications for professional practice.
Thank you

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Partnership, Openness, Innovation, and Harmony