

# Work and Learning: The implications for Thai transnational distance learners

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**Joanna Crossman**

Flinders University, School of Education [joanna.crossman@unisa.edu.au](mailto:joanna.crossman@unisa.edu.au)

*The paper describes a qualitative study concerning the experiences of nine Thai transnational distance learners enrolled in doctoral programs in Australian universities while working in higher educational contexts in their own country. Data were collected from participant journals, an open questionnaire and dialogic email communications. The study revealed that the workplace is an important influence upon the nature and quality of the learning experience largely through issues relating to finance, time management and technology or other resources. Learning, in turn, influences the workplace with individuals operating as educational change agents applying their learning about student centred methods to classroom practice. The findings are likely to be of interest to both Australian and Thai educators as postgraduate distance programs continue to be marketed in Thailand.*

Transnational education, distance education, Thai education, teacher education, online learning

## INTRODUCTION

The paper reports the findings of a qualitative study concerning the experiences of nine transnational distance learners employed as academic staff in Thai higher educational institutions. Each of these learners was enrolled in a doctoral program in one of three Australian universities. The analysis of data collected from journals, open questionnaires and dialogic communications through the Internet indicated that the workplace is an important influence upon the nature and quality of the distance learning experience and that, in turn, learning impacts on workplace practices.

There are a number of reasons why universities should explore the implications of transnational distance learning for Thai teachers. Despite a tradition of Australians and Thais learning from one another (Ma Rhea, 1996), very little literature has been generated on the subject. Also, international education has become Australia's third largest service export industry (Australian Embassy, Bangkok, 2004) with 50 programs being offered to Thai transnational distance learners (Australian Vice Chancellors' Committee, 2003). Given such expansion, universities need to become aware of issues that influence these learners in their own contexts and explore any implications for teaching, learning and quality assurance. Asking Thai educators about their distance learning experiences, empowers them as cultural experts in determining their own needs, interpreting what their learning means to them and how it can be usefully applied.

Local interest in the opportunities of transnational distance learning for Thai teachers has almost certainly originated in the Thai educational reform process (Coldevin and Naidu, 1989). There is also the perception that independent thinkers need to be developed through education in order to improve economic growth in an information based economy (Hallinger, Panomporn, Pornkasem and Umporn, 2000). Enrolments at Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University indicate a demand for flexible learning and this broad climate may have also contributed to a growing official

acceptance of foreign qualifications through distance programs (Gillotte, 2000; Thailand, National Identity Office of the Prime Minister, 1991). Distance education may also appear increasingly attractive to Thais following the Asian economic crisis of 1997 (Shive and Jegede, 2001) as a cheaper option than going overseas.

Technological developments are also obviously a crucial factor in the attractiveness of transnational distance learning for higher education teachers. Marginson's (2003, p.43) observation is that the expected bonanza of Asian enrolments into online distance learning programs offered by Western universities has not occurred because the internet has still not widely penetrated Asia-Pacific countries. It appears that although Evans' (1991) conception a decade ago that distance learning was a Western phenomenon is less true than it was, inequalities of access undoubtedly remain.

'Culture', as a concept encompassing the shared values of individuals that guide behaviour (Brislin, 1993, p.4) and affect language, politics, economics and society (Cryer and Okorochoa, 1999) was naturally a consideration in approaching a study involving transnational research. Given the connection between culture and education (Le and Grady, 1997; Thaman, 1997), researchers and universities need to be aware of what happens when professionals in one culture have designed distance programs in Education for teachers in another. However, despite these concerns, 'culture' did not become a central focus of the research study largely because the literature concerning cross-cultural research has given rise to some broad observations and concerns. Western academics have tended to develop their expertise in the culture of others by cataloguing cultural characteristics (DeBry, 2001; Irwin, 1996) that sometimes appear to support misleading, stereotyped, deterministic assumptions. Theories that Thailand, unlike Australia is reputedly a feminine (Hofstede, 1983) and collectivist society (Triandis, 1995) serve as an example. The implication for learning is that cultures will tend to encourage people, "to be unique and independent or conforming and dependent" (Irwin, 1996, p.34). Crude, stereotyped assertions appear to have been accepted without much questioning though it is possible that their underlying value lies in prompting discussions about what it means to be a 'Thai learner' and indeed if there is any such thing at all.

There are other reasons why cross-cultural judgements should be approached with caution. First, Thai and Australian universities share many curricula approaches and ways of knowing (Ma Rhea, 1996). Secondly, individuals do not always behave in culturally patterned ways (Montecinos, 1995, p.291) and finally, alternative conceptions can so easily be supported. For example, claims of student passivity in Thailand might be set against a Buddhist heritage of dialogic teaching and learning methods from 400AD (Keay, 1980 cited in Peters, 2001). For these reasons, the study adopted an intercultural rather than a cross-cultural approach because the former focuses less on differences and similarities (Irwin, 1996, p.22) in a globalising world and more on what happens when people of different cultures create their own meanings from within shared educational contexts.

Exploring the relationship between work and learning is particularly relevant given that working Asian transnational distance students tend to seek out programs that can be applied to their employment contexts (Tang, 1999, p.100). Historically, a range of traditions related to progressive education and situated learning theories have contributed to research connecting learning and the workplace (Cobb, 2001; Kolb, 1984; Mezirow, 1991; Smith, 2003). Nevertheless, the literature suggests (Argyris and Schon, 1974) that workplaces and universities have traditionally been somewhat estranged though the emergence of student centred learning and the development of transferable skills has clearly kindled initiatives to seek common ground (McGill and Beaty 2001, p.3). In this climate, Boud's (2001) work has attracted some interest, exploring as it does the similarities and contrasts between the contexts of workplaces and universities though some would

doubt that describing 'work' as delivering a service or good for profit adequately distinguishes it from the goals of educational providers.

## RESEARCH METHODS AND ANALYSIS

Grounded Theory was used as a methodological approach to the collection and analysis of data in the study (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) because it lends itself well to qualitative and phenomenological research concerned with the lives of individuals from their own point of view (Bogdan and Taylor, 1975). Since qualitative and phenomenological approaches are sensitive to cultural perspectives they were appropriate in a study concerning the experiences of transnational distance learners (Alasuutari, 1995). All data were analysed in the same way using the Constant Comparative Method (Strauss and Corbin, 1994). The nine participants were employed as teachers in disparate Thai higher educational institutions. The sample was fairly evenly gender balanced with five females and four males. Five participants were aged 48 years or older, one was aged between 27 and 41 and the remainder did not supply information about how old they were. Each participant was enrolled in a doctoral program in one of three Australian universities located across three states. Their distance learning programs all involved a study period from about one to three months in Australia and they also received periodic visits from Australian teaching staff.

The data were collected by email through journals, an open questionnaire and a dialogic communication. Email was a suitable means of responding to the pragmatic challenges of time, space, resources and political contingencies although as Firestone and Dawson (1988) pointed out, distance research limits a researcher's ability to get close to participants in their cultural contexts. Asynchronous rather than synchronised online communication was selected since it allowed non-native speakers of English more time for deeper reflection when composing messages. Journals were chosen as a useful way of investigating multiple perspectives through the Internet (Voithofer, Foley and Ross, 2002) although their time consuming nature probably made them less attractive to busy working participants. The open questionnaire was also relatively easy to send, complete and return by email and was more likely to reflect participant views than closed types (Foddy, 1999). The decision to use the reflective journal and questionnaire as a basis for subsequent asynchronous dialogue between the researcher and participant was inspired by Guy's work published in 1997. The dialogic communication activity was also consistent with the practice of grounded theorists who often return to the same participants to find further data to fill specific conceptual gaps, refine ideas and shed light on the emerging theory (Charmaz, 2000).

Data derived from journals, open questionnaires and email dialogic communications are all examples of documents containing narrative. Narrative, defined as almost any coherent discourse (Polkinghorne, 1995) has become recognised in social sciences, as an important way of conducting research in the field (Carter, 1993). Narrative data was appropriate as a way to uncover the issues and forces surrounding people that would otherwise be obscured (Church, 1995, p.35). This concealment takes place in a world where "truth is political and knowledge is an exercise in power" but narratives are able nevertheless to question the privileged view of Western ideas and enable diversity to be contemplated (Zepke and Leach, 2002, p.314).

Triangulation, referring to the use of multiple methods, and sources or data, was adopted in the study as a way of reducing the possibility of researcher bias and deepening an understanding of participants and their settings (Taylor and Bogdan, 1984). Investigator triangulation was implemented by using two consultant researchers who open coded data as part of an inter-reliability process revealing an 82 per cent agreement between the consultants and the main researcher. A Thai consultant was also involved in designing the questionnaire so that any potential problematic cultural issues could be avoided. By asking participants if their experiences had been accurately described as suggested by Maykut and Morehouse (1994) theory triangulation

was established and multiple perspectives were brought together in interpreting the data (Leininger, 1994).

Philosophically, the ethical process was loosely reminiscent of Kingsley's (1886) character 'Madam Doasyouwouldbedoneby' with the intention being to cause no harm. With this perspective in mind, the study incorporated a commitment to voluntary participation and informed consent (Corti, Day and Backhouse, 2000), the freedom of withdrawal and an assurance of participant confidentiality (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000). The Flinders University Social Behaviour Ethics Committee provided useful guidelines for developing ethical practices in research and granted approval for the research to take place.

## DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings of the study suggested that first, the workplace environment was an important influence upon the nature of participant learning, largely through financial, technological and resource issues. Learning was also affected by the way time was managed around work. Secondly, the data indicated that participating Thai transnational distance learners were discriminating change agents, making meaningful connections between learning and their classrooms. The findings are therefore presented under the headings of 'Workplace Influences on Learning' and 'How Learning Influences the Workplace.' It should also be noted that since the original open categories generated from the journal, questionnaire and dialogic communication were largely consistent, they have not been differentiated in the discussion of findings but used as a single data source. Participant comments have been included in discussing the findings as illustrations contributing to the study's credibility.

### Workplace Influences On Learning

#### *The Influence of Workplace Financial Policy on the Learning Experience*

Participant accounts cast the employer as both benefactor and impediment to learning in describing workplace financial policies and practices. For example, while employers supported learning by approving absence from work to attend seminars, teachers maintained that they were required to make up the teaching time lost which clearly made study difficult. Also, although employers supported student learning by providing scholarships, some participants believed that workplace practices and policies could lead to burdensome financial obligations and cultivated feelings of anxiety, inequality and vulnerability. For instance, one participant pointed out that withdrawal from a program for whatever reason would require some students to repay, "...a very large sum of money back to their boss". Anxiety was further heightened when scholarships had to be renegotiated during the enrolment period so participants could not be sure if they would be able to continue in their programs from a financial point of view. Furthermore, some participants believed that teachers working in rajabahts (teacher training colleges) were less likely to receive a national scholarship than university teachers. This perception gave rise to feelings of inequality illustrated by Rung's metaphor of being treated "like the minor wife's children who have been treated unjustly by the government" as the ultimate, national employer.

At least half the participants commented on how poor salaries or inadequate scholarships had led them to undertake additional work during the weekends and evenings to cover the costs associated with study visits. These accounts seemed consistent with British based research indicating that although distance learning theoretically provided greater flexibility, the combination of working long hours and studying tended to contribute to marginalisation and unequal status (Tait, 2003). Although the study visits to Australia were described positively, it is clear that given faculty visits to Thailand and the technology for learning at a distance now available, discussion about their benefits may need to be revisited.

### ***Time Management and the Workplace***

Participant accounts suggested a preoccupation with time management practices that were influenced by the workplace and technology. Their concern was well founded given that managing work responsibilities while learning is crucial to continued enrolment (Tait, 2003). Although cultures manage and conceptualise time in different ways, Thai participants appeared to 'commoditise' time in the characteristic efficiency mode of Western industrial society (Gross, 1984). They prioritised much the same activities as Western students (Kidd, 1983) though in this study, work was clearly identified as the main challenge to accommodating learning quality. Globalisation has no doubt contributed to commonalities between East and West though these broad conceptions are questionable in themselves (Reagan, 2005).

Part of developing an efficient strategy for time management often included a multi-tasking approach to activities such as jotting down ideas or plans when driving to work in the mornings. Others accommodated learning by rising earlier and retiring later. Thus, time management involved learning **around** work rather than being embedded **within** it. Participants viewed time management as a personal responsibility rather than one that might be usefully shared among learner, employer and university as stakeholders in learning success. Given that workplace demands are often described as a barrier to managing time for learning there would appear to be benefits in learners, universities and employers discussing alternative conceptions.

Journal data suggested that the workplace predominantly determined how and when learning happened. It seemed participants needed to paint a picture of their lives to illustrate how the nature and extent of their working responsibilities presented a major challenge to their learning. It is the practicalities of making study possible that seemed to consume participants rather than say, intellectual aspects of the learning activity though these realities didn't necessarily diminish enthusiasm for learning itself. Although particular kinds of work activities were given priority, learning related activities did occur during the working day and were influenced by the technology used.

### ***Technology and Resources in Distance Learning***

Thai higher education institutions as participant employers played a crucial part in the learning by providing networked computers, especially for those who were not connected at home. This is particularly relevant when we consider that 2 per cent of Thais (Shive and Jegede, 2001) have a personal computer with Internet access compared with 89 per cent of United Kingdom students (Johnson and Barrett, 2003). Although geography is theoretically no longer a barrier to a university education (Oravec, 2003), the findings indicated that in fact, access problems may mean that some transnational distance learners are still lagging behind. In keeping with other research (Pennells, 2003) including studies of onshore Western distance learners (Cannon, Umble, Streckler and Shey, 2001), findings in the study identified how learning is hampered by technical problems relating to the number of people sharing computers, the speed of the internet connection, available software and technical support. Participant difficulties in accessing computers were made more problematic because alternative resources (such as books, journals and teaching staff) are not readily available. There is also evidence to suggest that universities may need to work harder to understand the technological context in which transnational students operate. For example, Rung's narrative had a 'welcome to our world' ring about it. During a study visit to Australia, library staff had shown him how to access many of their services but on his return to Thailand he discovered that his workplace did not have the necessary technology for him to take advantage of the services that were theoretically available.

All participants used work computers for learning whether or not they personally owned one. However, more complex activities such as concentrated reading were kept for home or after

working hours. However, although Boud (2001, p.35) distinguishes between work and learning by suggesting that learning takes place at home, this study clearly indicates that what is done where, is in fact more complex. During the day, participants tended to engage in learning activities that did not require intensive prolonged attention and allowed for distractions. Such activities could thus be snatched easily and discretely from working hours. These findings are reminiscent of Kozoll's (1982) research indicating that educators find it hard to sustain focus or become deeply involved in their work because they are constantly interrupted. Such learning activities are also consistent with a tendency to view the learning process, the role of the teacher and the technology as largely being concerned with information transfer. There appears to be an opportunity here for exploring the work of Hallinger, Panomporn, Umporn and Pornkasem (2000) who maintained that Thai students tend to regard educators as sources of information rather than facilitators of student centred learning and discovering whether there is any connection with the use of technology in transnational distance learning.

### **How Learning Influences The Workplace**

Like other Asian distance learners in particular (Tang, 1999), Thai participants sought out knowledge, learning and assessments that could be applied to their work as teachers. The speed of technology has also enabled a more timely, meaningful juxtaposition of theory and practice for these individuals that in the words of one participant, brought them closer, "to the problem and the solutions." This process is reflected extensively throughout participant accounts particularly in how they applied their learning about student centred and critical thinking methods to classroom practices. The participants acquired this learning primarily by observing Australian teaching faculty in action in a way that suggested a process of cognitive apprenticeship.

However, data suggesting that teacher practice was altered through learning should not be seen as evidence to support technicist perspectives, so roundly criticised by Carter (1994) for their naïve expectation that theoretical abstractions can be directly applied to practical situations. The data did not give the impression of educational recipes being followed in a somewhat reductive way. What occurred was a more complex process of reflection upon knowledge and understandings in a juxtapositioning of theory and practice. One participant, Pornkasem, recounted how applications from global to local, theory to practice and learning to workplace are undertaken with consciousness, discrimination and discernment,

*It makes me go to see the wide world of everything I wish to - both good and bad things! I myself have discovered a lot of wisdom from the other side of the globe.... It is beautiful time for me to mix my local knowledge and global one for our peaceful world confronting with globalisation.*

Comments like this help us to understand how these individuals interpreted their experiences of other cultures in relation to the familiarity of their own cultural understandings. Another participant, Pongsin, writing in the context of encouraging surface and deep learning, suggested that change agency presented a challenge within his classroom and the institution. His difficulty may of course be illustrative of the kind of general resistance to change observable in many organisations internationally (Marsick and Watkins, 1999, p.21). Indeed, as Dewey (1921, p.108) also observed, change tends to bring opposition. Pongsin has clearly reflected upon this possibility too since he comments, "*To make any changes even in a positive way, one has to face some degrees of resistance....I wonder whether the same is true elsewhere.*"

Kanya discussed issues such as critical thinking, using 'w or us' pronouns to reflect a Western or Eastern interface. Similarly, Pongsin's journal also revealed how he identified the East with traditional learning and the West with modern approaches and innovation,

*I enjoy learning new concepts and new ideas about education that are common in the western world ...What I mean is that the kind of knowledge in the western world is generally placed in the front line of modern education, but the old tradition in my workplace is predominant.*

It is as though participants subscribed to a state of affairs whereby the “globalisation of knowledge and western culture constantly reaffirms the West’s view of itself as the centre of legitimate knowledge, the arbiter of what counts...” (Tuhiwai-Smith, 1999, p.63). Is it possible, that Westerners have perfected and distributed this perception so effectively that those from other cultures educated by or in the West believe it too? Educational providers need to consider carefully how transnational distance programs may be aiding and abetting this process especially since cultivating a perceived difference between Asia and the West is, after all, big business for Western universities.

### CONCLUSION

Through qualitative data collected from nine Thai higher education teachers, the study draws attention to the ways that the workplace can both inhibit and support the quality of learning through policies and procedures that relate to salaries, scholarships, professional development, technology and other resources. Additionally, participant accounts offer some insights into how workplace resources and practices affect time management. How time is managed ultimately determines what kind of learning takes place, where it happens, and when. For example, analysis of the data suggests that using technology during working hours for transnational distance learning may encourage a kind of ‘snatch and grab’ learning without sustained attention being given to it. Finally, there is clear evidence of participants applying learning from observation, research and assignments to classroom practice particularly in terms of student-centred methods.

This study has adopted an emic research focus concentrating upon the “insider’s perspective” (Miles and Huberman, 1988) within a specific Thai context though there may be the potential for others working in similar areas to explore meaning, gain insights, or judge for themselves, how applicable the findings from this study are to their own research contexts (Greene, 1990).

Using email as a tool for distance research is still an innovative method with huge potential given the rapid growth of internet use in education. However, there is little guidance available in the literature at this time and therefore a greater likelihood of unanticipated issues influencing the methods and analysis of the data. Choosing to receive data through the email involves much more than simply opting for a faster postal system. Electronic mail alters the genre and discourse of text and communication conventions that affect the relationship between researcher and participants and how the researcher responds to the data. Although this paper has focused on the findings of the research study *per se* there is much to be shared and explored in the collection of data by electronic means.

We need to explore the larger supporting structures that make access to technology, and therefore learning, possible (Kreuger and Stretch, 2000). These include an analysis of policies and practice that fund acquisition, affect access or determine appropriate software. Discussions might also take place concerning how libraries in Thai higher education institutions could become more appropriately resourced to meet the needs of postgraduate transnational distance learners and what part Australian educational providers might play in assisting the process. The technological difficulties experienced by Thai transnational distance learners suggests that issues of inequality need to be investigated through comparative studies with student groups based in Australia, on and indeed off campus.

Also, we need to understand more about Thai higher educational institutions as workplaces if we wish to develop our understandings of the experiences of those who work in them. All

workplaces, including educational ones, have their own distinctive organisational cultures that are known to have a powerful influence on employees. Organisational cultures influence human interaction by cultivating dominant values, acceptable behaviour, shared assumptions and beliefs. It is the culture of educational working environments that guide employee understandings about what it is to be a teacher and which methods and practices are likely to be acceptable. So powerful is it that personal and organisational values become one and the same (Owens, 1987). If we want to dig deeper into the challenges of Thai academics who are both learners and change agents we need to fill gaps in the literature about the culture of their workplace environments.

Findings of this study are consistent with those of Boud (2001, p.34) in as much as learning and work influence one another. However, whereas Boud's (2001, p.35) distinction between work and learning is based on the perception that learning takes place at home, the data in this research project clearly indicated that 'what is done where' is in fact more complex. When universities encourage the application of learning to work contexts, as is the experience of the participants in this study, the dividing lines between them are no longer so clear. Finally, to suggest that work based learning or any new hybrid of workplace learning, does not mean that barriers to learning at work have been removed, as Boud and Garrick (1999, p.1) suggest. While working learners find it difficult to devote themselves single-mindedly to either work or learning (Boud, 2001, p.35) it is possible to view the phenomenon as part of the solution rather than the problem; a solution that may bring workplaces, universities and learners together in a shared vision. Universities need to be aware of more than how students have to study **around** their working responsibilities. The influence of the working environment on learning is powerful and involved. It defines how learning happens. In other words, there is a need to consider not simply working **around** the workplace but rather from **within** it and at all levels.

Time management for participants is a concept based on the assumption that when one is engaged in one activity, involvement in another is unlikely. Time is presented in dichotomous and alternative ways. Perhaps learners, universities and employers would be better served by thinking about time spent on different activities from complementary rather than competitive perspectives. What is needed is a merging of the worlds of work and learning that explores what is valued and rewarded in each context (Kazmer and Haythomthwate, 2001).

Applications of learning from Western universities to the Thai workplace should not be taken as evidence of an invasion of local culture by the global phenomena or that a danger exists in learning being applied inappropriately to other cultures (Hallinger and Leithwood, 1996). Such an assumption undervalues the subtlety of the process and the critical discernment of those involved. The study revealed that Thai educators are discriminating transformers of cultural knowledge not naive victims of Western educational indoctrination.

The study appeared to confirm that participants tended to respond to local and global tensions (Evans and Rowan, 1997) by creating, a 'third place' between their own and the educational providers' culture that incorporated learners' new experiences with those that were more familiar (Kramasch, 1993 cited in Farquhar, 1999). The nature of this 'third place' evolved from critical reflection about what might be useful in Thai higher education classrooms at the local level. In addition, there is little evidence of any opposition as such, to educational globalisation or western approaches as Zepke and Leach (2002, p.314) suggest. Instead, narratives indicate a selection of educational concepts in a quiet and dignified way: the Thai way.

Learning for Thai transnational students is largely focused upon the process of making connections between theory and practice as well as the local and the global. For example, when we say 'work influences learning' and 'learning influences work' it becomes clear that the relationship between these two processes is a spiralling one. The study has separated out these two mechanisms though of course, when employee thinking and operating changes so too does an



organisation and vice versa because when learning leads to changed work practices the new environment generates new issues and new questions to be asked. How this interaction between the two occurs was not explored but could prove to be a useful and enlightening avenue for further research for all stakeholders in transnational distance education.

In conclusion, the findings indicate that in order to support transnational distance learners, a balanced approach to both institutional and individual issues surrounding learning is needed and can be achieved through conversations between employers, learners and universities. Universities and employers will need to reconceptualise their roles. It would appear to be accepted that the future for universities lies beyond focusing on the campus (Walker, 1993). The potential of transnational distance learning is also now becoming a familiar concept. However, the contribution of this study lies in highlighting the importance of exploring the role of the workplace in the transnational distance learning experience; the main motivation being that where learning happens will change what it is and what it does.

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