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Communication is key: a study of the development of communication key skills in China

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Abstract

Different countries offer alternative curricula around what might be designated language, literacy and/or communication. This paper focuses on the latter which has typically been associated with vocational education and often labelled a 'key' or 'core' skill that forms part of a wider set of life and employability skills. In recent years, as China has emerged as a global economy, education has been significant in its policy and development. This research explores staff and student responses to the introduction of a key skills communication course in three Chinese further education vocational colleges. The initiative was prompted by research in China which had suggested that communication is important not just for education (Ye and Li 2007) but also for employability, and that the ability to communicate effectively could be instrumental in individuals' success and development (Tong and Zhong 2008). It explores what communication key skills might mean in a Chinese context and questions notions of transferability and of competence and performance in communication. It analyses how motivation could affect learner success and the relationship of pedagogy to curriculum and, finally, it considers how communication might be an element in the longer-term social and political development of critical literacies.

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Introduction

Economic reform and greater commercial interaction have produced significant change in China during the last two decades and have affected not just industrial infrastructures but also society and culture (Kitchen and Schultz 2001). Integration

within world markets, for example, prompted a review of the Chinese educational curriculum and associated standards in part because Chinese employers as well as international companies had become increasingly concerned by the skills' level of their employees (Chen 2001; Tong and Zhong 2008; Cheung and Leung 2015). One of the key designated areas was 'communication' which was defined as:

Vital social and methodological competence[s] for daily life and professional development. (Chinese Occupational Skills Test Authority 2007, p3)

Communication and indeed key skills may no longer have the same currency in the UK and other western countries as previously, but this is not the case in China. Within this article, the notion of communication key skills will be interrogated and analysed with a focus, firstly, on how to specify communication key skills in the Chinese context. Secondly, what are the attitudes of Chinese teachers and students towards communication key skills, and, thirdly, how significant are pedagogy and curriculum to promoting communication skills in China and making them relevant to the world of work?

The wider research on which this study is based involved the introduction of a key skills communication course into three Chinese further education vocational colleges. The course was a compulsory component but not part of the students' core qualification and assessment. This article explores the impact of what they studied, its potential significance for employability and how it might affect future development, socially and politically. It is, however, acknowledged, that communication skills' acquisition can be affected by students' prior learning experiences (Li 2008), and that this presented a challenge to both teachers and students grounded in traditional Chinese transmissive methods which emphasise 'knowledge acquisition' (Wang 2002; Gu 2003; East 2015) and focus on learning that is 'classroom, teacher and textbook-centred' (Wang 2002, p73). Harkin et al. (2000) pointed out that communication skills, 'cannot be developed through didactic pedagogy' (p6), although Reece and Walker (2000) suggested that the competence outcomes usually associated with vocational education require 'the careful sequencing of learning activities to shape behaviour' (p123). Although the debate around whether communication should be delineated as either or both performance or competence is historic in the West, in China it still has resonance (Halliday 1975; McCroskey 1981):

Communication competence must be distinguished from communication

performance. Neither is seen as a reliable predictor of the other. (McCroskey, 1981, p2)

This study addresses the implications of some of these issues within a Chinese context. In doing so, it also raises questions around collaborative learning communities (Gillies 2007) and examines how an enhancement of communication skills might develop people's ideas about themselves, their employment prospects and their place in society.

Literature Review

Gao and Bao (2004) identified the primary purpose of Chinese vocational education as cultivating graduates with high level skills and competences. This, they claimed, was a fundamental requirement of vocational education and its mission for the world of work. However, although competence and skills' development have routinely been seen as pathways to educational reform and professional identity (Holmes 2015), a recurring criticism of competence-based education in China concerns its alleged utilitarian tendencies (Qing 2008). Qing criticised market-orientated principles and vocational criteria on the basis that they might undermine more broadly based general knowledge although researchers such as Zhang (2008) dispute whether competence-based education and general education are as diametrically opposed as this suggests. Wang and Cheng (2000), however, had offered a compromise position when pointing out that higher vocational education should enhance not only applied skills and competence but also theoretical understanding, implying that the two should be seen as complementary. Competence has also been seen more broadly as failing to meet employer expectations (Jackson 2014), and this is significant in relation to communication skills and vocational education. Communication, it is argued, should be more person-centred in theory and practice (Motschnig and Nyki, 2014) and more intercultural in its approach to employability (Yoshida, 2013).

Whilst much literature does define communication as competence (Chen 2001; Tong and Zhong 2008); some, although still alluding to 'skills', identifies its development as a more integrated and performative capacity (Littleford et al. 2004; Silver 2005). The concept of 'competence' therefore remains a controversial issue in

the field of learning and communication. Some literature has criticised the notion of 'key skills' and of competence-based approaches as being fundamentally flawed philosophically (Lum 1999; Mulder et al. 2007). Hyland (1997), for example, argued that competence has no 'rationally justifiable philosophical foundation,' (p491) because it cannot 'incorporate any intellectual process' (p494) and posited that a competence-based model will not promote students' learning since it is underpinned by 'technicist and managerialist assumptions' (p492). Competence especially with regard to 'communication' has been criticised for 'terminological confusion' (Winterton et al. 2005, p.12) although, in the 1980s, the UK Further Education Unit (FEU) had defined competence as the 'possession and development of sufficient skills... [for] successful performance in life roles' (FEU 1984, p3). Mulder et al. (2007) also suggested that competence was necessary for 'successful and effective job performers' (p69), although Hyland (1997) claimed competence cannot carry the 'weight of wide-ranging knowledge, understanding and value... [and] cannot accommodate the ethical and epistemological bases of professional practice' (Hyland 1997, p492). Lum (1999) extended this critique in a way that is relevant to communication skills in China since he indicated that competence assumes 'profoundly naive assumptions about language,' and a 'disregard for the metaphysical complexity of human action' (Lum 1999, pp416-7). Despite the many criticisms of the competence model, however, it does have some significance for Chinese education since it focuses on the process of learning and thus links learning and practice. Also, from a bureaucratic and political perspective, outcomes which purport to identify competence, clearly stated and assessed, are attractive because they appear to indicate a standard which has been achieved and can be demonstrated to both examiners and employers. The American model, which defines competence as a 'composite of skills, knowledge, attitudes or traits... [and] a set of inputs that influence behaviour' (Grzeda 2005, p533), refers to 'independent variables', in contrast to the UK model that categorises 'dependent outcomes' (Grzeda 2005). As a consequence, a broader approach to competence education is appealing to some, and the Chinese writers Wen and Ma (2007) endorse its combination of skills, knowledge and cognition.

Much of the literature on competence-based education does, however, categorise communication as a set of definable skills (Littleford et al. 2004; Silver

2005) and is inclined to shift the emphasis from an integration of communicative competence with cognate performance towards an assessment of measurable skills with behavioural aspects. However, this narrow focus undermines the notion of communicative 'performance' which should perhaps be considered both as a 'complex output of a variety of psychological processes' and also as 'a cooperative' and 'socially-situated' endeavour (Fussell and Kreuz 1998, pp3-7). Several other studies have highlighted the importance of social skills for effective communication performance (Hargie et al. 1994; Spence 2003). More recent studies have, however, indicated the value of that being collaborative discourse as opposed to or as well as online social networking (Lu, 2014). In their work, Hargie et al. (1994) had identified communication skills as 'a set of goal-directed, inter-related, situational-appropriate social behaviours which can be learned and which are under the control of the individual' (p2). The requirement to be 'situational appropriate' emphasises the importance of context and interactivity in communication. Price (1996) had also highlighted this, delineating communication as:

Activity in which symbolic content is not merely transmitted but exchanged between human agents, who interact within a shared situational and /or discourse context. (Price 1996, p399)

This notion of a 'dynamic social process' (Gerbner 1993, p15) stresses not just the interactive aspect of communication but also its fluidity and unpredictability. However, there is also literature linking the communication process to 'cognitive operations' (Griffin 2000; Hargie and Dickson 2004). Wyer and Gruenfeld (1995, cited by Hargie and Dickson 2004), for example, recommended seeing communication as an interpersonal cognitive process and indicated that interpretation and meaning are crucial for effective communication and should be seen as significant to communication pedagogy. Finally, communication has also been seen as an affective process which occurs as 'bodily experiences, expressions and feelings-physiological responses to a stimulus, rather than thoughts' (Kiely and Armistead 2004, p27). This suggests that personality is significant in communication responses and further emphasises the importance of cultural context.

This section has discussed the concept of communication and of competence, positioning both historically in keeping with the Chinese context. It has examined the communication process, emphasising the complexity of the social, cognitive and

affective issues that might influence it. Communication ability is, as Emanuel (2007) has pointed out, 'the vehicle that allows us to recall the past, think in the present, and plan for the future' (p2). It tells our stories, allowing us to articulate our lives and plan our futures. This has resonance both in educational and work-based environments and within the field of critical literacies. In China, it could be inferred that communication key skills might permit students to develop their understanding of the world, their employment and activity within it, and to extend their participation socially, culturally and politically.

Methodology

This research focused on the implications of communication key skills in the Chinese context; the attitudes of Chinese teachers and students towards communication skills, and the significance of pedagogy and curriculum for promoting communication skills in China. Three vocational education colleges in Beijing (B, R and S) initiated the new programme, and nine teachers from across the three colleges participated in the implementation process and were members of a focus group which met four times during the course of the study in order to review progress and share approaches to learning. Student participation was elicited through class observation and interviews during the two terms of the course. According to Lankshear and Noble (2004) observation can 'provide deep insights into social practice events and processes' (p219). Detailed field notes were taken during observation, focusing on pedagogical approaches, activities and interaction, and these provided a stimulus for the interview questions. The interviews were semi structured and intended to reveal relevant attitudinal data. They were audio recorded and subsequently transcribed. The student interviews were conducted in small groups of two or three immediately after every observed class, and the staff interviews, which were one-to-one, took place during each teacher's next available free time after the observed session. All parties gave their written consent to involvement in the research and were informed of the right to withdraw at any time (BERA, 2011).

The case studies (Stake 2000) and qualitative research were informed by phenomenology (Schutz, 1972, Heidegger 1975; Ferguson 2006) and the notion of 'illuminative evaluation' (Parlett and Hamilton 1972). Phenomenology encourages a

focus on perception and experience. Schutz (1972) highlighted, however, the significant link between an individual's 'in-order-to motivation' and the meaning of individual constructs. He pointed out that:

The subjective meaning-context which is the in-order to motive must first be seen and taken for granted as an already constituted object in itself before any venture in deeper levels is undertaken (Schutz, 1972, p130)

This statement puts an emphasis not only on the individuals themselves but on the relationship between individuals and a specific context and provides a link with discourse about the experience of change. Parlett (1989) when describing illuminative evaluation similarly associated innovation and context:

It should not set out to 'test' so much as to understand and document an innovation, examining its background, its organisation, its practices, and its problems, in addition to its outcomes. It should constitute a thoroughgoing and detailed exploration of the innovation-in-action. (Parlett, 1989, p187)

This research therefore explored the experience and perspectives of participating teachers and students within their specific Chinese context, and the following weaves an account of their stories.

Findings and discussion

In China, the introduction of the new communications course was challenging. Teacher Anm explains:

It takes too much effort to adapt to the position of change; both the students and I have to try to get used to our new roles. It is too difficult to guide the students in their practical action. I find it is much easier just to talk to them. I cannot change my role overnight. It will take a long time. (Teacher Anm, College B)

Both the teacher and her students were used to traditional didactic approaches with students being 'containers' ready to be 'filled' by the teachers (Freire 2002, p72). They could not immediately adapt and be participative learners. This acknowledgement is significant because it indicates that the teachers recognised the complexity of developing communication skills. Communication, it was felt, relates to students' motivation and self-awareness and their 'intention, control and awareness' (Hargie et al. 1994, p16). Changing students' attitudes would have to be relevant to 'their expectations for their learning' (Tem, B). The aim of an exercise in College B involved interviews and peer evaluation within a simulated work-based environment:

(The activity) includes participation in the learning activities and social practices. The assessment should be integrative, three-dimensional, in-depth and concrete so as to help the students' competence build step by step. (Teacher Jam, B)

Here Teacher Jam demonstrates awareness that communications teaching and learning are linked to social engagement and practical application and should be assessed accordingly. In another exercise, she wanted not only to break away from the limitations of the textbook but also of the classroom and therefore used the college canteen as a case study. She showed an understanding of both student-centred learning and outcomes-based assessment when creating a task intended to motivate students through its relevance and authenticity. Similarly, Teacher Anm had a 'car sale' workshop because she thought it would appeal to students:

I have to know my students well, know what interests them. (Teacher Anm, B)

She had embraced the 'importance of the emotional and personal side of learning' (Light and Cox 2001 p74), and sought to identify interesting learning activities. As a result, the student response was positive, one said:

I think the course is very practical; it improves my participation in learning. (Tang, B)

Another explained:

The car dealing workshop is the one that impressed me most. (Qing, B)

The message here represents an important conceptual change: Anm's new perspective is that teachers have to understand their students and identify activities that will appeal to them in a practical and relevant way. This accords with Gibbons and Gray (2002) who pointed out that being sensitive to a student's background and context would help 'trigger experience'. Anm described how the new learning approach had changed her students from what she described as 'naughty boys' into 'good students'. However, when designing activities to achieve these learning outcomes, teachers had to spend more time on learning resources. The teachers in College B indicated how challenging it was to do this. Their comments support the notion expressed by Harden and Crosby (2000), which emphasised that teachers have new roles in a flexible and student-centred environment, and reinforce Gu and Benson's (2015) recognition of the influence of agency and social context on adaptation and teacher identity.

Earlier it was suggested that the development of communication skills depends on the extent to which an individual is involved in socially interactive communication processes (Kukulu et al. 2006). Evidence from this study indicates that communication is also closely linked with individual motivation, beliefs and attitudes (Price 1996; Gillies 2007). One student explained:

Skilled communication can mediate interpersonal relationships. It can make people feel better, it happens everywhere, all the time. For example, we have lunch in our canteen very often. Before, I just handed over my card and told the staff what I wanted. Now I like to say 'hello' with a smile on my face. The staff members look happier to serve me. It is small thing, but it brought me a good feeling. (Shi, B)

This may be minor, but it implies the development of social awareness, as well as relevant and tacit knowledge: 'small things' matter. Another student thought the value of the course lay in the fact that it taught what was outside the textbook, in other words individual participation and personal involvement beyond regular formalised and prescribed parameters:

When you take part in that situation, you can feel something; you can get a better understanding of the concepts and knowledge involved, more than you could get from a textbook. (Feng, B)

This implies affectual changes that Feng could 'feel something' as well as having a 'better understanding', indicating that processes of cognition and of personal internalisation are taking place. Teacher Xum elucidated:

Students have to gain understanding from their own practices; their own perceptions, their own feelings. It was not like before, when the teacher did everything. (Teacher Xum, B)

Teachers now realised that understanding is generated through engagement and interactive learning. One stated this very clearly:

The aim of teaching, ultimately, is non-teaching. It is to lead student learning through their doing. In fact, it is this that enables them to learn how to learn. To teach students in communication through their communicative activities – that is the way of student-centred learning. It's killing two birds with one stone. It is the best way to achieve the goals of education. (Teacher Gom, B)

Here it can be inferred that the implementation of the communications course had led staff to view students in a different light, particularly regarding their ability to learn and understand. Teachers had started to realise that interaction makes learners modify and reshape their communication behaviours and attitudes. The focus was now on how students learn, and how to design experiences that stimulate students'

interest and engender active learning. Teachers felt the necessity to know students better, to understand their needs and design learning activities relevant to their interests. There were a number of examples in College B where this was done successfully.

Fullan (1991) identified several key factors that helped teachers adapt to change. One is a clear vision of what is required to 'permeate(s) the organisation with value, purpose, and integrity for both the what and how of improvement' (p81).

Teacher Ding in College R explained the extent of the challenge:

Traditionally, the teacher's talking dominates the class hour from beginning to end. We all grew up with that at school. . . We sat in ranks and listened to them. . . There was very little interaction between the teachers and students. (Teacher Ding, R)

Through the implementation of the communications course, a belief emerged that a more collaborative learning environment would facilitate meaningful activities and encourage more productive learning experiences. Research has demonstrated the complexity of the teaching and learning process in communication studies (Price 1996; Hargie and Dickson 2004), and the value of teachers' addressing students' construction of social meaning through different contexts. In this situation, communication is not seen simply as a competence to be demonstrated and measured but as something more fundamental. Some students in College R did, however, view it functionally as an attribute to be demonstrated and as an employability skill. Effective communication, it was felt, would improve their career prospects and performance:

We must develop our capacity to behave interactively. Learning the knowledge is not enough. We must also learn how to communicate it to other people in the workplace. Equipped with these things, we could occupy an invincible position in society. (Meng, R)

This Chinese student uses the phrase 'invincible position' to describe how important he considered the role communication skills might play in his life. In the current Chinese socio-economic climate, he associated his future with their enhancement.

Another student also indicated this:

Living, as we were, in a mini-society, what we learned in the college is very important for our future. Since communication skills are about how to deal competently with others, they are very important. I believe that my excellent communication skills could help me to show better performance. (Li, R)

These students think that proficiency in communication skills will benefit them personally and professionally. Indeed, the second respondent indicates through his 'excellent' communication skills that he has already internalised this notion. For those attending College R who might previously have thought themselves 'failures' because they did not attend university, the course appears to have improved their self-assurance, given them a sense of purpose and worth. A third student pointed out:

I feel much better than before. As teacher Xiao said, we should be brave in facing up to reality, to those challenges as solid as the Tai mountain. . . Now, I look forward to presenting in public, at the front of the class. (Jiamei, R)

The message conveyed here also implies raised self-esteem and the enhancement of confidence, as well as contextual skills. Jian further explained:

Some detail things in communication I had never thought about them before. . . One class which was focused on appearance and euphemism made a great impression on me. . . I mean the skills can be used directly in life. (Jian, R)

Typically, the Chinese have educated their children in collaborative skills and creativity through social and extra-curricular activities such as music, handwriting, painting and game-playing. This was in accordance with the belief that environment, co-operation and ritual are influential with respect to an individual's behaviour. Contemporary Chinese society, however, is eroding this familial process, and education is beginning to be seen as a significant alternate for the establishment of social values and cultural mores as well as for the development of new ways of thinking and interacting.

Students in College R expanded on the benefits of the new communications course. Typical of this was the respondent who said:

Communication skills are not only the skills to use language as a means of communicating with others. They also help you to perceive others. The same discourse, in another's conversation, can often have many different interpretations. (Hong, R)

Evidence here supports the idea identified by a number of researchers, that of the complexity and social interactive nature of communication processes (Gerbner 1993; Hargie et al. 1994). This student's acknowledgement of difference and of alternative meanings may, however, have wider implications in China for social and political discourse, alternative literacies and for new ways of communicating and thinking.

Another student thought that the communication process needed to involve 'cognitive activity':

Participation in communication should include two important factors: one is practice, the other is active thinking. we have to consider seriously the topic that the teacher has provided – that is, make our thinking logical and objective. This may help us to improve our ability to think logically in our communication activities. (Ling, R)

These students recognise the complexity and potential of communication as a result of their course and their own role socially and in work as 'active thinkers'. Tan also commented:

This course is linked with our living closely...I mean it is the sort of thing you can use unconsciously. It is an indirect, tacit knowledge... Or, you can say, this is a social course, a kind of life experience... it enables us to understand others well and get along better with them, allowing us to express our thoughts and feelings accurately and properly. This helps us achieve our purposes successfully. A positive attitude is very important; this course enables us to communicate with others using a positive attitude. (Tan, R)

This again suggests that communication is closely linked with knowledge and understanding of social attitudes and values (Hyland 1999; Van Loo and Toolsema 2005).

As early as 1974, Becvar contended that collaborative learning helps students develop effective communication. Evidence from this study suggests students can be encouraged to be more aware of engagement and openness despite these being relatively novel concepts for Chinese students. One student in College S thought that she had gained 'real experience' during this course. She said:

The most significant benefit for me is that the course aims to promote our competence rather than to memorise conventional rules and regulations. I can get a real experience of communication which makes me feel much more confident now. (Lili, S)

'Competence' here is seen as an active process, and the importance of interaction with others was a dominant topic throughout interviews:

The most important change in this class is that the teaching model is not like the traditional one. We learn through practice actively in the group. It is not as stiff as a poker. I do like this model very much. (Ming, S)

Students perceived the importance of collaborative learning and of communication in practice. They thought that it helped them to understand ways in which to co-operate with others and how to be part of a learning community. These were very positive

outcomes for the communications course in College S. Teacher Wu recognised the complex nature of competence and the need to give space and time for students within the classroom. His attitude reinforces that of Stavenga et al. (2006) who placed great emphasis on facilitating students' involvement, including through the physical environment:

We need to change class patterns. Before it had been students sitting in ranks, the teacher stand at the front, his textbook open whilst he spoke. That was the original situation. Now, we are organised in dynamic groups, students sit face-to-face, in groups. (Teacher Wu, S)

Mr Wu suggests here that collaborative learning has changed the class into a learning community (Kilpatrick et al. 1999), but it can also be inferred that power has been transferred or at the least shared. Foucault (1980), who explored power both organisationally and as a process, describes power of this kind:

In thinking of the mechanisms of power, I am thinking rather of its capillary form of existence, the point where power reaches into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies and inserts itself into their action and attitudes, their discourses, their learning processes and everyday lives. (Foucault 1980, p.39)

Mr Wu recognises the potential of this and also determined that using reflection and evaluation could promote 'context interaction' (Burke and Dunn 2006). He organised a 'job' interview which students evaluated:

Wu: Ok! Now, could you please comment on S4's performance? From an employers' point of view firstly? (He nodded his head to members of group two).

S7: I thought her performance was quite good. She could keep smiling while she answered the questions. Her manner was very proper throughout the whole interview process.

S8: Additionally, she kept eye contact with the interviewers; that's very important for a successful interviews.

S6: Yes! I agree.

S11: But, I think her response to the question of 'What was your best achievement during your study' was not satisfactory. You see, you told us you had some part-time work experience during college years; however, you didn't mention anything about your work experience but instead gave an example how you arranged a duty schedule for your class mate to clean your classroom. I think the interviewer who asked this question wanted to know some details of your performance in your part-time job but you didn't catch her meaning. (During S11 speaking, S4 nodded her head and kept writing notes)

Here, firstly, evaluation allows learners to 'clarify and take ownership of the need to learn as defined by the intended learning outcomes' (Race 2005, p95). Secondly, it indicates that collaborative learning provides an opportunity for a student to 'reflect on what happened during the task with the other group members' (Prichard et al. 2006, p123). Students indicated the merits of the performance as well as criticising it,

and the teacher reinforced students' judgements. Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006) point out this process helps students, both observed and observers, to construct meaning and understanding from 'feedback messages' (p210). Lili commented:

The conventional course highlighted the information in the textbook which one might use to deal with the examination. This course is different; it is examined by our classmates and our teachers. It stresses practicality, the real abilities . . . used in communication. (Lili, S)

This is especially important for communication skills' development in China because the objective of the assessment here is not solely to give a score for a student's performance but to engage students and teachers 'in critical consideration of their subjective relation to knowledge by positioning them as knowing subjects' which involves them in 'drawing on and challenging their experiences, understandings, values and identities' (Burke 2002, cited by Burke and Dunn 2006, p221). This contrasts with the traditional Chinese examination regime that focuses primarily on testing students' recall of textbook knowledge. Teacher Wu explained:

The assessment has changed. It is not only about the method but also the content. Students' performances were evaluated in groups; they have to show what they can do after study. The students comment and learn from each other. (Teacher Wu, S)

It is notable that he designates assessment as not only an opportunity to measure competence but also as a performance, indicating that both are significant, and that outcomes are not only a product but also a process of learning.

During the class observation of an interview simulation, one student commented:

Teacher, I think this task should have been given to us last week; we could have prepared more details. . . Like our résumés. (Teacher Wu nodded his head).

What happened here deserves comment. The student offered his suggestion to the teacher in the middle of the class. Chinese students are usually trained to obey their teachers without question (Gu 2008). However, this student explained:

This course is taught in a very different way, the teacher going to us, not like before when teachers looked far away from us. He looked very flexible and very close to us. (Cheng, S)

This suggests that, within the College S classroom, there was evidence of the more distributed notion of power and shared responsibility for learning mentioned earlier. Replacing teacher autocracy with a more egalitarian collaborative approach to learning is a relatively radical phenomenon in China and one which potentially has implications not just for education but also for the workplace and the Chinese social

and political landscape (Grabinger et al. 1997; McGill and Brockbank 2004). Mr Wu commented:

Effective learning is about whether the students can gain real understanding. The teachers have to modify their angle to think and encourage the students. . the more they participate; that is, do, the more they will understand. This is their reward. (Teacher Wu, S)

Students felt that they were not only more confident in speaking publicly but also more aware of how they interacted with others. In addition, they enjoyed opportunities to engage in evaluation and reflection on their own and peers' performances. They liked this course because they had a new, closer relationship with their teachers. The teacher was considered to be a team member, and students were no longer afraid to challenge his or her authority in class.

Conclusion

Both teachers and students recognised the significance of communication and identified it as comprising what could be termed 'key skills'. They also appreciated the value of a more complex and nuanced communicative competence and performance. However, both teachers and students also acknowledged that development was multifaceted and would only occur through interaction and diverse experiences in different contexts. Traditional didactic teaching with little student participation, it was felt, did not offer this. Analysis of the concept of communication and of key skills that emerged from the case studies identified not only employability skills but also cognitive abilities. Students perceived themselves as individuals with the capacity to interact with and influence others. They thought that the acquisition of communication skills would help them to be more adaptable and confident, and to integrate more effectively within social and professional communities, thereby generating more varied and challenging discourse. They heard and exercised their voices for the first time in an environment which, it was believed, also encouraged students' social and cultural development as well as their communicative expertise. This has resonance in China and accords with Wang (2006) who highlighted the connection between individual communication skills and self-realisation, motivation, attitudes and values. It reinforces the complexity of these skills as being more than simple practical skills or measurable competences which can be learned through

mechanistic training programmes. Effective communication, it can be inferred, also has the scope to offer alternative solutions and address the challenges socially and politically of change as well as the new demands of employability and globalisation.

Evidence from the case studies showed that the teachers and students valued the use of collaborative learning in the new communication course. It increased participation in class, and, as the course progressed, students perceived that they developed more confidence and a greater willingness to become involved in interactive and reflective learning. They gained understanding through experience: 'You can feel something; you can get a better understanding of the concepts and knowledge involved'. Another explained: 'The course aims to promote our competence rather than to memorise those conventional rules and regulations. I can get a real experience of communication which makes me feel much more confident now'. Evidence drawn from the case study in College S supports the use of a collaborative approach to learning. Students felt 'more confident in their contact with others' within the small groups, and this enabled them 'to understand others well and get along better with them'. Students spoke of overcoming shyness, being more assertive, increased confidence and responsiveness. They were better able to consider others and thought that this brought benefits, not just for interpersonal relationships, but also for their future professional and vocational lives. These results corroborate findings which conclude that interactive group learning promotes flexibility and adaptability (Morreale and Backlund 2002; Ortega et al. 2006; Webb et al. 2009) both of which are significant in a climate of change although it is worth noting that such engagement requires careful tutorial management (Robinson et al. 2015).

Also of interest is the fact that students perceived the assessment as part of the learning process. They found that formative assessment helped them to achieve more highly, often through the sharing of knowledge, peer evaluation as well as tutorial feedback. The case studies also showed that, where this was working well, assessment tasks were integrated with learning outcomes, and the assessment process itself promoted understanding of context and of the knowledge and competences required, allowing students not only to acquire information, but also to participate purposefully. However, effective integration of competence, context and

assessment seemed to depend on pedagogical design and management which emphasises the importance of the role of the teacher. Collaborative activity also provided a climate in which students shared and facilitated each other's learning and demonstrated the potential for Chinese students, within a suitable learning environment, to learn in new ways and develop communication skills despite prior experiences of teacher transmission and textbook tyranny. Students saw the benefits of a different approach and perceived it as a democratising process whereby they could even question the teacher. Teachers for their part also welcomed this and did not see it as a criticism or dereliction of duty. As a result, the effectiveness of this communications key skills initiative revealed a different ways of thinking: collaborative, critical and exploratory.

The implications of the research findings

This research has explored the experience and significance of the implementation of a new key skills communication course in three Chinese colleges. This has implications for the development of communication skills in Chinese further and vocational education and for the range and nature of communication skills within work. It has explored the complex, social and integrative nature of communication as revealed by those taking part, highlighting that communicative competence and a successful communication performance, here as elsewhere, is an integration of various factors, perceptual, cognitive and affective in a specific social context (Hargie et al. 1994). The students not only linked communication skills with the new demands of the Chinese employment market but also with their own attitudes and motivation. Moreover, students perceived themselves as more open and more positive about communication, believing that not only had they become more employable, but also more adaptable and confident through their raised self-awareness and attention to others. They were more willing to question and evaluate the circumstances and experiences which are fundamental to participation and social responsibility and also to embrace a more critical discourse. There was recognition that communication could be seen as part of individual cognition and socialisation processes, including psychological, cognitive and emotional skills development, and the ability to cooperate with others (Cherry 1993; Hargie et al. 1994; Fussell and Kreuz 1998), and that these aspects are not just 'skills' in terms of simple

measurable competences. The Chinese teachers in this research learned to perceive the communication process as an integrative one which involved knowledge, motivation, values and attitudes.

The results of this research demonstrate the importance of effective and appropriate communication skills in China. Firstly, students perceived that their self esteem and confidence had been boosted through the implementation of more collaborative learning. Secondly, with a student-centred pedagogy and curriculum, they perceived that their participation in learning was higher than before. Thirdly, students had more understanding of the meaning of 'cooperation' and responsibility. In a competitive society like China where individual achievement and examination success are everything, a shift towards collaboration and cooperation is significant not only in education, but also in the workplace, and both socially and politically. Embedding communication skills within a policy framework that still invokes traditional behavioural assumptions may not at first sight seem particularly radical or new. However, in China, the implications are potentially significant. The Chinese government, like many others, emphasises the need for skills that are intended to create a responsive, adaptable, creative and highly skilled workforce, but, since this is only likely to be achieved through communication, cooperation and collaborative learning, it is creating the potential for very different citizens to emerge and a discourse for the future to surface. Communication may after be 'key' to all our futures.

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