

International Students' Perception of the Australian Tertiary Learning Environment

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Abstract

The tertiary learning environment is not always easy to navigate, particularly for international students who are not always familiar with the western education system, whose environment is characterised by its expectation that students are independent learners. This study sought to investigate international students' perceptions of the Australian tertiary learning environment through focus group research utilising a cross section of students from Japan, China, Thailand, Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaysia, Sri Lanka and Singapore. The study provides evidence that tertiary institutions need to continue to utilise less formal and more flexible learning approaches in terms of student engagement and student-educator relationships.

Keywords: International students, perceptions of learning environment, learning approaches

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Introduction

Traditionally, the Australian tertiary education system has fostered the importance of students' being able to contribute to their own learning outcomes (Prosser and Trigwell, 1999; Trigwell and Prosser, 1991). This viewpoint is cultivated by the perception that the education system is grounded in the advancement of deep and strategic approaches to learning which promotes independent learners (Baird, 1988) and, as a result, enhances learning outcomes. This is particularly important in a marketing education context where students are required to demonstrate sound conceptual and theoretical understanding. In recent years, tertiary institutions have seen an influx of students from different cultural backgrounds which have implications for those students' ability to adjust to a 'foreign' learning environment. In 2008, there were 182,770 international students enrolled at Australian higher education institutions (Australian Education International, 2009). Of this number, the largest cohort of students was from the Asian region, accounting for 43 percent of all higher education enrolments. The learning approaches of students from this region are stereotypically characterised by a surface approach to learning where students have little cognitive engagement in the learning task. This paper addresses the results of an exploratory study that investigated international students' from large power distance and strong uncertainty avoidance cultures perception of the learning environment in an Australian university. The context is from the broader tertiary education learning environment and the perception of the role of the educator.

Literature Review

The teaching and learning environment is complex when integrating multicultural factors into the equation. Given the diversity of students' backgrounds it is becoming increasingly important to understand the implications of students' cultural backgrounds on the perception of the learning environment. As a result, cultural distance between learning approaches is very much dependent upon the student's cultural value set and background (Yamazaki, 2005). Cultural distance has received a great deal of attention in the international business literature (Dow, 2000; Kogut and Singh, 1988; O'Grady and Henry, 1996). Most of what is known about cultural distance has been adapted from Hofstede's (1980) research which in an education context is based on the premise that different countries can be grouped according to their homogeneity and heterogeneity in teaching and learning cultures (Wierstra et al., 2003). Of Hofstede's (1980) four cultural dimensions (power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism/collectivism, masculinity/femininity), he distinguishes two distinct teaching culture dimensions, namely, *power distance* and *uncertainty avoidance*. The cultural dimension of *power distance* defines the extent to which people less powerful in a society accept power inequality. Students from Asia are considered to be from a culture which exhibits *Large Power Distance*. This culture is characterised by a tertiary education system that tends to be teacher-centred with students depending on teachers to initiate class discussions thus relying on educators to transfer their personal wisdom (Hofstede, 1986). On the other hand, the cultural dimension of *uncertainty avoidance* defines the extent to which people within a culture are made nervous by situations which are perceived as being unstructured, unclear, or unpredictable (Hofstede, 1986). In *Strong Uncertainty Avoidance* cultures (e.g., Asian cultures), students are perceived as preferring a more structured assessment regime. In this type of environment, educators are expected to provide solutions and give detailed instructions for assessment tasks and students do not question the teacher's

knowledge as it is seen as being disloyal (Hofstede, 1986). These cultural traits have implications for the role of the educator in tertiary institutions in Australia due to our different learning environment punctuated by independent, self-directed, active learning requirements.

Understanding students' expectations in relation to the role of the educator in the learning experience is important, particularly within culturally diverse student cohorts. Previous research has recognised that students from Asian cultures are more likely to view educators as an authority, someone who transfers personal knowledge and maintain a formal relationship with the educator (Hofstede, 1986). Consequently, it is argued that students from large power distance/strong uncertainty avoidance cultures expect the teacher to take all initiatives, resulting in a less student-oriented and more reproduction-oriented learning environment (Wierstra et al., 2003). This is consistent with the surface approach to learning. The *surface approach* to learning essentially reflects recall, reproduction and memorisation. This learning approach is prevalent in strategies where there is limited student engagement (Biggs, 1979; Marton and Säljö, 1976; Prosser and Trigwell, 1999) and minimal cognitive effort (Biggs, 1999). This often results in the inability of students to integrate and apply principles in a meaningful manner (Entwistle and Ramsden, 1983; Richardson, 1994). Fundamentally, emphasis is placed on factual answers and passive thinking through the use of low cognitive strategies with limited personal engagement in learning outcomes (Entwistle and Entwistle, 1991; Laurillard, 1979; Pearson and Beasley, 1996). For students undertaking tertiary education in a culturally distant country, this dynamic change in the student-educator relationship has implications for the students' ability to adapt to a totally different learning environment which emphasises cooperative and collaborative learning.

From a pedagogy perspective, a number of learning strategies can be implemented in the classroom to foster the attainment of learning outcomes including cooperative and collaborative learning and 'equity pedagogy' (McGee-Banks and Banks, 1995) which essentially involves students acquiring knowledge through active learning. Equity pedagogy alters the traditional student-educator relationship and assumes an integral relationship between knowledge and reflective learning being the onus of the student (McGee-Banks and Banks, 1995). Equity pedagogy challenges the role of the traditional educator and has implications for the strategies adopted in the classroom. More importantly, equity pedagogy and cooperative learning actively reinforce the importance of communication skills, problem-solving skills, and the ability to work in teams and generate knowledge which is seen to be fundamental in developing student potential. The outcome of equity pedagogy is a proactive learning environment which encourages students and provides opportunities for them to fully participate in their learning experience and thus take control of their learning outcomes (McGee-Banks and Banks, 1995). This type of learning environment contradicts that experienced by Asian students in their home country. Students are leaving a learning environment which is dominated by the educator taking control of students' learning experience to a learning environment which places more emphasis on student interaction, autonomy and cooperation with peers thus providing a fulfilling learning experience (Slavin, 1980, 1990). Therefore, the objectives of this study are:

- To determine international students' attitudes and perception toward the learning environment in Australia; and
- To provide insight into the difficulties encountered by students studying in a culturally distant learning environment.

Methodology

The current research was undertaken within the context of a second year undergraduate marketing research class at an Australian University. The research method was in the form of focus groups. This method was chosen as the primary method of data collection because of the exploratory nature of the study. Focus groups offered the opportunity for group interaction promising the gaining of rich insights. As Merton, Fiske and Kendall (1990) suggested, the focussed interview with a group of people "...will yield a more diversified array of responses and afford a more extended basis both for designing systematic research on the situation in hand" (p. 135). Morgan and Krueger (1993) also emphasised, group interaction offers valuable insights into the extent of consensus and diversity of opinions among the participants. A cross section of students from Asian countries were represented in the focus groups including Japan, China, Thailand, Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaysia, Sri Lanka and Singapore. Students were asked to voluntarily take part in one of the five focus groups conducted for this study during normal class time. All students present in each of the classes agreed to participate ensuring a wide cross-section of students with differing abilities in terms of social skills and language proficiency. The focus group moderators were trained and highly experienced and therefore ensured that all participants were able to talk freely, without interference and that all opinions were duly recorded for analysis.

Findings

The following findings are from the viewpoint of students from Large Power Distance, Strong Uncertainty Avoidance cultures who are currently undertaking tertiary studies in an Australian university. Students preferred the less formal and more flexible learning approaches in terms of student engagement and student-educator relationships. It was felt the ability to discuss theories and concepts in the classroom was a positive experience for international students as opposed to the learning approaches advocated in the classroom of strong uncertainty avoidance cultures where educators are expected to provide solutions and students do not question the teacher's knowledge:

"[In Malaysia] most of the tutorials will focus on the questions [and content] of what they teach in the lectures ... In Malaysia you do the questions before the class and they will just give the answers [in tutorials] and here they will be discuss things... So I prefer to study here [in Australia]" (International student, Male).

It was also perceived that a learning environment where students were treated as equals with the educators was an important criterion for an effective learning environment for international students as it fostered cooperative and collaborative learning pedagogy:

"The differences in the students here [Australia] are more active [classroom interaction] ...In [Australia] ... if you don't understand then you ask then you get a clearer message...and greater understanding (International student, Female).

I don't know, here is more free to explore yourself and in Indonesia... I cannot explore myself as free as here (F3, International student, Female).

Understanding students' expectations in relation to the role of the educator in the learning experience is important, particularly within culturally diverse student cohorts. Previous

research has recognised that students from Asian cultures are more likely to view educators as an authority, someone who transfers personal knowledge rather than facilitators of learning who encourage students to develop independence, critical thinking and creative problem-solving skills (Hofstede, 1986). The opportunity to provide students with the freedom to discuss theories and concepts within a multicultural classroom setting provides students with the ability to take control of their learning experience. This dynamic change in the student-educator relationship, from one which is dominated by the educator taking control of students' learning experience consistent with strong uncertainty avoidance cultures, to an environment placing more emphasis on student interaction, autonomy and cooperation with peers has provided a fulfilling learning experience (Slavin, 1980; 1990). As indicated in the focus groups, students believed their educational experience to be richer in a classroom environment that fostered collaborative and cooperative learning (Adrian and Palmer, 1999).

At first glance, it appeared that the students preferred the surface approach to learning in terms of the preference for tasks which did not involve high levels of cognitive activity or conceptual and theoretical understanding:

"[I prefer] online tests. There are options. You can just choose one of the answers and it is much easier than writing an essay. You can still learn from online tests because you have to search for the answers. I don't think many students like doing essay type questions because it is boring" (International student, Female).

"I don't like essays because it takes ages to write. You have to do some research ..[In my own culture it is] easier because we just write our ideas and personal opinion so there is no need to take reference from someone else. [In Australia] you have to prove your idea, so it is difficult" (International student, Female).

Based on the above inferences, it can be disputed that students from high context cultures, particularly those from countries where the culture is dominated by strong uncertainty avoidance prefer the surface approach to their learning. Zeidner (1987) and Ballard and Clanchy (1997) argued that multiple-choice assessment tasks and the surface approach to learning is the preferred method of learning approach used by Asian students. This may be the case, but it may be that language proficiency is the reason as to why students are perceived as preferring the surface rather than deep or strategic learning approaches:

"I have some ideas but I always need someone to elaborate and make it more understandable because I can't do it well [due to English language problems]" (International student, Male).

These findings have revealed students adopted a surface learning approach when the aim was to understand the subject material when limited or no personal engagement was required in the completion of the task. However, it has emerged in this exploratory research that there is a misconception in the stereotyping of Asian students as being 'rote learners' (Biggs, 1999; Kember and Gow, 1991). Findings inferred that Asian students use a systematic, step-by-step approach to their learning which encompassed both the surface and deep learning approaches when completing, for example, multiple choice tests. It is not simply memorisation or rote learning, but the completion of multiple choice tests assists students in the theoretical and conceptual understanding of the learning material. Further, the dislike of 'essay-style' assessment practices is more due to the lack of language proficiency and the cultural

difference in research method resulting in a negative perception of assessment practices attributed to deep and strategic learning approaches.

Concluding Remarks

Students from Asian cultures often find the western education system as characterised by independent learning and less interaction and guidance from teachers or lecturers (Andrews, Dekkers and Solas, 1998; Ballard and Clanchy, 1997) difficult to adjust to. This is due to the perception that students from these cultures tend to implement a surface approach to learning and have a tendency to require all learning materials to be provided with rigid parameters for all assessment tasks with the focus being on recall rather than understanding. In addition, the relationship between the teacher and the student is outcome focussed with the student relying heavily on the teacher's knowledge rather than confronting academic content and participating in active learning (Morse, 2003). Yet, Biggs (2003), Kember and Gow (1991), Marton, Dall'Alba and Kun (1996), Kember (1996) and Hess and Azuma (1991) have challenged these generalisations and stereotypical characterisations of students from Large Power Distance, Strong Uncertainty Avoidance cultures and the use of surface learning practices. For example, they argue that Asian students use a systematic, step-by-step approach to their learning which encompasses both the surface and deep learning approaches when completing assessment tasks.

Students indicated that equity pedagogy that fosters a cooperative learning environment has many benefits for more effective learning outcomes. As Johnson, Johnson and Holubec (1990) assert: "what we know about effective instruction indicates that cooperative learning should be used when we want students to learn more, like school better, like each other better, like themselves better, and learn more effective social skills" (p. 5). Academic research has indicated that cooperative learning strategies as opposed to individualistic or autonomous learning approaches are more effective in promoting intrinsic motivation in the attainment of task achievement that results in higher-order thinking skills, improving attitudes toward the learning, developing academic peer norms and fostering greater levels of self-belief and self-esteem (Oxford, 1997). These findings are consistent with the viewpoint of a number of students from Asian cultures involved in this study. The students argued that a cooperative learning environment where they participated in frequent class discussions resulted in a better understanding of the subject material, the ability to apply relevant theories and concepts to new settings or contexts (Beaver, 1994) and developed effective engagement amongst their peers and educators. Therefore, tertiary institutions need to continue to encourage "teaching and assessment methods that foster active and long term engagement with learning tasks [and] . . . opportunities to exercise responsible choice in the method and content of study" (Ramsden, 2003).

This exploratory study enables further insight into student perceptions of the learning environment. The focus groups methodology allows for an exciting opportunity to gather insights into one of Australia's leading industry sectors: that of tertiary education. This study also allows for an abundance of future research opportunities within the tertiary education domain. For example, in future it would be of benefit to divide the sample even further into high, *moderate* and low cultural dimensions of power distance and uncertainty avoidance, rather than the high and low measures utilised in this study. Comparisons of students' perceptions across these three (rather than two) groups would provide even further insight into each group's perception of the Australian teaching and learning environment.

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