

Chapter 14

Exploring Intercultural Awareness: International Student Mobility in China and the UK through a Non–Essentialist Lens

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ABSTRACT

In the research literature regarding international students' learning experiences, a frequently studied theme is the 'Chinese culture of learning' as contrasted by the 'Western/United Kingdom (UK) culture of learning'. This essentialist approach tends to reduce culture of learning to a static, nationally-bound object that exists a priori. A cross-faculty study examined the complexities underpinning culture of learning in the context of student mobility, using a non-essentialist lens. Using individual experiences, unique perspectives on own and host cultures of learning by students from China studying 'business' in the UK and students from the UK studying 'design' in China are captured in seven distinct themes, including good teaching, good learning, peers and assessment. The results inform the design of student mobility programs with aspects of intercultural empathy, as well as preparation for and benefits from study abroad as a feature of the internationalised of Higher Education (HE).

INTRODUCTION

This chapter is focused on the increased internationalisation of teaching and learning in Higher Education (HE) worldwide (Knight 2006; Caruana & Spurling, 2007) and specifically the ambition to internationalise the student experience (Hyland et al., 2008). The specific interest is 'internationalisation' from the students' perspective as it focuses on 'academic learning that blends the concepts of self, strange, foreign and otherness' (Teekens, 2006, p. 17). This view of internationalisation is also congruent with the perspectives of Appadurai (2001), Haigh (2009) and Sanderson (2011) who foreground the value of personal awareness in intercultural encounters in HE. The interest for the study stemmed from a desire

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to examine the complexities underpinning the concept of ‘a culture of learning’ in student mobility through a non-essentialist lens. Exploring the rich and individual student perspectives, the objectives of this study included: (a) to explore how students can benefit from cultural diversity through mobility; and (b) to raise awareness of their own and other cultures of learning, with both points contributing to the development of one’s ‘intercultural capacity’ i.e., a Graduate Attribute.

BACKGROUND

A Culture of Learning

The idea of a culture of learning is not recent to researchers and practitioners engaged in intercultural education. As denoted by the element of ‘learning’, a culture of learning addresses aspects of a number of learner-oriented concepts, such as *approach to learning*, *learning style* and *learning habit* (Zulu 2012; Pask & Joy 2007). A culture of learning, however, broadens understandings of what happens in the learning context by going further to encompass dimensions of teaching, assessment and the wider social environment in which the learning context is shaped. This has invited a variety of nuanced conceptualisations of this term. For example, Chisholm and Vally (1996) defined culture of learning as ‘bringing about of the conditions and disciplines of compulsory schooling to bear on teachers and students, regular attendance, punctuality and acceptance of authority’. ‘Culture’ is a contested word, but may be summed up as ‘the way we do things round here’ (Pask & Joy 2007, p. 169). Culture reflects the values in use that have emerged over time; values that can be quite different from the espoused or official values of the organisation (2007, p. 169).

The conceptualisation most relevant to this study concerning HE in an internationalising context is the one proposed by Cortazzi and Jin (1996) based on issues of overseas students’ learning around intercultural communication, and especially ‘the hidden assumptions about culture, which impact communication and learning’ (p. 76). It is a complex whole that consists of key elements including socially transmitted expectations, beliefs and values about *what* good learning is, *what* constitutes a good teacher and a good student, *what* their roles and relationships should be. It further relates to teaching and learning styles, approaches and methods, classroom interaction and activities, and use of resources.

The ‘Chinese culture of learning’ has been a popular theme in the literature on international students’ experiences. For example, in the classroom, they are often observed to be ‘quiet learners’ (Turner, 2003) and prefer a reflector learning style by taking a less active role (Wong, Pine & Tsang, 2000). Central to their perception of teaching is the authoritative status they assign to their teachers who embody a source of hegemonic norms (Chee & West, 2007). The work students produce for assessment is believed by many researchers to indicate a preference for rote-learning and a view of knowledge as a reproduction of what is being taught (Carson & Nelson, 1994). This impression is usually associated with the understanding that ‘Chinese students’ tend to ‘lack in critical or independent thinking’ (Ballard & Clanchy, 1991). The majority of the above perceptions are based on studies and data collected in the host (‘Western/UK’) culture of learning, which plays an important role in how learners interact in the classroom.

The ‘Western/UK culture of learning’ has also been well documented in the international education literature (Livingston & Lynch, 2000; Vita, 2001; Hand, 2006). For example, students from this cultural or national background are found to prefer direct and low-context communication and address questions and puzzles in the classroom by interacting with the teacher (Holmes, 2005). ‘Western/UK culture of

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