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The Online Acculturation of Chinese Student ‘Sojourners’

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Abstract: This paper presents a work-in-progress research project that explores the acculturation of Chinese student ‘sojourners’ to online learning at an Australian university. Building on Berry’s (1980, 2005) acculturation frameworks, this project examines the processes of change in the students’ perceptions of online learning and the strategies they use to adapt to online learning. The research consists of two parts: a pilot study and the main study. The aims of this paper are to explain why Berry’s frameworks have been chosen for this investigation and to report on the pilot study findings. The overall results indicate a strong clash of educational values and practices between this student group’s heritage and host cultures, pointing to a number of adaptation challenges that may be exacerbated by online learning. The main study is currently being conducted. It is expected that a refined framework for conceptualizing the participants’ online acculturation experiences will be developed based on the findings of the main study.

Introduction

Over the last decade there has been a massive increase in the number of Chinese students studying in Australian tertiary institutions. Most of these students are ‘sojourners,’ who by definition spend “a medium length of time (six months to five years) at a place, usually intending to return ‘home’” (Furnham, 1988). These students have long been found to encounter immense difficulties in adapting to Western learning environments due to their inclination toward conformity, passivity and dependence on authority figures (Ballard & Clanchy, 1991). These features are contrary to the characteristics which are viewed as desirable in Western education, those of a capacity for independent learning and to think critically (Ramsden, 2003). The recent trend for Western universities to deliver their subjects online, unfortunately, may pose new and even greater challenges to these students, as the educational presumptions ingrained in the new technologies tend to accentuate the underlying educational beliefs in Western education. For instance, Catterick (2007) posits that the teaching approaches espoused by online learning may disadvantage Chinese learners on account of the focus by these approaches on active learning, reflective practice, collaborative learning and autonomous learning.

Although research on Chinese students’ online learning experiences indicates that Chinese students generally appreciate the flexibility of online learning, they see the lack of interaction and immediate feedback as major impediments to effective learning (Ku & Lohr, 2003). Other factors that cause problems to Chinese students include: the absence of non-verbal channels of communication and chances to learn about the host culture, the feeling of being ignored by other students, and the exhausting process of reading, writing and responding to

messages (Thompson & Ku, 2005; Tu, 2001). Compared with local Australian students, Chinese students were found by Smith, Coldwell, Smith and Murphy (2005) to be less able to utilize the Internet, less inclined to communicate electronically, and posted fewer messages of an intellectual nature. So far, research in this area has predominantly focused on how cultural backgrounds affect students' perceptions and behaviors pertaining to online learning, treating these influences as permanent and students as fixed entities. To date, little attention has been paid to how these perceptions and behaviors of individual learners may change over time.

This research project attempts to address this gap in the literature by investigating the acculturation processes of fifteen Chinese student sojourners studying online at an Australian university. In investigating this phenomenon, the study proposes to use, and to examine the suitability of, acculturation theory from cross-cultural psychology – in particular, Berry's frameworks for understanding acculturation and acculturation strategies. While theories on sojourner adaptation are mostly stage models, which tend to neglect individual differences and sociocultural factors, thus overgeneralizing sojourn phenomena, Berry's theory encapsulates the complexity of the acculturation process, therefore serving as a more appropriate theoretical framework for the current project. This project is to our knowledge one of the first endeavors to examine the acculturation phenomenon in an online context.

The next section provides an overview of Berry's theory and the rationale for using it in this project. Then the methodology of this project will be described, followed by a report on the pilot study.

Acculturation Theory

Definition of Acculturation

Acculturation, when first defined by anthropologists Redfield, Linton and Herskovits in 1936, referred to "those phenomena which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact, with subsequent changes in the original cultural patterns of either or both groups" (p. 149). Two points are worthy of note regarding this definition: First, although ideally, changes will take place in both cultural groups, in reality, they happen mostly in the acculturating group rather than the receiving culture. Secondly, while this definition only addresses acculturation at the group level, acculturation at the individual level has received considerable attention, which has come to be known as "psychological acculturation" (Graves, 1967). It refers to the changes in individual members of an acculturating group, and it is this facet of the acculturation phenomenon that the present project intends to focus on.

Framework for Understanding Acculturation

There is an extensive, cross-disciplinary literature on acculturation theories. One of the most influential contributions from this literature is unquestionably Berry's acculturation frameworks, which have undergone four decades of development and modification since the late 1960s. Berry's framework for understanding acculturation, as shown in Figure 1, conceptualizes acculturation at the group and individual levels. To understand acculturation at the cultural/group level (shown at the left of the figure), key features of the heritage culture (Culture A) and the host culture (Culture B), the nature of their contact relationships, as well as the changes as a consequence of the contact to both cultures have to be investigated. The dynamic interplay among all these components will in turn affect acculturation at the psychological/individual level (shown at the right of the figure). Earlier acculturation outcomes are behavioural shifts and acculturative stress. The former refers to the behavioural adjustments individuals make in order to cope with the new environment. This is usually done without too much difficulty. The latter, however, results from the psychological conflicts between the desires to maintain one's culture and to participate in the host culture. The strategies individuals seek to deal with acculturative stress eventually lead to two types of longer-term outcomes: psychological and socio-cultural adaptations. Psychological adaptation refers to "feelings of well-being or satisfaction during cross-cultural transitions," whereas sociocultural adaptation refers to "the ability to 'fit in' or 'execute effective interactions in a new cultural milieu" (Ward, 2001, p. 414).

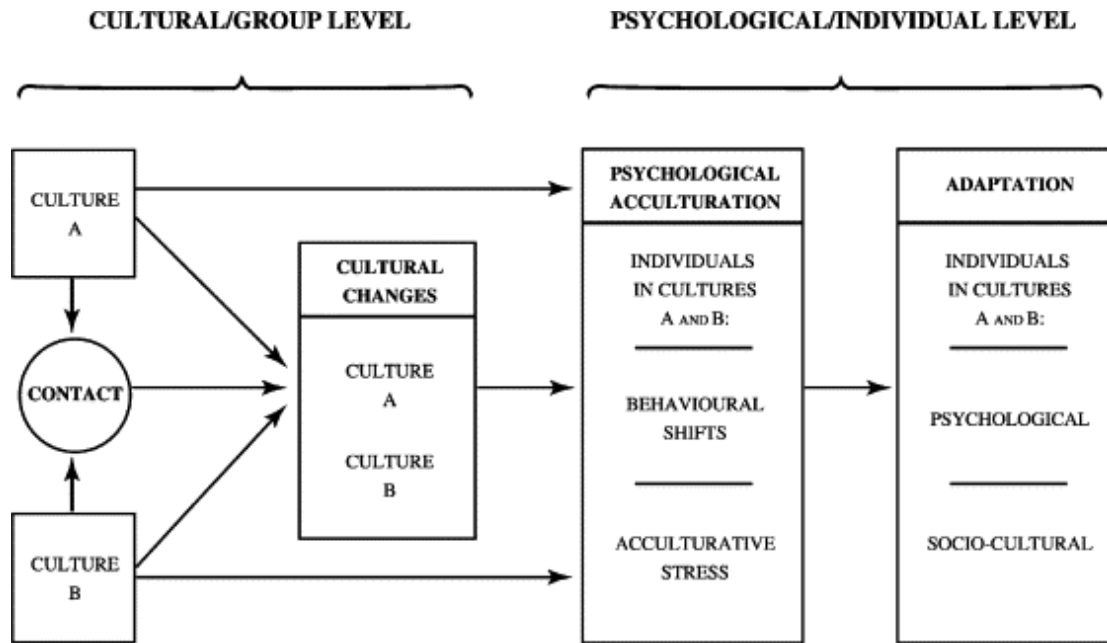


Figure 1: A general framework for understanding acculturation (SOURCE: Berry, 2005)

Framework for understanding acculturation strategies

Berry challenges the unidimensional perspective on acculturation, which views acculturation as a linear process with assimilation being the ultimate outcome. His framework of acculturation strategies proposes two underlying dimensions based on two central issues facing all acculturating groups and individuals: cultural maintenance (the extent to which one wishes to maintain one’s cultural identity and behaviors) and inter-group contact (the extent to which one wishes to be involved in the larger society). The orientations towards these two issues determine one’s acculturation attitude and strategy. When one wishes to fully participate in the larger society while willing to relinquish one’s cultural identity, the *Assimilation* strategy is defined. The *Separation* option, by contrast, results from one’s desire to retain one’s cultural identity while showing no interest in maintaining relationships with other cultural groups. The *Marginalization* strategy is opted for when one does not want to have connections with either one’s heritage culture or the larger society. Finally, *Integration* is the alternative when one values both one’s cultural identity and the relationships with other groups.

It should be emphasized that this framework is intended to present a “space” of acculturation attitude defined by the intersection of the two issues, rather than offering “types” or “categories,” and that it is “the ends of the two dimensions” that define sectors and receive names (Berry, 2003a). This clarification is important for the this project because while it is possible to discern an individual member’s inclination toward a particular acculturation strategy at a certain point in time, this project does not intend to categorize the acculturating individual accordingly, but to observe whether and how the preference has changed over time, as well as what factors may have had influence on the preference and the changes .

Student Sojourners’ Acculturation in this Project

Use of Berry’s frameworks in the present investigation is limited in scope in two aspects: one concerning the type of the acculturating group and the other the level of culture being examined. Based on the variations in the degree of voluntariness, movement and permanence of contact, four different acculturating groups have been identified: immigrants, sojourners, refugees, and indigenous peoples (Sam & Berry, 2006). The type of group has different implications for the acculturation process. In applying these frameworks to this project, it should be borne in mind that compared with the other groups, the voluntary nature of sojourners’ migration may make their adaptation relatively easy, but the temporariness of their stay and their intention to return home may decrease their motivation to participate in the host culture (Berry & Sam, 1997).

Secondly, while the heritage and host cultures in Berry's frameworks encompass culture at all levels, namely, national, individual and institutional (Berry, 2003b), this project will place a stronger focus on the perspectives at the individual and institutional levels. This is because student sojourners' acculturative arena may be largely confined to their learning environments: in this case, the university campus and their online learning environment. This said, we acknowledge that national, individual and institutional cultures are equally important, as any university learning environment is embedded in a higher education system, which is shaped and molded by the larger social, economic and political forces (Lauzon, 1999). Therefore, data will still be collected on wider cultural experiences wherever possible.

Methodology

This research project consists of two parts: a pilot study and the main study. The pilot study reported in this paper adopted a focus group method, the purpose of which was to obtain general background information about the topic. Results of this pilot study were analyzed using Bernstein's (1971) concepts of classification and framing, which were then used to facilitate the design of the instrument for individual interviews in the main study.

The main study, which is currently being conducted, employs a qualitative, cross-cohort, multiple case study design. Data is being collected through individual interviews, a study process questionnaire and document review. Three student cohorts with different amounts of online learning experience have been recruited and are being observed over a single semester. Each cohort consists of approximately five students. The individual interviews are being conducted up to four times with each student participant, and once with each subject conductor and designer. The Study Process Questionnaire (SPQ) (Biggs, 1987) measures the students' learning approaches and the motives and strategies that constitute these approaches. The results of this questionnaire may contribute useful insight into the participants' willingness to adapt to their learning environment and also into their acculturation strategies. Documents such as subject outlines and university policy documents will be reviewed to help the researchers understand and interpret the subjective interview data.

The Pilot Study: Focus Group Interviewing

The purpose of this pilot study is twofold. The first is to investigate acculturation at the group level: specifically, to understand the potential clash of educational values and practices in this student group's heritage culture and the Australian culture, so that adaptation challenges can be identified. The second is to define a number of "domains" for which the acculturation attitudes of this student group can be constructed: Berry (personal communication, 3 Jan, 2007) insists that the instrument for the measurement of acculturation should be culturally appropriate because the acculturation process is initiated by different issues that arise from different intercultural contact situations.

The focus group interview was conducted with seven Chinese international students from different disciplines at a regional Australian university. Table 1 describes the demographic information for these participants.

Country of origin	Gender	Level of study	Discipline	Time in Australia	Number of online subjects taken
China	F	Postgraduate	Nursing	8 months	4
China	M	Undergraduate	Commerce	6 years	14
China	M	Postgraduate	Education	8 months	12
Taiwan	M	Postgraduate	Commerce	1.5 years	8
Taiwan	F	Postgraduate	Commerce	1.3 years	6
Taiwan	F	Postgraduate (PhD)	Creative Art	1.5 years	0
Malaysia	F	Postgraduate	Nursing	5 years	3

Table 1: Demographic information for focus group participants

The discussion in this focus group interview was guided by a set of very broad, open-ended questions. The moderator was generally nondirective, which enabled the group to pursue any issues of interest to them. The participants were asked to compare their experiences in learning and teaching in their own countries with those in Australia, to describe their feelings about moving from a Chinese learning environment to an Australian one, and to discuss their general perceptions about what Chinese students in Australia may think of online learning, their own experiences of online learning in Australia and changes in their perceptions of online learning. After the open-ended questions, two documents were shown to the participants: a picture of the home page of two example online classes and a list of 15 past research findings regarding Chinese learners studying online in Western countries. These documents were used to trigger the participants' memories of their own online learning experiences. The participants were also asked to comment on the research findings.

Results

This focus group interview generated two main categories of data: the participants' opinions of the educational environments in their heritage and host cultures, and their attitudes toward the acculturation context, i.e. online learning.

Heritage and host cultures: Chinese and Australian education

The participants' views on the educational values and practices in Chinese and Australian educational environments largely accord with the literature in this area. The main themes that emerged from the data are as follows.

The participants described Chinese education as

- teacher-centered: Teachers have total control; students are not allowed to do other things in class or interrupt the teacher, which means disrespect for the teacher and also disrupts concentration. Teachers tell students what they should learn. Teachers make good use of the time in class, and they are able to attract students' attention with concise and focused lectures; students can easily remember what they learn by just listening to the teacher.
- textbook-based: Teachers use the prescribed textbook, and they usually struggle for time to cover everything in the textbook. Teaching materials are based on these textbooks and rarely updated, and tests are also strictly based on these textbooks. Students are not supposed to ask questions about previous lessons, which slows down the pace of the class.
- assessment-based: A good teacher is someone who helps students pass the exams, so teachers offer students a lot of mock tests to prepare them for the exams. What's learned in class is usually not relevant to real life. Students do not have to read extensively for assignments or tests.

In comparison, Australian education was perceived by the participants as having

- an equal relationship between teacher and students: Teachers only guide students, who have to find out the answers to their own questions. Students are given a lot of freedom to pursue things they are interested in, and can move on when they feel they are ready. A good student is someone who reads extensively outside class and is able to challenge the teacher's opinions.
- a loose class structure: The classroom atmosphere is very relaxed. Teachers put a lot of thought into the design of assignments and their teaching materials, but they do not focus on strictly managing their time in class, and they do not make major efforts to attract the students' attention the whole time. Neither do they teach all the contents of the textbook. Students are not able to acquire all the knowledge they need in class.
- an emphasis on real-life experiences: Students are required to draw on their personal experiences in their assignments and exams.
- multiple channels to obtain knowledge: Textbooks are used merely as a stepping-stone to stimulate students to discover a broader range of knowledge on their own. Students are encouraged to read extensively outside class, and to use learning resources in the library.

It should be noted that these descriptions were consistent among the participants regardless of their country of origin.

Attitudes Toward the Acculturation Context: Perceptions of Online Learning

The questions concerning the participants' attitudes toward online learning and their experiences in this form of learning gave rise to one main theme: the nature of the medium for learning. All participants but one were skeptical of the effectiveness of online learning, asserting that

- computers are machines and thus are unable to communicate feelings at a deeper level;
- text fails to convey a message fully;
- written communication is superficial (in comparison to verbal communication); and
- the lack of physical, aural and verbal cues for emotions leads to poor interaction between teacher and students.

The invitation to comment on the past research findings proved to be a useful stimulus, which heated up the discussion and generated more issues. To summarize, the participants generally agreed with most of the findings except for the questioning of their ability to utilize the Internet to learn (Smith, Coldwell, Smith & Murphy, 2005) and the attribution of their low online presence to the face-saving culture (Tu, 2001). They contended that Chinese students are simply reluctant to use the Internet because, in addition to language barriers and their doubt about the educational values of this medium

- online activities are seen as forced assignments to get over with, rather than an opportunity to discuss issues in depth;
- they do not feel comfortable talking to strangers;
- compared with their Australian peers, they are not sufficiently well read, so do not have much to say about the discussion topics;
- unlike their Australian peers, they were not trained to be critical of others' opinions; and most importantly,
- the teacher does not participate in the discussions.

Discussion

In analyzing its results, most research in this area has adopted the approach of contrasting the descriptive features of the two learning contexts in question. This approach has led to a slightly different list of features every time a new study was completed. Unlike these past studies, the present investigation seeks to understand the underlying structures that shape these two learning cultures by using Bernstein's (1971) concepts of classification and framing. These two concepts complement Berry's frameworks by providing a means for analyzing the different *educational* practices and contexts. According to Bernstein, classification refers to "the degree of boundary maintenance between contents", such as the boundaries between different subjects, or those between the knowledge obtained inside and outside the classroom. Framing refers to "the degree of control teacher and pupil possess over the selection, organization, pacing and timing of the knowledge transmitted and received in the pedagogical relationship" (p.88).

Two major findings were derived from this analysis: the fundamental differences in educational values and practices in Chinese and Australian cultures and the accentuated culture clash with online learning.

Fundamental Differences in Educational Values and Practices

Tightly-structured curricula and discontinuity between classroom knowledge and real-life experiences are the norms in Chinese education. The former is demonstrated in a number of themes emerging from the data. For instance, every teacher uses the same textbook, assessment is strictly based on the textbook, and teachers struggle for time to cover everything in the textbook. The latter is exhibited in the consensus reached by the participants that the textbook is rarely updated and what students learn at school does not prepare them for real life situations. The boundaries between contents, i.e. classroom and the outside world, appear to be strong, and therefore involve *strong classification*. Teacher-centered pedagogy and strict classroom discipline on the other hand are realized through *strong framing*. Students are expected to learn what the teacher tells them to learn, and are discouraged from interrupting the teaching or asking questions about previous lessons. As is made clear in these examples, the control within the classroom lies with the teacher.

Relative to Chinese education, Australian higher education has weaker classification and framing. The *weaker classification* is highlighted by the participants' shared opinions that students are required to draw on personal experiences and to read extensively outside class, and that textbooks serve merely as a stepping stone to a wider range of knowledge. The relatively *weaker framing* in Australian education is illustrated by the participants' statements that students are encouraged to find their own answers to the problems they are interested in, to learn at their own pace, and to choose their preferred way to learn. We can thereby understand the contrast between the two learning cultures in terms of their underlying structuring principles (stronger classification and framing; weaker classification and framing). In short, when Chinese students enter Australian higher education they can potentially experience a code clash between the underlying principles of their formative educational experiences and those of their new educational contexts.

This is not to say that the participants in the focus group unanimously preferred one learning environment to the other. While some criticized the strong teacher control in Chinese education, others applauded this type of teaching for its being more systematic and effective. And while some appreciated the freedom they had been given to think on their own in Australian education, others were critical of the loose structure of the classes, teachers' poor time management in conducting their classes, and their failure to attract students' full attention. It seems tenable to argue that Chinese students' adaptability to Australian higher education will be affected by their initial preferences for an education environment that involves stronger or weaker classification and framing.

Accentuated Culture Clash with Online Learning

In defining the domains for constructing Chinese students' acculturation attitudes toward online learning, all the issues discussed above regarding the students' opinions of their heritage and host educational cultures have to be taken into consideration. This is because since online learning is in essence 'a subset of learning in general' (Anderson, 2004, p.34), it is very likely that the educational beliefs underpinning students' past learning experiences and academics' teaching practices will both transfer to the online context. The other essential constituent of the domains is how this student group perceives online learning at their university.

The results shown in the previous section suggest two important reasons why Chinese students may experience significant difficulties studying online: firstly, their strong inclination toward feelings, human relationships, face-to-face contact and verbal communication; and secondly, their strong reliance on authority figures and reading materials as the only sources of knowledge. These attributes seem to originate from the strongly classified and framed learning environment that they were enculturated to when studying in their countries, in which learning is perceived to only occur within the classroom, with the teacher's presence, through face-to-face lectures, and when the student shows his or her acquisition of the knowledge contained in the textbook through assessment. On the other hand, in the teaching practices commonly implemented within online environments, such as active learning, reflective practice, collaborative learning and autonomous learning (Catterick, 2007), the boundaries between the classroom and the outside world are obviously weaker, and the control over learning is shifted to the student. In fact, with the visible, physical boundaries vanishing in the online context, Australian online learning forms a far starker contrast with the relatively strongly classified and framed Chinese education than traditional Australian education. This relatively weakly classified and framed online learning context appears to be alien to Chinese students and will therefore initiate their acculturation processes – it can create even more of a code clash.

Conclusion

The findings from this pilot study not only point to a strong clash of values and practices in Chinese and Australian education, which is accentuated in the online context, but they contribute valuable insights into the construction of the culturally-appropriate acculturation domains for the main study. A number of acculturation domains have emerged from the pilot study results, for example, curriculum, assessment, class structure, pedagogy, teacher control, student control, teacher-student relationship, view on technology and learning tasks, and preferred communication style. These domains have been used to facilitate the design of the instrument for the individual interviews in the main study. While this pilot study explores the first two components of acculturation at the group level in Berry's framework for understanding acculturation (Figure 1) – to recapitulate, the heritage and host cultures – the main study will investigate all components in each participant's acculturation process, as laid out in Berry's framework, as well as his or her acculturation strategies. Although largely guided by Berry's frameworks, in

light of the distinctiveness of the sojourner attributes and the online acculturation context, it is expected that a refined framework will be developed to account for Chinese student sojourners' online acculturative experiences in Australia. Data collection for the main study is scheduled to be completed around June 2007, and some results from the initial analysis will be available for report at the conference.

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