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This essay contains my reflections of working in a number of teaching and learning projects in the last decade at The Chinese University of Hong Kong. Our research confirms that the principles that inform scholarly teaching and learning, that are generally considered universal, also apply in a Hong Kong Chinese context. However, the implementation of those principles is subtly different. It is the nuance in the details about how these principles are enacted in practice that I will explore by considering how the concept of 'face' plays out in designing for learning and looking for evidence that such designs are effective.

## **Keywords**

Chinese culture, Engagement with cognitive challenge, 'Face', Risk-taking, Innovation timelines

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## **SoTL at Cultural Interfaces: Exploring Nuance in Learning Designs at a Chinese University**

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### **Abstract**

This essay contains my reflections of working in a number of teaching and learning projects in the last decade at The Chinese University of Hong Kong. Our research confirms that the principles that inform scholarly teaching and learning, that are generally considered universal, also apply in a Hong Kong Chinese context. However, the implementation of those principles is subtly different. It is the nuance in the details about how these principles are enacted in practice that I will explore by considering how the concept of 'face' plays out in designing for learning and looking for evidence that such designs are effective.

**Keywords:** Chinese culture; engagement with cognitive challenge; 'face'; risk-taking; innovation timelines

### **The Universality of Principles of Good Teaching**

When I came to The Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) in 2002, I was given the fascinating task of 'proving' that 'Western' active learning was relevant in the context of a Chinese university. I decided that an appropriate approach would be to investigate how the very best teachers at CUHK operated – what their beliefs about teaching and learning were and how these beliefs were translated into action. We conducted interviews with 18 teachers who had been awarded the Vice-Chancellor's Exemplary Teaching Award at CUHK. The details of the project are available in Kember et al. (2006), and Kember and McNaught (2007); a brief summary of the results is that the grounded analysis of the transcripts of the 18 interviews yielded 17 principles that clustered into five main areas – planning teaching, what is taught, how it is taught, motivating students, and developing oneself as an academic teacher. There is, of course, overlap between these areas, and between the principles themselves.

In order to see how universal our set was, we examined the literature on principles for good teaching from various countries. A few examples are: Australia (e.g. Ballantyne, Bain, & Packer, 1997; Ramsden et al., 1995); UK (e.g. Gibbs & Habeshaw, 2002; Elton & Partington, 1993); and the US (e.g. Bain, 2004; Chickering & Gamson, 1987). The stories and principles that were illustrated in this international literature showed very similar threads across a very diverse set of contexts. This project confirmed my belief from previous teaching experiences in Africa, Australia and New Zealand that there is a compelling argument to be made for viewing academics in reputable universities as an international community with respect to quality in teaching.

At CUHK our set of principles are the foundation of our Teaching and Learning Policy, and accepted as being sound. However, we are a Chinese university (90% local Hong Kong students, 10% mainland Chinese students and very few international students; the vast majority of teachers are Chinese), and the process of the enactment of these principles

has its own nuances. In order to understand this, it is important to recognize some broad features of Chinese culture.

### **The Paradox of the Chinese Learner**

There is a tendency to talk about Asian learners as if they were part of a homogeneous group. This is clearly no more sensible than talking about Western learners in the same way. Watkins and Biggs, in their seminal books on the Chinese learner (1996) and the Chinese teacher (2001), illustrated the complexity of cross-cultural observation. They described the 'paradox' of the Chinese learner: despite being educated in large classes, within a rigid curriculum with a predominance of norm-referenced assessment, Chinese learners often outperform Western students. The general culture outside the classroom impacts on academic learning. Briefly, these cultural impacts are:

- *Memorization and understanding.* Chinese learners use memorization as a strategy to explore meaning and not just as a reproductive process.
- *Effort versus innate ability.* The emphasis within Chinese culture is that effort is paramount and so all students have a reason to strive.
- *Intrinsic versus extrinsic motivation.* These are not mutually exclusive; pragmatic rewards reinforce interest and vice versa.
- *General patterns of socialization.* Respect for elders, groups norms and the need to invest time in learning are emphasized from early days in Chinese culture and hence repetitive school tasks are not seen as boring.
- *A social, rather than individual, view of achievement motivation.* The centrality of family in Chinese culture provides a social framework which encourages all children to succeed and give face to the family.

Chinese teachers are able to work with these cultural characteristics to design orchestrated environments within which students can achieve deep levels of understanding. The 'paradox' only exists when Chinese classrooms are viewed with totally Western filters. This is not to say that Chinese pedagogy is superior to that used in the West. There are clearly problems with the rigidity and pressure that exists in schools in Hong Kong and the Chinese mainland. However, changes need to be made with an understanding of these cultural factors. A number of the interviews with our CUHK teachers contained comments about the effects of the school system on students who enter university and how these teachers assist their students to adjust to new ways of working.

"Students who grow up in Hong Kong, however, are generally frightened as they are so used to having model answers given to them in their secondary school training. "You just give me the model answers, tell me all about the author and I will memorize, so that I can regurgitate during exams". There were times when students were really frightened and dissatisfied with the fact that I had not given them the absolute model answers. So, it takes rather a long time to convince the students that the teacher is not there to tell me everything or hand down knowledge. It is I myself who need to think independently, analyse, discover and eventually understand." (Lo Wai Luen – Chinese Literature)

### **Enacting Authentic Learning in a Chinese Context**

I have always been a fan of learning designs that involve authentic tasks – the use of cases, multidimensional problems, etc. – that are solved in some form of collaborative

fashion – teams, groups, etc. While there were some learning activities of this sort at CUHK a decade ago, this was often only in higher years or in postgraduate courses. First-year courses were seen as needing to be didactic for teaching the ‘basic’ vocabulary and conventions of the discipline. Achieving a balance between providing information in a form that students can use to build their own understandings, and designing tasks where students also develop skills in independent learning is challenging, but I believe that the process of honing independent-learning skills must begin early in degree studies – certainly in first year.

One extensive study at CUHK of one of the first implementations of first-year case-based learning in the Sciences collected student data from examination results, the Study Process Questionnaire (Biggs, Kember, & Leung, 2001), a course-end survey, and a focus-group meeting; teachers also kept reflective journals. The findings were that students demonstrated a motivation to be able to solve practical problems; however, they showed an unwillingness to take up a personal responsibility for learning; they lacked the confidence (were “frightened”) to be truly independent learners. (McNaught et al., 2005; McNaught et al., 2007). The ‘art’ of collaborative learning design in a Chinese context is to scaffold students so that they are supported while trying out new learning strategies.

A number of CUHK teachers have now established case-based learning in foundation courses in science and business discipline areas. While these courses were a new experience for students coming from school education in Hong Kong, they engaged well with the problems. However, the ‘rules’ for group work were much more structured than I would normally use in an Australian class. In Hong Kong, one group of students can debate with another group but it is too confronting to expect individual students to disagree in a public situation. The teacher needs to plan ahead and carefully structure the ways in which multiple perspectives can be comfortably explored. The end result is the same – good engagement with authentic, open-ended tasks – but the strategies are subtly different.

Perhaps surprisingly, for a campus-based university, students at CUHK value interactive online activities and see them as leading to developing desired learning outcomes (Kember et al., 2010; McNaught, Lam, & Cheng, 2012). Indeed, the more exposure they have to interactive activities online, the more positive they are that these are more conducive to learning than access to static information such as notes and PowerPoints (Lam et al., 2011, 2010). However, they value information when (sadly, all too often) it will improve their chances of getting good grades. Like all students they ‘read’ the system; if reproductive assessment strategies are requested, they will work to that end (Ho, Lam, & McNaught, 2009).

The same findings emerge from studies on online forums. We have done a number of studies in this respect using a mixed-method approach – analysing forum postings with the SOLO taxonomy (Biggs & Collis, 1982), collecting perception data from both students and teachers, and looking at log data. Overall, students are happy to engage in online communication tasks if they are well-structured, have meaningful (to them) topics, and do not involve direct interpersonal conflict (McNaught, 2011a; McNaught, Cheng, & Lam, 2006).

### **The Chinese Concept of ‘Face’**

The teaching and learning culture at CUHK is a conservative one. In all universities where the majority of teachers are from a Confucian Chinese heritage (Bond & Hwang,

1986; Fan, 2000), we need to acknowledge the Chinese concept of 'face' in implementing innovation. Some of the issues relating to concerns about being on public (or even semi-private) record reflect the concept of face. The positive side of face is care for the other, a gentle politeness (Brown & Levinson, 1987). The negative side of face is avoidance of conflict at all costs and extreme unwillingness to take risks. A long-term psychologist at CUHK, whose decades of research has been based on understanding Hong Kong Chinese culture, Michael Bond (1991) described the constraints of face in these terms:

"Given the importance of having face and of being related to those who do, there is a plethora of relationship politics in Chinese culture. ... the use of external status symbols, sensitivity to insult, ... the sedulous avoidance of criticism, all abound, and require considerable readjustment for someone used to organizing social life by impersonal rules, frankness, and greater equality." (p. 59)

### **The Timeline for Innovation**

The stories of several of our excellent, and often innovative, CUHK teachers are noted above. In these books (Kember et al., 2006; Kember & McNaught, 2007) and many other studies from CUHK, there is no evidence of a discipline bias, and we have no evidence at this stage to think that discipline area should be a particular factor affecting adoption of interactive strategies for teaching and learning. Clearly, at CUHK there is a 'comfort zone' where many teachers across the University feel confident in trying new ideas and feel rewarded when they do. This has been one of the joys of working at CUHK.

However, at CUHK we have found that innovations that are adopted quite rapidly elsewhere take longer to become embedded in the 'normal' teaching and learning repertoire. Two of our projects – introducing a lecture-recording system (McNaught et al., 2012) and supporting learning designs with social media (McNaught et al., 2011) – have had very long lead-in times with many teachers waiting till others 'mainstreamed' the innovation, thus leading to a 'wait and watch' impasse. In Hong Kong, risk-taking is more threatening than in so-called 'Western' nations, and failure has more serious consequences in terms of perceptions of self and one's reputation.

Teachers' confidence flourishes with satisfying prior personal experiences of innovation and this usually means having access to good support – in terms of professional development, technical support and adequate time. Feeling rewarded also inevitably involves appropriate institutional personnel policies. In all work in learning design, the challenge is to build in strategies – discussions, negotiations, adjustments – that nudge all students towards lifelong growth and exploration at an optimal pace. Minimizing any sense of threat, while gently pushing the boundaries of both teachers' and students' comfort zones, is necessary in all contexts but assumes an even higher priority in a Chinese context.

#### *Acknowledgement*

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