

Confucian or Fusion?: Perceptions of Confucian-Heritage Students with Respect to their University Studies in Australia

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Abstract: This research aims to uncover the perceptions of first-year Confucian-heritage students towards their lived experience of university study in Australia. Data was gathered from the students via interviews and analyzed using a phenomenological approach. From the students' perspective, prior experience of western-style pedagogy was found to be helpful in giving students an idea of what the Australian learning environment would entail, although many students still had difficulty with classroom interaction due to persistent cultural conditioning. In terms of teacher behaviour, important factors include the lecturer demonstrating an understanding of the student's culture, using humour in teaching, being a role model, developing a good relationship with the student and demonstrating a commitment to their learning. Issues included the students' lack of understanding of the true significance of assignments and lecturers' misunderstanding of the valuable role of memorization in Confucian-heritage students' learning. The findings of this work allow academics an insight into the lived educational experiences of the student participants. They may also be tentatively offered as a means of informing future course design and delivery, with the goal of improving the quality of student learning and, therefore, academic success.

Keywords: Cultural Issues in Education, International Students, Asian Students, Confucian Influences in Education

Introduction

A CONFUCIAN-HERITAGE LEARNER can be defined as one who comes from such Asian countries as China, Taiwan, Singapore, Hong Kong, Japan, Korea and Vietnam (Louie in Carroll & Ryan 2005; Nguyen, Griffin & Nguyen 2006). Confucian-heritage students comprised 49% of all international students enrolled at Australian universities in the year 2007, the most recent year for which statistics are currently available (calculated from DEST 2008). They therefore represent a significant proportion of our students, given that international students comprise 26.5% of the total student body. Students from China were the greatest cohort (21.5%), followed by Singapore (10.8%), Hong Kong (8.4%), Vietnam (2.8%), South Korea (2.1%), Japan (1.6%), Taiwan (1.5%) and North Korea (0.3%).

Despite the fact that the academic literature on Confucian-heritage students is quite comprehensive and spans several decades, there is still a poor understanding of the learning needs of this group. Many educators, for example, believe that these students are not deep learners, whereas deep learning was determined to be part of their learning style in the 1980s

and early 1990s (Biggs in Ramburuth 2001). Why then do we appear to be discovering that these students can, in fact, be deep learners as though it were new knowledge? Possible reasons are that the research findings are not being passed on to subsequent generations of educators, or that there exists a strong culture of resistance to this concept in the academic community. The authors contend that such perceptions persist because some teachers use their own Western worldview to judge only what they see on the surface, and do not analyse or seek to understand the true situation from the student's perspective. Some studies have demonstrated a conflict between lecturers' understandings of their Confucian-heritage students, and the views held by the students themselves of their learning requirements (Lee & Carrasquillo 2006).

The aim of this study, therefore, was to understand the perceptions of university study held by international students from a Confucian-heritage culture. It was thought that a study of the lived educational experiences of representatives of this group would reveal valuable information about their studies from *their* perspective, rather than how their lecturer assumed it to be. The students were enrolled in their first year of business studies at a preparatory college within an Australian university. Upon successful completion of their first year, they would then be admitted to the second year of the business degree at the university. They had all recently completed a compulsory first-year Information Systems unit taught by one of the researchers. The students were viewed as a fairly typical sample in that 68% of international Confucian-heritage students in Australia enroll in some business or computing-related degree (DEST 2008) and are therefore likely to undertake an introductory Information Systems subject. The study adopted a phenomenological research methodology. Explication of in-depth interviews with students from China, Korea, Singapore, and Vietnam yielded common themes that delivered insights into the lived experiences of these particular students before and during their time as learners within the subject.

Firstly, this paper outlines the effect of the Confucian heritage on education, including students' approach to learning and some popular misconceptions. Secondly, we explain the phenomenological methodology and detail how data was gathered, as well as how the interpretive methodology was applied. Thirdly, the findings of the research are presented as a narrative that seeks to provide a cohesive account of the educational experiences of the interviewees from their own perspectives. We hope that this study will shed light upon how Confucian-heritage students adopt strategies to learn and how effective they perceive their teaching at an Australian university to be.

Confucian Heritage and Education

Confucianism has influenced societies in the East Asian region for more than 2000 years and therefore its affect on the culture of the people in that area is enormous (Merriam 2007). The Confucian heritage may be characterised by familism, harmony, paternalism, equality by age, diligence, spiritual strength, heritage, loyalty, and work orientation (Rozman 1991). This has resulted in a specific learning orientation for members of such cultures. From their perspective, learning is viewed as a most valuable and central part of one's life. It is characterised by sincerely respectful teacher-student relationships, modelled on those of kings and their subordinates; is teacher-centred; and is a part of maintaining social order (Merriam 2007; Carroll & Ryan 2005). Confucian-heritage students can be very active learners, but

they hold very different views on how to conduct themselves in class compared to Australian students from other backgrounds.

Rote Learning and Deep Learning

A stereotype of Confucian-heritage students is that they focus upon shallow memorisation of material. It is as though a skill is deemed to be well-learned if it is practiced via seemingly endless repetition (Rozman 1991; Carroll & Ryan 2005). To Western-style educators, the practice of memorisation is almost exclusively associated with mechanical repetition and no understanding. Rote learning without understanding results in surface learning – where the student does not comprehend the full message of the material, but can reproduce it verbatim. This view is coloured by Westerners' own experiences and styles of memorisation. Moreover, Saravanamuth (2008) suggests one other reason for the perception of these students as low-cognitive rote-learners: if their English proficiency is low, they may switch to mechanical rote-learning as a survival tactic when their language skills are not acceptable for their level of study. Sometimes academics inadvertently encourage meaningless memorisation by allowing students to develop a belief that examination questions are very closely based upon tutorial questions or lecture material.

However, Smith, Miller and Crassini (1998), have confirmed that while Confucian heritage students may use different methods than Australian students when studying, they do exhibit a deep learning approach. Deep learning is where a student not only understands the material, but also is able, for example, to determine where it is situated with respect to other held knowledge, can comment and evaluate the knowledge, and point out shortcomings in concepts. Asian students use repetition of memorised material as an adjunct for deeper understanding, not a replacement for it (Haggis 2003).

In contrast to common belief, Chan (1997) discovered that, of the ten strongest beliefs about learning held by Australian and Hong Kong students, seven were the same. A number of the Hong Kong students' attitudes to learning centred on quite active approaches including a belief in the importance of developing thinking strategies (e.g., being able to plan, to evaluate alternatives, and to keep one's mind on task); learning as the expression of one's own views and opinions; and the need to ask questions of oneself, others, texts, and even the commonly accepted theories, views and wisdom.

The misconception of these students as poor learners may lead university lecturers to deliver courses inappropriately and then the student's education itself may suffer (Ramburuth 2001). Suggested means of encouraging deep learning by Confucian-heritage students in a Western-style higher education environment focus on being student-centred and facilitating lessons that enable the student to make connections with other material, for example, to see how the current material fits with the overall structure of the topic under study. Students are also more able to experience deep learning when they are taught in a positive environment that acknowledges that mistakes can be a good way to learn.

Reluctance to Contribute in Class

It is easy to conclude that Confucian background students are passive learners who are 'shy' in class, especially when viewing them with a Western cultural lens. In contrast to the findings of previous research, Chalmers and Volet (1997) discovered that this was a misconception,

even though the idea had been given credibility by being published in various academic journals previously. Confucian-heritage students have very strongly held beliefs against speaking out in class due to the perception that it is time-wasting and selfish to do so. The classroom is more teacher-centred, with learning in control of the teacher, who does the talking (Kato 2001). Whereas the Western expectation may be that tutorials are an opportunity for student discussion of lecture material, by contrast this group of learners are aware of the fact that class time is short and so they would prefer to discuss issues with their classmates during their own informal 'tutorials' after the official one. This can be a problem in Australian settings if a lecturer misconstrues quietness in class with passive learning. One study revealed that almost 50% of the international students surveyed received lower grades than they had expected (Krause, Hartley, James & McInnis 2005): there may be a connection with the fact that 31% of these students reported a sense of unease in participating in class discussions, as compared with 20% for local students.

Compounding their ability to participate in class is their difficulty in making timely sense of spoken Australian English during tutorial classes and lectures (Nataatmadja, Sixsmith & Dyson 2007). Understanding lecturers' jokes and colloquial language causes difficulties. Furthermore, a study by Mulligan and Kirkpatrick (2000) showed that non-English speaking background students were significantly less likely to understand material that referenced Australian or Western cultures or to make connections with the material presented and their own lives. The study also quoted Reid et al. (1998) in noting that some students perceive that lecturers assume that they have had a similar life experience to local students.

Lack of Homogeneity

Further complicating these misconceptions is the fact that there may be considerable variation in individual learners depending upon their specific country, socioeconomic background, gender and education level (Jones 2005). Different styles of learning can exist within different Confucian cultures (Smith, Miller & Crassini 1998; Lê & Shi 2006). Between cultures there are also differences: for example, Shi (2008) discovered that mainland Chinese learners value understanding in learning and the elaboration of learned material more so than learners from other Chinese cultural backgrounds. This is clearly not a case of memorisation without understanding.

Research Method

The researchers adopted a phenomenological methodology. This is an essentially postmodern approach which rejects the independent existence of external reality in favour of people's perceptions: 'To arrive at certainty, anything outside immediate experience must be ignored' (Groenewald 2004). Phenomenological research describes the lived experiences of research participants with respect to the phenomenon being studied. In this case, the phenomenon was university study in Australia as experienced by first-year Confucian-heritage students.

Participants

Eleven participants were chosen by purposive sampling (Groenewald 2004). Table 1 provides their details. Interviews were conducted with 9 students from Confucian-heritage countries

and 1 local student, who was included as a comparison. All these students had undertaken an Information Systems subject as part of their first semester of study in Australia. With the exception of the one local student, all the students were enrolled in a business course. In addition, written testimony collected from 1 Australian teacher, who had studied and tutored in a Top-4 university in China, was included for her valuable perceptions. One of the Chinese students had studied both at a university in his native province for one semester as well as at an Australian university. His contribution was sought as a means by which to place into perspective reported difficulties of international students in adapting to the student lifestyle and learning environment in Australia. Any problems that the other students had experienced in Australia that were the same as those reported by this student in China could be removed, or at least acknowledged as not a uniquely ‘overseas student’ experience, because they might have ordinarily experienced the same problems in their home country had they not moved overseas. The Australian teacher’s perspectives on university life in China were checked for consistency with the comments of this student.

Table 1: Research Participants

Origin	Male	Female	Remarks	Total
South Korea	2	2		4
Mainland China	2	1	Participants came from Xiamen, a city of c. 600,000 inhabitants; Jiangsu Province, a more traditional area; and Liaoning Province, in the north. Includes 1 male with Chinese and Australian university experience and 1 who had attended a selective high school in Singapore.	3
Singaporean Chinese	1	0		1
Australia	0	2	Includes 1 Australian-trained teacher who had both studied and taught at a Chinese university	2
Vietnam	0	1	Had previously attended a selective high school in Singapore	1
TOTALS	5	6		11

Interviews

In-depth interviews lasting between 20 to 40 minutes were recorded in digital format. Transcripts of the interviews were later provided to the interviewees, who were able to clarify or correct any discrepancies. Questions were open-ended and based on a protocol of enquiry that sought to determine demographic data, the student’s educational experiences prior to studying in Australia, their experience of their Information Systems unit, and their study-related plans for the future. The use of open-ended questions allowed the temporary

suspension of preconceived ideas. This liberated the student to respond using their own perspective of their lived experience. The pre-determined questions were only utilised according to the natural flow of the student's responses. That is, the interview started with several planned questions and the respondent was allowed to navigate through the breadth and depth of their responses naturally. While it would appear that a protocol without the constraints of predefined questions would best suit this form of enquiry, it was determined that some sort of structure would be most useful in both keeping the interview relevant to the project's aims as well as providing a contingency measure in the case of an interview stalling.

Data Explication

The steps used for understanding the recorded material were adapted from Creswell (1998, p. 32):

1. Significant statements were noted and extracted from the interview transcriptions.
2. These statements were conceptualised into units of meaning, which were then grouped by theme.
3. The researchers created connections between relevant themes to provide a coherent 'narrative description.' Despite being composite, the narrative must take into account general as well as unique themes present in the data. Furthermore, in the narrative, the words of the individual participants are transformed into a research discourse in which theoretical concepts and ideas emerge (Groenewald 2004).

During this process, the researchers, to the best of their ability, avoided imposing their own subjectivity on the data by 'bracketing' out their personal views. Recurring themes were noted as an indication of which perceptions were shared by interviewees. Analysis also focused on the richness and depth of the responses in order to approach not just the essence of the meaning elicited, but also the reasons for its importance. Deep insights were thus revealed.

Narrative Description

This narrative can help uncover what it was like for the student participants as learners at Australian universities, taking into account their whole person and their educational experiences prior to studying in Australia.

Antecedents: Educational Experience in the Home Country

Primary School was Hard

Most Confucian-heritage students interviewed had an experience of primary school in their own country that was characterised by hard work and a feeling that as students, they were unimportant. Most did not have happy memories of learning. Their learning was exam-oriented and gave most importance to learning mathematics and their own national language. Learning English was also considered to be very important, but not quite as important as mathematics. Most of the time, the teacher wrote material on the board and the class simply

accepted it and committed it to memory. The teachers seemed to spend more time with the more capable students. Thus, it was considered almost futile for a 'normal' student to ask questions from the teacher.

High School was Hard

High school was generally a time of intense pressure, where students would have classes up to six days per week, starting as early as 7:30am and finishing at 6:00pm. In China, mathematics, the national language and English were again considered to be the most important subjects. Preparation for examinations could involve memorisation with understanding, or, if the material was very difficult, without understanding. The students reported that they were not required to write formal essays in high school. The only assessment events in China were end-of-semester examinations, where the student provided either short- or point-form answers. A student's final grade for a subject was completely based upon their performance in the final exam. A Korean interviewee remembered having 56 exams per year, and another reported having 'lot of tests everyday' in addition to exams. As a consequence, homework and assignments were considered unimportant, and thus a significant number of students would regularly copy assignment work from classmates. If homework was done without copying, it could mean working until midnight or later.

The Style of Learning in High School Used a Mostly Non-Western Approach

Unless the students had experienced a Western-style, or at least more interactive style of learning (for instance, in Singapore), asking questions during class time was considered selfish, time-wasting and an endeavour that posed a great risk of making them appear 'stupid'. For example, a Korean participant stated that students 'just have to memorise stuff, and they have to learn stuff off teachers. They can't ask why it is.' The Vietnamese interviewee noted that participation was limited to students answering questions put by the teacher, and in high school solving problems in front of the class, but students couldn't ask questions themselves because the class needed to be quiet. As a consequence, a significant level of collaboration on homework was engaged in, private tutors were even hired as a measure to help students succeed in high school, and sometimes parents helped. However, teachers in China were generally available for consultation after classes, and were happy to meet students in their offices to explain material.

University Education is Easier than High School

The students that experienced tertiary education in their home countries enjoyed a lifestyle and system of learning that was much easier than what they had as high school students. It was easy as a significant number of subjects still gave total weighting to final exams, and it was apparently accepted practice for some lecturers to supply both examination questions and answers prior to the examination, although this was not necessarily the case with top-20 universities. Thus, in terms of performance in exams, it did not matter if a student memorised after gaining understanding, or if they memorised without understanding.

Computer Studies were Considered Unimportant

Several interviewees reported very little exposure to computers. The student from Vietnam remembered visiting a computer lab once in her fifth grade in primary school: ‘My first time I touched a computer. We were in a queue and we got shown once how the computer worked. I didn’t even know where the start button was.’ By the end of high school her knowledge of even basic office applications was still very poor. Information Technology (IT) did not feature as an examinable senior high school subject in most countries, and was therefore considered to be of low importance. If IT was actually taught, it was highly practical in nature and based around productivity software, and only offered for a brief period in the middle years of high school. Even at university, Information Systems subjects were not offered as part of a common first-year business course load.

Experiences and Expectations of Students with Regards their University Study in Australia

The Student-teacher Relationship was Considered Very Important for Success at University

Students placed a great deal of importance on the relationship that developed with their lecturer, indicating that their quality and enjoyment of learning was directly connected with their perception of how close they felt with their teacher. A factor that appeared to significantly aid in developing a strong connection with students was the teacher’s ability to show interest in them by demonstrating some unexpected understanding and appreciation of aspects of their native language, culture and even food. One student came to an early conclusion that his teacher was ‘good’ because he knew something about the students’ cultural identity. Students also reported that they were more inclined to apply themselves in their study because they felt that a strong bond existed between them and their lecturer. Another factor that helped develop a good relationship with students was the lecturer’s sharing of various aspects of his life, especially the display of family pictures.

On the other hand, fear of a teacher was a reported factor that could prevent the development of a good bond, and thus learning experience, for the student. Furthermore, as may be expected with the 1-to-many relationship in a lecture, some students reported feeling much closer to the teacher than they perceived the teacher felt towards them.

Humour in Classes is Highly Desirable and Important

A variety of responses indicated that students considered the use of humour to be very important for their enjoyment of the learning experience. Some reported that it helped them learn better by aiding their memory, while others indicated that it assisted in maintaining attention during lectures. Some even admitted that it stopped them falling asleep, especially towards the end of a 3-hour lecture. There also seemed to be a connection between the overall effect of being in a class characterised by humour, and how close a student felt with their teacher. One student’s memory of certain jokes in class seemed to shape her overall positive memories of it.

Students Perceived Good Teaching as an Outflow of the Teacher's Commitment to their Learning Through the use of Techniques, Electronic Resources and Language-learning Methods

The students perceived that they were receiving good quality teaching because the lecturer wanted them to understand by using good explanations, examples, continuous revision and available technical resources. Some students appreciated the teacher's willingness to explain the meaning of unfamiliar words in the way that an English language teacher might.

However, while the more proficient in English understood this, they considered it to be something that could restrict the flow of the lesson. For example, the local Australian student, while quite understanding why attention was paid to language issues, sometimes felt as though the lectures were too slow for her liking: 'let's just get going'. This highlights the importance of balancing one's teaching style with the requirements and preferences of local as well as international students.

Western-style Interactive Learning can be Difficult to Adapt to Because of Persisting Cultural Conditioning

Despite their lecturer regularly inviting discussion during class, not all Confucian-heritage students were comfortable embracing interactive learning when it involved their direct contribution. Students were aware of this and perceived this to be because of the difficulty of overcoming cultural conditioning, and the persistent fear of being embarrassed by asking a question that might broadcast to the class and teacher that they had sub-normal scholastic capability. However, they did believe that they were more likely to ask questions, even after the class, if they had a strong bond or felt 'close' to their teacher. Some also realised that, after a period of time, for example, one year in Australia, they habituated and were able to participate like the Australians. Practice and socialising with Australian students helped.

The Students are Impressed when the Teacher's Behaviour is Exemplary in Potential Conflict or Embarrassing Situations

Students reported that they were impressed if their teacher behaved in a way that appeared to be virtuous and challenged them to higher ideals. For example, instead of showing anger, the teacher reasoned with misbehaving students in such a way they were motivated to never commit such a transgression. Other students that observed this may have been intrinsically motivated to behave, rather than from fear of punishment. Defending a student who was being teased also resulted in a similar response as the teacher seemed to really care about the students' academic success.

Students Educated in Singapore Exhibit the Most Westernised Views

The students who had either been born or educated in Singapore yielded general perceptions that were the most different from the rest of the national subgroups. This may be attributable to the effect on its education system of its protracted historical contact and business dealings with the West. For example, the Singaporean student stated that it was quite normal to ask questions in school: in primary school, students would raise their hands to ask questions or would post a question, whereas in high school they would 'just shout the question out' or

even challenge the teacher if they thought the teacher was wrong. This student found the other overseas students in his Australian tutorial classes ‘very, very quiet’ compared to his experience back home. Teaching styles in Singapore and Australia were perceived to be very similar and assignments were part of the assessment. However, students didn’t study very hard at high school, except for a minority, the ‘leng magren’, or bookworms.

Conclusion

Our phenomenological enquiry into the perceptions of first-year Confucian-heritage students towards their lived experience of studying at an Australian university yielded some findings that already appear in the literature but also deeper insights which have important implications for how we teach. Of particular importance was the relationship between the student and their teacher. A significant factor was the lecturer’s appreciation of the student’s culture. As one student put it, ‘I think you have some experience like Chinese style... so I am very comfortable with your teaching.’ The relationship was further enhanced by the lecturer’s willingness to provide good explanations, including explaining unfamiliar English words, and using humour in the class. In general, students were impressed by the teacher’s commitment to their learning and the teacher’s modelling of exemplary behaviour in dealing with problematic situations in class. Even where students were reluctant to participate actively in class because of persistent conditioning derived from their educational experiences back home, they were more likely to ask questions if they had a strong relationship with their teacher.

The research also revealed aspects of the students’ prior education which impact on their learning in Australia. One noteworthy finding was the importance of exams at the expense of assignments, and the fact that copying assignments and homework is commonplace. Lecturers must communicate to international students the significance of assignments in the Australian university context and be very explicit about the high percentage weightings that assignments carry. This may serve to discourage plagiarism and the habit of copying. Teachers need to be very proactive in encouraging class participation in order to help students relearn their classroom behaviour. This includes clarifying their expectations of the students’ role in the class. Lecturers also need to be aware that memorisation is not a bad thing in itself, as long as it is used as a tool towards understanding. For teachers of IT and Information Systems, an awareness that these subjects may be considered unimportant because no final year high-school subject exists for them in the student’s home country reminds us that teaching must take into account the diversity of our student population.

Finally, we must be wary of believing that all Confucian-heritage students are the same and we must question our initial perceptions. Stereotypes of their learning style may hide a major barrier to participation – as highlighted by one of our interviewees – that of language. This study shows that students are not homogenous in their approach to study and some, particularly those from Singapore, have been exposed to a much more Westernized education system. In addition, students who undertake part of their education at colleges in their home country which employ foreign teachers may have had exposure to Western teaching methods. However, despite these variations, Confucian influences are still strong in many Asian students. One Chinese participant stated that in her more traditional province Confucius’ teachings were still regarded highly at school, while another noted that Confucianism was

no longer taught in his region but ‘the philosophies, way of thinking, tradition is in our blood.’

In this study, using a phenomenological approach has resulted in a much more substantive form of student feedback than normally acquired through the standard survey techniques. Some other teachers may be encouraged to undertake a similar enquiry in order to check that perceptions from their students are in line with their own expectations. The method can be applied across the normal range of students, or targeted at a specific student group as this study has done. Certainly, being able to identify and embrace the student perspective can be used not just for understanding but also as a lever to facilitate positive outcomes. With respect to Confucian-heritage students, developing knowledge about their learning and better relationships with them is crucial in the Australian university sector, that relies so heavily upon the international student.

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