Using a co-experience approach to improve international students' classroom experience: a practice report from within an Australian higher education setting

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Beside my bed a pool of light,
Is it hoarfrost on the ground?
I lift my eyes and see the moon,
I bend my head and think of home.
- Thoughts on a Quiet Night, by Li Bai, Tang Dynasty Poet (701-762 A.D.)

Based on my experience teaching in a large metropolitan university in Australia, I discuss why we need to stop looking at international students through a deficit model, and look at the rich range of knowledge that our classrooms can gain from international students; many of them have been top performers in their home countries before they come here, but quickly get disheartened upon arrival in Australia when they find themselves stereotyped in a negative way, on top of all the culture shock and other adjustments they go through. I argue that the solutions go beyond just teachers and university support systems; we need to involve domestic students in making international students' experience more positive, for they play a big part in an international students' day-to-day experience in the classroom. Based on a participatory action research project within my own teaching practice, I argue that giving room for flexibility in content choice, assessment choice, and choice of modalities within the scope of a subject's learning outcomes can yield positive results for all students as detailed in this paper.

Keywords: International student, mental health, higher education, teaching innovations

Introduction and Background

The international student industry in Australia is a lucrative and complex one, but a paradigmatic shift is required from thinking about international students in economic terms, to considering them in human terms (Pejic, 2012). A 2016 Australian study of international students and mental health identified three broad dimensions to mental ill health amongst international students: adjusting to unfamiliar academic practices, managing everyday life in a different cultural context, and recognising and seeking professional help for mental health problems.

Australia is unique among OECD nations for its international presence in the higher education sector (Gray, Chang, & Kennedy 2010). As at May 2018, 556,987 international students were enrolled in Australian universities, which is 36% of all students (Department of Education and Training, 2018). It is widely argued that the internationalisation of universities contributes to graduate attributes related to intercultural competence and learning, global mobility, cross-cultural communication skills, and international perspectives on professional life (Kimmel & Volet 2012). It is believed that people from different backgrounds studying together will create a mutually beneficial flow of knowledge and culture (Leask & Carroll 2011).

Challenges for International Students

A comprehensive literature review conducted by the UTS Centre for Public Policy and Governance for the City of Sydney (Ryan et. al., 2016) as part of a large survey study, identified the following key focus areas that contributed to the lack of wellbeing of international students:

- Housing and housing exploitation
- safety and security
- financial resources and exploitation in the work-place
- discrimination, and
- social integration

Together, they cover what may be termed as human issues that are shared with local students, but international students bear the additional burden of discrimination and social integration, but the strongest area with need for improvement was in the area of international students' mental health. The Orygen Report (Browne et al., 2017) also found that emerging high-risk groups in terms of

mental health of Australian university students included those from low socio-economic backgrounds and international students.

Effects on Mental Health

Leask (2009) observed that international students often feel isolated, due in part to being away from home and also due to difficulties integrating socially with their local cohort. More recently, research has shown that due to the ubiquitousness of digital technologies that connect families transnationally, it has been possible for international students to stay connected to their families almost continually. Whilst this can be a positive experience, Martin and Rizvi (2014) also found that as a result, "their senses of both home and Australia are fragmented, deterritorialised and syncretic, woven in and through each other, as the Australia that they inhabit is fundamentally conditioned by the fluctuating mediated co-presence of home, derived from the simultaneity offered by digital media (p.1016)", and students can receive "an emotional jolt when the limits of transnational media connection are reached and geographic location reasserts itself" (p. 1019). On the other hand, this digital connectedness can also emotionally block a sense of identification with and belonging in Australia while simultaneously also helping them negotiate the materiality of the local space they inhabit. Hence, digital media's role can lead to a very fragmented experience of the new country, which can be a barrier to integration (Martin & Rizvi, 2014).

Innovating the Classroom Through Action Research

Keeping the literature and previous classroom experience in mind, I made a considered decision to revise and change the delivery of an elective subject within an Arts and Social Sciences faculty at a leading metropolitan university in Australia, using a participatory action research approach. Participatory action research is "an iterative process of interplay between researcher and participants in which activities shift between action and reflection" (Fisher & Ball, 2003, pp. 209-210), is context-bound, and addresses real-life problems through a learning-by-doing approach (Kindon, Pain, & Kesby, 2009); "It builds upon the idea of introducing changes or other sorts of interventions into a context and studying the effects of those actions. Importantly, the researcher acts as the agent of change or intervention… while also examining how these actions influence the phenomenon at hand" (Recker, 2012, p.99). I used this approach in combination with a deliberate co-experience design as a way of continually adjusting my classroom strategies with specific focus

on making the university experience of international students more meaningful for everyone. Co-experience moves the focus away from experience with its implicit individualistic bias, and focuses on the social quality of the experience (Battarbee, 2003). This is important for international students' (and every student's) experience, and for learning, especially in a face-to-face classroom like the one described below, which is necessarily one of co-experience.

The subject and its context

The specific subject within which I employed this approach is on Design Thinking, a process which allows practitioners to generate user-focused innovation by employing the 'thinking' and 'doing' of expert designers and applying them in fields other than design (Carlgren, Rauth, & Elmquist 2016; Johansson-Sköldberg, Woodilla, & Çetinkaya 2013). The process has also been shown to be effective in enhancing outcomes in higher education (e.g., Huq & Gilbert 2017; Tan & Wong 2012). The subject Design Thinking for Social Innovation is offered as a final-year elective to undergraduate students at the School of Communication at the University of Technology Sydney a metropolitan university in Australia. The subject is aligned with the design thinking process developed by the Hasso Plattner Institute of Design at Stanford University (d.school, 2011). Each session of the subject is dedicated to one phase of the five-phase process of design thinking: developing empathy for all affected by an issue, defining the problem, ideating a solution, prototyping the solution, and testing the solution. The class meets fortnightly for a highly interactive five-hour session, freeing the students to work independently and/or meet with their industry client in the 'off' weeks. The industry clients present a societal challenge to the students in the first week of class. The student groups work as a team throughout the semester, and each team also delivers a presentation of their solution to their chosen client at the end of the semester as part of the final assessment.

A closed Facebook group was set up for the subject wherein all students were asked to join and introduce themselves online before coming to first class, for research shows that this kind of controlled introduction is very comfortable to many students who find icebreakers in the classroom quite confronting (Campbell & Narayan, 2017). All the tutors in the subject introduced themselves, posted photos of themselves, all in a conversational fashion, and one by one all the students followed. This was a great reference point for later in the semester for everyone in the

classroom, especially when students wanted to create their own small groups on Facebook to discuss their client project.

Classroom dynamics and analytics

The clients, mostly non-profits, charities, and NGOs, posed a social challenge to students in the first week of class, and students chose and ranked their preferences in order. I formed them into groups of five each, with five groups in each class, based on their ranked topic choices rather than any other factor; that way, students got to work on topics they liked rather than try to form groups just with their existing friends. Each class met face-to-face on-campus for five hours every fortnight – this interdisciplinary undergraduate elective subject had 175 students in 2018 across six class sessions, with two tutors for each session, with myself, the subject coordinator, as one of the standing tutors across all six sessions. The students were a mix of Australian students (81%) and international students (19%) with a further breakdown of English-only home language students (67%) and home language other than English (33%), with 28% male and 72% female students. These figures are provided by the university via a subject dashboard to the subject coordinator prior to the start of the teaching session for purposes of planning. The cohort consisted of students from several undergraduate majors in Communication including creative writing, political science, public communication, advertising, film-making, journalism, sound and music studies, and also a few students from Design, Business and IT. Generally, students from non-English backgrounds, including some international students, struggle with the high-level language demands (both academic reading and writing) of this school, compared to others in the university.

Each class has a cap of 28 students and each classroom had two tutors facilitating the sessions. Classes started with a 20-minute lecture-like introduction to the topic, and the class activities that followed were highly structured and timed, in line with the design thinking process, and although students worked in groups for a couple of hours at the end of each class session, they were rotated between groups for the first few hours, all helping out with topics from other groups and hence getting to know everyone better. This was inspired by the *World Café Method* (Brown & Isaacs, 2010), with its following seven design principles, which are an integrated set of ideas and practices that form the basis of the pattern embodied in the World Café process:

1. Set the context

2. Create a hospitable space

3. Explore questions that matter

4. Encourage everyone's contribution

5. Connect diverse perspectives

6. Listen together for patterns and insights

7. Share collective discoveries

In this subject, every class meeting followed the above process; the context was that the students would learn the design thinking process by doing it, a learning-by-doing approach, and the classroom was filled with creative supplies, music (for times activities with timers), and even some nibbles for the break, making it look like a gathering of friends rather than a classroom. The questions we explored in class were related to the clients' challenges. All students had a chance to interact within their own groups, and the groups were also mixed up for some activities, all of which encouraged students to intermingle and interact with everyone rather than stay within their in-groups, be they domestic, international, or discipline-specific in-groups. All groups also shared their outcomes with the whole class at the end of every session, which generated input from all groups into every topic chosen. Additionally, students were asked to give anonymous feedback on the session through dropping filled-out post-it notes into a cardboard box. This, along with the rest of the class interactions, provided an opportunity for the tutors and myself to adjust our approach for the next session, and pay attention to areas that required more or less time; this was one way in which we used participatory action research.

Case-based learning

Abeyesekera (2008) found that international students in Australia preferred interactive and case-based learning rather than traditional lectures. Through a diversity of clients' challenges, all involving societal issues, the students had a range of topics to choose from, giving them an opportunity to work on something they personally cared about. In 2018, more than 18 clients presented these challenges to students and 32 student groups across six different class groups (with five students in each group) - there were some instances when a client had more than one group tackling their topic within a single class. All students benefited greatly from these topic choices and interactions with real-world clients, but the topic choices of international students gave us an idea about their interests and concerns; most chose topics around first-year experience, student

mental health, racism, housing, and refugee communities, showing us that these topics rang true to their personal experiences as they also articulated in the classroom.

Design of assessments

Research around learning styles through the years has been inconclusive about how they can help modes of teaching (Beere et al. 2005; Coffield et. al, 2004). Also, learning styles inevitably differ among students in any given classroom. Hence, I designed assessments that would be beneficial to a range of learning styles. From my past experience, I have found that several international students in Arts and Social Sciences (mainly from developing countries in Asia and South Asia) struggle with electronic assessments as they are generally more used to submitting hand written assessments in their own countries. Based on discussions with colleagues in education, nursing, engineering and design schools, where a notebook or other process documentation is often incorporated into instruction as a pedagogical tool (Moon, 2011) to assess a student's solution process separately from their design artefacts, I decided to incorporate a reflective assessment instrument in this subject. Based on past experience, I have also found that irrespective of content knowledge or skills learned, international students often preferred more tangible modalities when it came to written work (handwritten vs. typed up, for example).

In light of all of the above, one of the major assessments in this subject, the only individual component, and worth 40% weightage, was a handwritten journal that students were asked to bring to class but maintain off-class and submit at the last class session. At the end of the semester, after submission of all assessments, students also filled out a self- and peer- review form online to rate their own and others' input within their groups, which generally improves self-reflection and group dynamics (Willey & Gardener, 2009).

The individual assessment was named a "design journal", and incorporated elements from learning journals, process logs, information diaries, and reflective writing. The journals were checked a few times in class by the tutor, and continual feedback was provided to the students in line with participatory action research; often, one tutor silently checked students' journals and made notes for action whilst the students were engaged in other class activities, and discreetly put in a post-it note inside with their comments. Several good examples from past students (with permission) was provided at the beginning of the semester; this abated some fears from all students about

handwritten journals and also provided some guidelines/criteria on format (handwritten, not typed up and pasted up), neatness of information (not penmanship or handwriting), spread over semester (so they are evenly distributed), quantity (sufficient amount of material and coverage of class topics and procedures) and quality (coverage of readings, discussions, and reflection); we also explained that this was not designed to be class notes and that if they were used to taking notes in class, they could do so separately and that they need not share that at all.

Outcomes

Student discussions in class

Due to the format of the design thinking process which encourages both open discussion and silent and anonymous input on every topic – everyone shared their thinking through post-it notes and put them up on their group boards. Some of the major issues that came up are below. Student names used here are fictional names.

Perceived discrimination: All international students felt isolated and lonely in their classrooms in the first year, and found it hard to make local friends. Many resent the preconceived notions that teachers and local students have toward them, "Professors/students shouldn't assume students are having a better life in Australia just because they come from a developing country" said Ella. Many spoke openly about racism and discrimination at university and in everyday life, and Vicki said, "I studied high school in Australia and my English is almost the same as a native speaker, and yet I am treated like an idiot just because of the way I look (Asian)." In fact, Anna said she had given up even trying, "I just want to finish my degree and go back to my home country as soon as possible." Jenny piped in "Internationalisation doesn't mean Australian students getting on a plane to go to another country. It also means welcoming those like us who have spent a lot of money to come to your country to learn."

Group work dynamics: Group work is another issue that came up a lot in the class discussions. Almost all of our subjects in the school have a group work component, and international students often felt ghettoised and segregated when they were put into groups amongst themselves. Mark said "Please don't let students form groups on their own; we are always excluded and segregated in our own groups with other international students." Even when they were in mixed groups,

international students felt like they were just treated like a lame duck and condescended to: "I don't like being excluded or side-lined in group discussions; my ideas are never heard," said Cathy.

The language of friendships: Many international students spoke about their efforts to make friends in Australia. Those who were partnered with a local student in their first year through a "buddy program" said they really loved it and that it really helped with their conversational English and also everyday life; some of the local students in the classroom who had been assigned buddies also said that they had loved the experience. For those who had not been through the program, making friends was harder. Sarah said, "When I work with domestic students, they are very nice and helpful, but whenever I invited them for a coffee or lunch they said they were too busy. They never invited me when they went out with their friends either." Farah added that some of her difficulty in making friends was her own issues, "Reading and writing is not a problem for me, but speaking is; students are very nice with me for group work etc., and even tell me that my language is fine, but I don't feel that." In an effort to make new friends, Mandy even went out of her way to learn a new language, "I have joined Korean and Japanese clubs on campus (I am Chinese) in order to force myself to speak in English and not resort to Chinese like I do when I hang out with Chinese students." Some local students recalled their own experiences from their semester abroad, and identified with and confirmed similar experiences. Overall, one of the outcomes of these discussions in the classroom was that local students, after hearing these experiences from international students in my classroom, made a conscious effort to be more inclusive in their activities.

There were other issues discussed around procedural difficulties related to enrolment, and understanding the Australian higher education system, and many of these comments were passed on to the university's international office.

Finally, there was a very curious conversation I had in class with a very smart international student from China. John was having a really hard time understanding what 'reflective writing' meant despite my showing many examples. He had looked at a dictionary on his phone and was thinking of the literal meaning of "reflection" as in Physics and was very confused. Then I tried to explain it more, and then he said I was talking about "light refraction" and then when I expanded on it, he said I was now talking about "light diffusion" — I was at a loss. Then I explained to him with the one and only Chinese poem I know and said: "Remember Li Bai's

poem about looking at the Moon and yearning for home [used as an epigram in this paper]; that is an example of somebody reflecting on something." Although this impressed (and also confused) him a bit, he was still not convinced how an assessment can involve a poem. Then I opened up an online thesaurus on screen and showed him all the other related words and explained the alternate meanings for reflection. He was still not convinced, but wrote down this new online resource (thesaurus.com), which he had never heard of before. Then I went on to chat about how to use a thesaurus and explained the difference between a dictionary and a thesaurus. Then I called and spoke to a Chinese-Australian academic colleague who sent me some links in Chinese (from Taiwan) about reflective writing; she also added that it wasn't a common form of writing at university in China, but that there is indeed a Chinese word for it and it is 反思性写作 or Fǎnsī xìng xiězuò. The student was so excited and thrilled to hear this word that he immediately texted all the other Chinese students in class and explained to them what reflective writing meant. Apparently, I had somehow solved their problems with other subjects that required reflective writing also. That evening, I received an email from another international student from China with the following message:

> "Dear [teacher],
>
> This is [student name]. I represent all my Chinese friends to thank you.
>
> I want to send you a Chinese poem:
>
> Be kind, there is no return. So, it's lovely.
>
> We think you are the most lovely teacher we have meet.
>
> Thank you!
>
> [student name] and all your Chinese students."

This shows how we take a lot of foundational skills such as using a thesaurus for granted without understanding a student's linguistic and cultural context, and how a little bit of mindfulness and effort can go a long way.

Student experience with groups

One of the most successful aspects of this subject was the way groups worked amongst themselves and between groups. This was partly because of the active nature of the classroom where everyone had to interact with each other in a structured way, and also because of the World Café method wherein students rotated between groups for at least one activity every session, helping them interact with other students outside of their group. The most notable written comments in the student journals related to group work, and Jasmine articulates it best, with this entry below:

"Over the course of an entire semester, we have worked in a group working on a project. This isn't something I am used to as other group projects last a month at most. I kind of prefer it this way because you really get to know your team and have a more practical approach to working on something. Even hearing from other groups in the class, I have become interested and invested in their projects too. We were going into our presentations with confidence in ourselves and our ideas and hope to leave an impression on the client. I was super excited when I got this subject and it lived up to expectation. Seeing the implications of design thinking makes me really want to work with this methodology again."

Other students wrote that they had been too silent within group work until they entered this subject. For example, Eddy wrote:

"I have felt very bad in the past as I cannot contribute much work in group projects in previous subjects. However, I'm happy and feel better in this subject's group work. I want to share all my opinions with them. I do not feel stress in the group. Although, I argued for different perspectives of the project, and we try to convince each other and share our own ideas…We learned a lot from the process and we want to change the situation for international students. I hope more and more people can realise international students' real problems. Everyone is fair and equal. I like this topic and I hope I can help to change the international students' [illegible]."

It was also heartening to see that in every group, each group member had a part they presented to the client, after practising them together several times; this was unusual in that in past subjects, I have witnessed international students take a back seat in the presentations either because of their own hesitation or because local students don't give them a turn to speak. Jasmine's journal entry below illustrates the success of group work in this subject:

"My group mates and I had a thorough discussion as to how we should present. Should one or two of us represent the team and go up or should the ones who had better English or communication skills present? At the end, we decided that all four of us should go up and present, each selecting our own preferred and confident parts. [Student A] took the part of identified problems, I explained the concepts, [Student C] went into details about the three types of users. At the end [Student D] outlined the benefits to these three stakeholders. We also tried to remember each other's parts in case if anyone forgets any information, which I found really helpful and it really made me feel like a team. Presentations has always been my weak side since every time I need to present formal report in front of a crowd or many people, I would shake and my words would begin to not make any sense, but presenting with my team who would help me when I forgot really gained me more confident.

[Photo of team was inserted here with the caption "My Family"]

Honestly, I had a great time and experience working with these three people. The best team mates that I met throughout my university time. It's not like it's perfect, we still get angry at each other sometimes, but working together, helping each other, without caring if someone did less or more makes me feel really heartwarming. Caring, sharing, helping, these are the values that encouraged us to create a piece of great work."
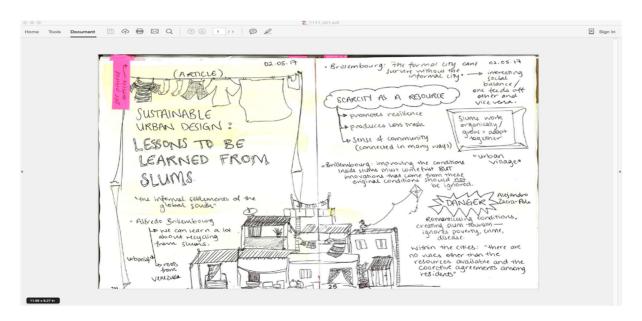
Student expression through the design journals

Despite initial confusion, the design journal quickly became a beloved and tangible object that was brought into class by students and worked upon both in class and outside (photos of classroom work were often included). Students were given full creative freedom with their journals; some students decorated it excessively and were proud of it too. By framing it as a scrapbook or album, a format that most students were familiar with, the journal seemed (to students) less like an assessment and more like a log of their learning.

Many of these journals were excellent, but the ones written by international students (especially from Asia) were particularly impressive as they had great penmanship, were meticulous, had drawings and doodles to illustrate concepts, had photos of themselves and their group mates at work, and had creative imagery throughout, including the use of cute animal mascots everywhere, which seems to be a result of a cultural affinity to certain animals. Figure 1 below shows a page from a student who was working with a client on sustainable urban living, and the page shows her take on a scholarly article and shows how students, if given the freedom to be creative, can reframe existing ideas to create new ideas.
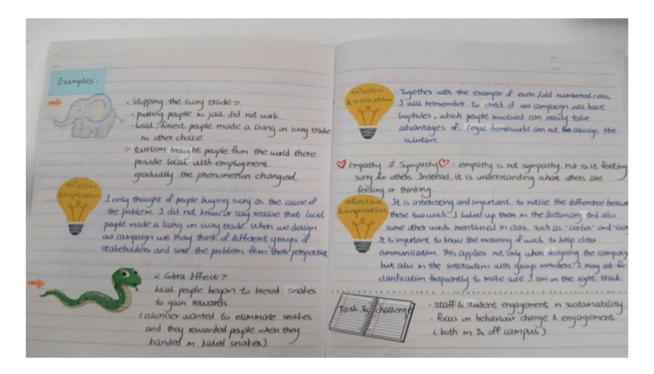
Figure 1

Another international student, who was relatively shy in class, produced a stunning journal that not only documented her learning and reflection, but also took great pains to organise and categorise her entries (Figure 2).

Figure 2

I believe the mode of this assessment, within a course where students are often asked to write an essay or a report, combined with the somewhat throwback modality of the assessment (hand-written rather than type up), opened up students' imagination, creativity and playfulness in a way that was meaningful to them while also providing significant learning outcomes. Additionally, this modality afforded students to have their own thoughts and writing shine through, especially with international students who may have a particular training where rote learning skills may have been inculcated in their high schools.

Student outcomes and feedback

A mid-semester student feedback survey was administered to all students by the university, and the feedback for this subject indicated that students generally loved the subject, but had some confusion around the lack of readings, apart from five seminal articles in design thinking. In the next session, I explained that groups need to decide together on the readings related to their individual topics, which excited the students, who then went off to the library as a group to choose readings for their topic. At the end of the semester, the anonymous student feedback survey showed that an overwhelming number of students found the subject extremely useful and interesting and had a great learning experience. Although it is not possible to say what comments came from international students, the fact that no students complained about the group work indicates that the international students had the same positive experience as everyone else. All students loved working with a real-life client, and also enjoyed the interactive nature of the classroom, the freedom to choose their own topics, and the timed and structured, but fun activities in the classroom. One of the anonymous comments says it all,

"I absolutely LOVED this subject. For me, it has been the most practical, engaging subject that has given me the most real-life work experience that I have ever received in any subject in my 5 years at university [as a student completing a double major]. Can't speak highly enough of it. I think the content is super important in today's industries - thinking laterally, collaborating with different people, and approaching problems in a designs-thinking-way is so valuable and important and useful - and the structure of the subject was really great too… I loved that we got to work in groups across the whole of semester"

To get students to this state of appreciation for a subject at the end of the semester, in a subject where students came from different majors and disciplines, was possible only because of the

feedback mechanisms that were built into every class session – some that were open (such as class discussions and activities, and some that were anonymous (such as post-it note feedback, mid-semester survey, and journal entries). This is the strength of the participatory action research, as my tutors and I could continually act upon this feedback throughout the semester, adjusting the class activities for the next session.

Discussion and Conclusion

The participatory action research approach helped me make quick changes in the classroom as needed through the semester, and intervene in any perceived issues on the spot. As a result, my classroom was more inclusive of all learning styles and assessment modalities, and made it a better overall experience for all. Through actively engaging all students in the classroom using structured, timed, pre-planned activities, wherein there was a built-in mechanism for all students to rotate between different groups and topics, the classroom was transformed into a discursive space, which was a safe zone for all students, where students themselves were actively participating in a form of participatory action research.

The student experience and results from this subject shows that we need to stop discussing international students with a deficit lens and look at the immense strength, resilience, and even fun and delight they bring to the classroom, not to mention the pedagogic value they add. Nearly all international students succeed in their studies, but their view of their host country is solidified during their studies; this is important for us to keep in mind, for these same students are the future leaders in their professions back in their home countries. Teaching this subject has taught me that it is important to recognise differences in academic cultures, and provide support and guidance for cross-cultural communication through devising interesting and engaging methods to encourage participation and enculturation.

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