

Chapter 4

Chinese Postgraduate Students Learning Online in New Zealand: Perceptions of Cultural Impact

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Based on the two fully online papers making up a Postgraduate Certificate in e-education (University of Waikato, New Zealand), this study researched Chinese students' perceptions of the impact of their culture on their online learning. The key questions were: (1) What are Chinese students' understandings of online learning? (2) What are their perceptions of whether Chinese culture has impacts on their online learning? (3) What are these students' recommendations to eTeachers and other Chinese students about e-teaching and e-learning?

Findings presented explore the Chinese cultural influence, aspects of instructional design that supported learning and achievement, and the influence of the culture in which they were learning. Lessons for the teaching staff, learning design staff and others involved in online learning for students of other cultures are outlined.

SITUATION BACKGROUND

The School of Education at the University of Waikato focuses on pre-service and in-service

professional development and accreditation of teachers. The University of Waikato was the first in New Zealand to connect to the Internet in 1989 and the School of Education has been offering

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undergraduate and graduate programs online since 1996. At the time the Post Graduate Certificate in eEducation was developed, the university had a key strategy of “leadership in e-learning”. This was designed “to assist educators to explore eEducation research and development and plan, develop and evaluate online learning” (School of Education, 2002, p.1). It was introduced in 2003. The certificate was designed to provide opportunities for teachers at all levels (in universities, polytechnics, primary & secondary teachers and industry training organizations), and others in relevant roles (such as librarians and instructional designers), to “examine the potential of this medium and investigate and upskill themselves in its use” (School of Education, 2002, p.1). The program has a focus on preparing these people to work in online environments “utilizing the potential of information communication technologies to create effective e-learning opportunities” (School of Education, 2002, p.1).

The Post Graduate Certificate Programme consists of two 500 level papers. The first, PROF521A (NET) *eEducation Research and Development*, emphasizes current research and development of eEducation, and the second, PROF522B (NET) *The Professional Practice of eTeaching*, focuses on the professional practice of eTeachers. Both papers are compulsory for the certificate and both are taught entirely online. In the eEducation Research and Development paper, students explore the history of distance education, open learning, and flexible and mixed modes of teaching or delivery. Examining the research and literature in this field, students consider the context of eEducation in New Zealand and internationally, and orientate their own personal and professional experiences to this field. Students critically examine the rhetoric, trends and challenges for all levels; teachers, students, parents, school leaders, managers, commercial interests, policy makers and government. This paper looks at an historical perspective on eEducation, themes and trends,

the role of eEducation in the current learning landscape, and the challenges facing institutions.

In the second paper, *The Professional Practice of Teaching*, the emphasis is on aspects of professional teaching practice in online environments, reviewing research and literature on pedagogy, instructional design, issues, and trends to identify what is good practice when teaching online. Specifically, this paper looks at needs and opportunities of online environments, planning and preparation for teaching, good practice and evaluating online environments. Students develop confidence in learning in an online environment and understand the challenges and choices that face eTeachers.

This program has been running since 2003 and has attracted a diverse group of students including foreign students from a range of Asian-Pacific nations, New Zealand teachers currently working overseas but looking to return to New Zealand, teachers looking for learning to support their moves to increased responsibility and senior management, librarians in tertiary institutions, lecturers in tertiary institutions, and IT and technology specialists looking to be more involved in training. However, at the time of this study there were also a number of Chinese students from Hebei Province on a professional development program for teachers arranged between local Chinese Government and School of Education, University of Waikato. These students were very interested in eEducation because some were secondary and high school teachers and university tutors. Their purpose in taking on online paper studies, particularly these two papers, was to obtain knowledge of eEducation and experience so that they could apply this to their future teaching as well as enhancing Chinese education professional development on their return to China (Organizing Committee of China International Distance Education, 2007). The Chinese government’s needs for developing e-learning and eTeaching may be considered as a main reason why these participants chose to undertake this programme in New Zealand.

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