

# Understanding online learning across cultures: The encounter between Confucius culture and Western culture

Kang, Haijun

## Published version information

**Citation:** Kang, Haijun (2014). Understanding online learning across cultures: The encounter between Confucius culture and Western culture. In Q. Sun (ed.), Proceedings of the Seventh Asian Diaspora Pre-Conference (pp. 44-56).

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# UNDERSTANDING ONLINE LEARNING ACROSS CULTURES: THE ENCOUNTER BETWEEN CONFUCIUS CULTURE AND WESTERN CULTURE

Haijun Kang<sup>1</sup>

*ABSTRACT:* The purpose of this study is to understand how much the field knows about the role culture plays in online learning. Further, the question is situated in the interplay between online learning behaviors influenced by Confucius culture and Western teaching pedagogy. The shared understandings of Confucius culture and Western culture presented in current literature are reviewed and compared. The impact on online learning beliefs and behaviors of international student sojourners from Confucius culture is discussed from the following three dimensions: teacher-student relationship, curriculum development, and teaching and learning pedagogy. This study cautions that culture matters in online learning but its influence should neither be underestimated nor overestimated/stereotyped.

## Introduction

Due to the rapid development of Information Communication Technology (ICT) and increased competitions worldwide, most education institutions are making efforts to globalize their student recruitment strategies and to develop online distance education programs. The direct outcomes include continued growth of international student population in countries such as U.S., U.K., Australia, and Canada (Choudaha & Chang, 2012) and the fast growing of online distance learning (ODL) market. This international education development trend poses great challenges to educators working with international students. The need to examine the interaction between culture and ODL is well documented in the literature (Mclsaac & Gunawardena, 1996; Moore, 1994; Pincas, 2001; Rogers, Graham, & Mayes, 2007; Tan, 2009; Wong, 2007) because “the deeper cultural layers that affect their [students’] learning process, such as communicative attitudes in class, relationship with the instructor and classmates remain tacit” (Szilagyi, 2013, p. 594).

The purpose of this study is to explore the shared understanding of the impact of culture on international student sojourners’ online learning behaviors presented in current literature. As four out of the eight top origin countries are influenced by Confucius culture and the major learning destination countries represent Western culture (Choudaha & Chang, 2012), this study zooms into the interaction between Confucius culture and Western culture to explore how Confucius culture affects online education dominated by Western culture. Culture, in this study, is defined as a set of beliefs and values shared by a group of individuals that guide each group member’s behaviors (Bennett, 1993). People traveling to different cultures for a short period of time and then return home are considered as sojourners (Berry, Kim, Minde, & Mok, 1987). The research question is:

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<sup>1</sup> Haijun Kang, Department of Educational Leadership, Kansas State University, hjkang@ksu.edu

1. What does literature say about the online learning behaviors of student sojourners from Confucius culture when these students take online classes influenced by Western culture?

### **Methodology**

The research question decides to use research method. Document analysis was employed in this research. Focusing on understanding Confucius culture and its' impact on online learning behaviors, we began our search by exploring popular education research databases. We began with ProQuest database and later included EBSCO and ERIC. During our search, the following key words were used, including culture, Confucius culture, online learning, e-learning, and distance education. The search results were carefully examined and only those that treated culture and online learning as the main focus of the article were included in the next stage analysis. At the second phase of data collection, only those articles that focused on Confucius culture and its impact on student sojourners' online learning in ODL environment dominated by Western cultures were kept. The reference lists of the articles produced through the second phase of data collection were examined as well to collect more related research studies.

In data analysis, we employed the “keywords-in-context” technique (Onwuegbuzie, Leech & Collins, 2012). This technique is useful when studying research literature because context matters. In our data collection process, it was noticed that culture means different things in different contexts. Unless we examine the surrounding words to know in which context the published study was situated, it is difficult to find the appropriate research articles to include in our review. In other words, linking the keywords used by the author to the surrounding words and the context, one can truly understand the underlying meaning the author wants to convey to the readers. In our data analysis, themes were developed using the “keywords-in-context” technique and relationships between themes were explored.

### **Results**

The results are organized into three sections. In the first section, the field's shared understanding of Confucius culture and the education beliefs of student sojourners from Confucius culture are reviewed. In the second section, the field's shared understanding of the Western culture and the dominant Western teaching pedagogy influencing online learning are discussed. The third section focuses on the online learning behaviors of student sojourners from Confucius culture when they are engaged in online learning dominated by Western teaching pedagogy. The results reported in each section are further clarified into subthemes to provide a detailed account for the impact of Confucius culture on online learning in ODL environment dominated by Western teaching pedagogy.

#### **Shared Understanding of Confucius Culture in The Literature**

Confucius culture grows out of the teachings of Confucius and is documented in Confucius' seminal works including *Confucian Analects*, *Mencius*, *The Great Learning*, and *The Doctrine of the Mean* (Merriam, Caffarella & Baumgartner, 2007). Confucius culture represents a system of philosophical, ethical and political thought used to regulate the thinking and behaviors of people from countries such as Mainland China, Taiwan, Korea,

Japan, Singapore, among others (Biggs, 1996; Wang, 2004; Watkins & Biggs, 2001). Confucius culture emphasizes the ties among individuals in a society, social hierarchy, and social harmony. Interests of family members and community surpass individual's interests and it is the community and family that the life of an individual acquires its meaning or significance from. Parents have the highest authority in the family and the elders are highly respected following the virtue of filial piety.

Applying Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory (Hofstede, 1980; Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010), Confucius culture fits the description of collectivism and feminism, exhibits high power distance and strong uncertainty avoidance, is short-term oriented and fosters "normative virtues related to the past and present such as national pride, respect for tradition, preservation of 'face', and fulfilling social obligations", and is characterized as a restraint culture that "suppresses gratification of needs and regulates it by means of strict social norms" (Hofstede & Hofstede, n.d.). The examples provided below illustrate the shared understanding of the basic principles of Confucius culture in the literature:

- Be modest and respect peers. Example: 子曰：“三人行，必有我師焉。擇其善者而從之，其不善者而改之。” (English translation: The Master said, "When I walk along with two others, they may serve me as my teachers. I will select their good qualities and follow them, their bad qualities and avoid them.") (Legge, 1893a)
- Reverence to authority. Example: 齊景公問政於孔子。孔子對曰：“君君，臣臣，父父，子子。” (English translation: The duke Ching, of Ch'i, asked Confucius about government. Confucius replied, "There is government, when the prince is prince, and the minister is minister; when the father is father, and the son is son." (Legge, 1893b)

### **Applications to International Student Sojourners from Confucius Culture**

Confucius culture's influence on the education beliefs of student sojourners from Confucius culture is three folds. First, the role a teacher plays in an individual's growth is instrumental. In Confucius culture, teacher is more than just a lecturer. The teacher also has the moral role as a 'parent' who has a collective obligation to instruct students to strictly follow social norms and behave within the socially accepted ways (Watkins & Biggs, 2001). This aspect of Confucius culture clearly exhibits the high power distance dimension of Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory. Students take it for granted that the teacher has the absolute authority and is the source of the truth and correct answers (Liang & McQueen, 1999; Liu, Hodgson, & Lord, 2010; Thompson & Ku, 2005). Therefore, students from Confucius culture feel uncomfortable to challenge their teacher and are always found to be on the receptive side of learning. Yarosz and Fountain (2003) considers this as "take culture".

Second, conflict is seen as an undesirable and ineffective learning behavior so should be avoided with the greatest efforts (Chang, 2000; Chiu, 2009; Williams, Watkins, Daly, & Courtney, 2001). The higher the level of uncertainty and ambiguity in learning, the higher the chance of conflict between students, and the less comfortable students will be with their learning. This is why Confucius culture exhibits strong uncertainty avoidance. Collectivism aspect of Confucius culture offers a solution by surrendering individual's learning needs to

the group's collective learning interests. If a potential conflict is sensed, individual learning need is to be sacrificed to satisfy the group's collective learning interests that, in most cases, are determined by the teacher. This reaffirms Chen & Bennett's findings (2012) that the instructors from Confucius culture tend to cater to the class as a group so that they can cover all the content they deem as the most important to the entire learning group. As noted by one student participant of their study that students learned "not to disturb the class [by asking too many questions], [because] even if their questions are brilliant, the teacher still might not answer them because he/she wants to teach something else first" (p. 684).

Third, the femininity aspect of Confucius culture stresses the value collectivism places in each individual student's learning. It emphasizes the importance of individual's diligence in academic pursuits and instills the belief that all students regardless of innate ability can do well through the exertion of effort (Chen & Bennett, 2012; Rao & Chan, 2009; Watkins & Biggs, 1996). Fang's study of twenty Singaporean Chinese engineering students' online learning experiences (2007), for example, indicates that their students from Confucius culture focus mainly on learning achievement and success. These students did so by focusing their attention on those tasks directly related to their learning achievement and caring less for fun and exciting but learning-irrelevant activities. The "nail that sticks up" (Uzuner, 2009) and "showing off or trying to appear smart" (Al-Harhi, 2005) types of learning behaviors are discouraged in Confucius culture.

Chen and Bennett (2012) and Liu, Liu, Lee, and Magjuka (2010) summarize the learning preferences of student sojourners from Confucius culture that: (1) The types of curriculum that these students value are those that are heavy loaded with content knowledge; (2) these students are more comfortable to learn in a learning environment that is well structured and transparent with learning is pre-sequenced by the teacher; (3) these students perceive the assigned textbooks and required learning materials as the main sources to all learning activities and assessments; and, (4) these students expect the teacher to provide explicit criteria against which they can measure their own learning progress and they see examinations as the essential way to define their learning performances and help them compete for higher social status. As one student participant of Chen and Bennett's (2012) study reflected:

A good lecture is very systematic and attractive. The content of the lecture is to the point, very concise, easy to be digested by students, easy for them to remember without even having to take notes. ...The teacher highlights the main points for students. (p. 684)

### **Shared Understanding of Western Culture in The Literature**

"Personal freedom, individuality, and objective thought" are highly valued in Western culture (Nisbett, as cited in Merriam et al., 2007, p. 222). This focus on individual has been extensively discussed and documented in the literature (Bassey, 1999; Beckloff, 2008; Chen & Mashhadi, 1998; Gunawardena, Nolla, Wilson, & Lopez-Isias, 2001; Hofstede, 1986; McGee, 2002; Walker-Fernandez, 1999). The relationships between individuals within a society are weak and individuals are expected to look after themselves and their immediate families (Tylee, 2007). Personal interests are valued above that of a group. If there is a conflict, it is left to the individual to decide whose interests to meet first. Similar to Confucius culture, Western culture values personal achievements as well but the essential

interest is still placed on individual. To accomplish personal achievements, this culture appreciates assertive behaviors and attempts at excelling. Not all individuals living in Western culture represent Western views. Euro-Americans and minorities with a high degree of acculturation from Western European and North American seem to be the ones mostly possess Western cultural values (Anderson, 1988; Sanchez & Gunawardena, 1998; Szilagy (2013)).

Applying Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory (Hofstede, 1980; Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov, 2010), Western culture fits the description of individualism and masculinity, exhibits low power distance and weak uncertainty avoidance, is long-term oriented and fosters "pragmatic virtues oriented towards future rewards", and is characterized as an indulgence culture that "allows relatively free gratification of basic and natural human drives related to enjoying life and having fun" (Hofstede & Hofstede, n.d.). Sanchez and Gunawardena, in their study of culturally diverse distance learners, highlighted the fundamental dimensions of Western culture as follows (1998, p. 5):

- Emphasize individual competition
- Achievement for the individual
- Must master and control nature
- Adhere to rigid time schedule
- Limit affective expression
- Nuclear family
- Dualistic thinking
- Religion is distinct from other parts of culture
- Feel their world view is superior
- Task-oriented

### **Applications to Western Teaching Pedagogy**

Western culture's influence on teaching pedagogy is two folds. First, learning is considered as an important component of personal growth. Individual students are expected to be self-directed and to take great responsibility to their own learning (Rogers, 1969). To accomplish this, dialogue and interaction are highly encouraged and pragmatism that emphasizes real life, practical and problem-solving skills is promoted in Western classroom (James, 19070). These teaching principles are clearly exhibited in Western adult learning theories such as Malcolm Knowles' Andragogy, Howard McClusky's Margin Theory, and Jarvis's Learning Process Theory (Ntseane, 2006; Beckloff, 2008; Merriam et al., 2007). Asking questions and challenging the teacher and peers are seen as signs of good learning interests that will lead to group construction of knowledge (Al-Harhi, 2005; Liang & McQueen, 1999; Liu et al., 2010; Thompson & Ku, 2005). Yarosz and Fountain (2003) consider this as challenge culture that leads to transformative learning experience (Gabriel 2004; Milhauser 2006).

Second, Western challenge culture is constructive rather than destructive. It focuses on collaboration-based constructivism and offers the potential to foster critical and reflective thinking skills (Barah, Hay, & Duffy, 1998; Chen & Bennett, 2012; Chiu, 2009; Dewey, 1938; Herrington, Reeves, Oliver, 2005; Huang 2002; Palloff and Pratt 2001; Taylor 1998). Immersed in this challenging and collaborative learning environment, "learners could learn actively and construct new knowledge based on their prior knowledge [and] construct

knowledge through social interaction with others” (Huang, 2002, p. 28). In a pedagogical context of this kind, efforts are usually made to create learning community (Lave & Wenger, 1991) and the instructor’s role is discussion facilitator and is seen as just one source of information among several (Crooks, 1998; Liu & Schwen, 2006; Lock, 2006; Wilson, Ludwid-Hardman, Thornam, & Dunlap, 2004;). Some studies show benefits of this teaching pedagogy to online learning (Stacey & Wiesenbergs, 2007; Liu et al., 2010; Baskin, 2001).

Al-Harhi (2005), Liu and Schwen (2006), Liu, et al. (2010), and Robinson (1999) summarize the characteristics of the courses dominated by Western teaching pedagogy that: (1) courses designed and delivered by Western teachers tend to have open curriculum that include multiple sources for course content and include several ideologies & perspectives to present balanced view; (2) student-centered learning design dominates the entire course and individual learner’s learning needs are prioritized by allowing high learner autonomy over course content and methods; (3) learning assessments mainly focus on evaluating learning process and learning skills such as analytical and critical thinking skills are valued over rote memorization and repetition; (4) learning is meant to fulfill individualism and self-development. As one research participant of Chen and Bennett’s (2012) study reflected:

You don’t simply lecture to students at every opportunity. What you try to do is get them more active in their learning so you get them collaborating, working in groups, solving problems. Now you can’t do this lecturing. (Teacher E) (p. 685)

### **Online Learning: The Encounter of Confucius Culture with Western Culture**

The above review of the current literature seems to classify Confucius culture and Western culture to the two opposite ends of Hofstede’s cultural dimensions theory spectrum. To reveal “the deeper cultural layers that . . . remains tacit” in online learning (Szilagyi, 2013, p. 594) and to exemplify how online learning practices are influenced by cultural beliefs of the people involved (Collis, 1999; Hiltz & Goldman, 2005; Liu, et al., 2010; McLoughlin & Oliver, 1999; Uzuner, 2009; Wong, 2007), online learning perceptions and experiences of student sojourners from Confucius culture studying in online learning dominated by Western teaching pedagogy are reviewed in this section.

**Teacher-student relationship in online learning.** Because of their beliefs in high power distance and the virtue of reverence to authority, students from Confucius culture expect and appreciate every opportunity to imitate “the conduct of the sages” (Merriam et al., 2007, p. 226). They value feedbacks from the teacher more than those from their peers and they rarely voluntarily raise questions and challenge the teacher’s authority (Fang, 2007; Liang & McQueen, 1999; Liu, et al., 2010; Thompson & Ku, 2005). Lack of teacher presence in online courses will make these students uncomfortable and unconfident with their own online learning (Morse, 2003; Zhang & Kenny, 2010). A Chinese student participant in Thompson and Ku’s study (2005) reflected on his online learning experience with an American university that:

It is like students are exploring an unknown territory in a forest. The instructor eventually comes out and leads us to the right path. Because we think the teacher is an authority figure, we want to know what his thoughts are instead of discussing among ourselves blindly. (p. 42)

In Bing and Ping's study (2008a), this cultural virtue was evidenced through the increased interactions between the students and the online instructor. In Wang's study (2007), however, students from Confucius culture reported low levels of comfort in approaching their instructors. Regarding Western online instructor's approach to online learning, participants in Chen and Bennett's study (2012) put it this way: "It's up to you. If you want to have a look at some spot, go for it. If you want to learn, do so. And if you don't, so be it. (Jennifer, Interview 5)" (p. 687).

**Western online learning curriculum.** Influenced by strong uncertainty avoidance and instilled with restraint culture, students from Confucius culture are used to following strict social norms and expect to have the similar experience in online learning. They look for highly structured programs, transparent course structure, clear rules from the instructor to guide their learning behaviors, and detailed assessment criteria for them to concentrate (Smith & Smith, 1999; Wang, 2007). They will feel threatened and get lost if any of these necessary learning components are missing in online learning environment (Al-Harathi, 2005; Bing & Ping, 2008b; Chen & Bennett, 2012; Ku & Lohr, 2003; Smith & Smith, 1999; Smith, Coldwell, Smith, & Murphy, 2005; Wang, 2007).

In reality, what students from Confucius culture experience in online learning dominated by Western teaching pedagogy include absence of lectures, solitary reading, learner-controlled discussions and team works, and the nonlinear nature of learning. They feel very nervous studying in a pedagogical context of this kind because they are uncertain whether their understanding and interpretations of the content are correct (Chen & Bennett, 2012). In particular, being used to refraining themselves from giving personal opinions that might conflict with the correct answers and make them lose marks puts them in a disadvantage position when subjective assignments with lack of clear objective assessment criteria are given.

**Western online teaching pedagogy.** Influenced by the virtues of collectivism, femininity, and normative orientation, students from Confucius culture are cultivated to value group effort, maintain harmony, and avoid conflicts (Chiu, 2009; Fang, 2007). Therefore, if being asked to conduct team collaboration and group discussion, these students tend to exhibit modest, face-saving characteristics (Liu et al., 2010). They are found to be less critical and opinionated (Kim & Bonk, 2002; Seo, Schmidt, Sowa, & Miller, 2008; Thompson & Ku, 2005), are less likely to post anything that conflict with the instructor and peers' views (Wang, 2007; Zhao & McDougall, 2008), and are ambiguous and indirect when expressing their positions. Their purpose of participating in group works is more of contributing to the development of a consensus than creating dissonance among the groups (Chen, Hsu, & Caropreso, 2006; Seo, et al., 2008).

Research studies show mixed results with regards to the performances of students from Confucius culture on group-based online learning activities. Biesenbach-Lucas (2003), Ku and Lohr (2003), and Wang (2007), for example, indicate that students from Confucius culture accept the idea of collaboration-based group learning because this type of learning activities can help build an online community among peers, develop a locus of mutual support, and offer the opportunity to examine topics from various angles. Bing and Ping (2008a), Chen and Bennett (2012), Chen et al. (2006), Liang and McQueen (2000), Lim (2004), Tan (2009), Thompson and Ku (2005), Zhao and McDougall (2008), and Zhang and



Kenny (2010), however, argue that students from Confucius culture find it hard to adapt to group-based online learning activities and many of them choose to be passive and quiet. As one student participant in Zhang and Kenny's study (2010) reflected:

In this online setting, you say something, either you get some responses and you don't know what are the emotions behind it, or you do not get any response, and what does that mean? ... so I sometimes decided to have less contributions, because I was scared, if I say something and these people think that "She's an idiot." (p. 27)

### **Conclusions**

We often assume connection of learning to culture or that culture plays an important role in online learning. But the shared understanding of the relationship between online learning and culture within current literature was unclear. Situating this question in the context of student sojourners from Confucius culture attending online learning influenced by Western teaching pedagogy, the puzzle starts to come together. The literature reviewed unanimously agrees that culture affects online learning and online learning is never a value-free transaction and self-referenced learning event. We should never separate the complex nature of humans as socio-cultural agents from individual learners' online learning behaviors. Example impacts of Confucius culture on online learning dominated by Western teaching pedagogy are reflected in teacher-student relationship, online curriculum development, and online teaching and learning pedagogy. The literature indicates that overlooking the critical role culture plays in online learning will lead to "detrimental educational and psychological consequences" (Chen & Bennett, 2012, p. 677). This will create 'behavioral shifts' and 'acculturative stress' (Berry et al., 1987) and students will experience feelings of isolation, frustration, alienation, and feel helpless, upset, anxious, or depressed (Chen & Bennett, 2012).

However, it is also critical to interpret culture and the role it plays in one's online learning accurately. Overestimating or stereotyping is as harmful as underestimating and can create 'behavioral shifts' and 'acculturative stress' (Berry et al, 1987) as well. Wang's (2013) discussion of Confucius culture dichotomy is an example of how the same culture leads to completely opposite interpretations. She cautioned that operating Confucius culture from a "deficit" perspective will stereotype students from Confucius culture as passive and dependent learners, which can only "magnify the negative effects on these learners who accordingly tend to internalize these values and view themselves as passive" (p. 105).

Therefore, the field's shared understanding as presented in current literature is that culture does matter in online learning but there is yet a crystal-ball way of understanding the phenomenon because of the multi-layered and multi-faceted nature of culture. It is important we gain balanced understanding before judging culture's impact on anyone's online learning.

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