

The Adaptation of East Asian Masters Students to Western Norms of Critical Thinking and Argumentation in the U.K.

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## **Abstract**

The paper explores the adaptation experiences of East Asian masters students in the U.K. in dealing with Western academic norms of critical thinking and debate. Through in-depth interviewing, students' perceptions of their learning experiences were explored, and stages in this adaptation process were identified, with various entry and exit routes. It was found that the majority of the students opt for a 'Middle Way' which synergises their own cultural approach to critical thinking with those aspects of Western style critical thinking and debate that are culturally acceptable to them.

## **Introduction**

Some East Asian masters students on arrival in the U.K. are more aware than others of differences in the teaching and learning approaches between their home countries and the U.K. Indeed, that might be one of the reasons why they choose to study abroad (Paige 1990: 167). For many, however, these differences come as an 'education shock' (Hoff 1979), although not necessarily a negative one. The speed with which they adapt to the new expectations depends, amongst other things, on their motivation, previous educational experience, English language competence and the learning support they receive (Durkin 2004, Jin 1992, Jin & Cortazzi 1996). The time-scale for this adaptation is usually one year in the U.K., so students need to adapt rapidly to the new academic norms. Universities in the U.K. have traditionally regarded Western style deductive, critical debate as the norm in much academic writing. However, this paper argues that a clearer understanding and awareness of cross cultural differences in academic expectations could encourage Western academics to reflect on how best to support East Asian students in grappling with these differences.

At this point, the term 'East Asian' needs defining. There are multiple strands in the rhetorical traditions of the geographical part of the globe referred to as East Asia, due to various religious, philosophical, cultural, political, economic and geographical factors. National cultures are not homogenous, however; they are made up of individuals, religious and other groupings which exhibit different tendencies. Nevertheless, there does seem to exist a sufficiently identifiable core of rhetorical traditions which will allow for the use of the singular label 'East Asia' (Jensen 1992). This grouping is further justified by East Asian researchers themselves using it when contrasting cultural academic expectations (e.g. Tanaka 2002, Park 2002, Coward 2002), and commonalities make it practical to group these cultures together for the purpose of contrasting them with the U.K.

The term 'West' is used throughout the paper to include Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand, as referring to traditions of thought and practice and an historical trajectory. However, there are difficulties in monolithically describing cultures as 'Eastern' and 'Western' (Said 1995), which terms suggest and homogeny among particular group members, whilst ignoring their differences. So although the term East Asian is used in this paper as an umbrella term for the five target cultures involved in the research (Chinese, Taiwanese, Japanese, Thai, Indonesian), this is not to suggest that these cultures are not very different from each other in many ways. This paper, therefore, whilst using the terms 'East' and 'West' for identifying trends and emphases, does so with caution, recognising the complexity of the issues.

## **Literature Review**

Research carried out by Hofstede (2001), Triandis (1995), and Bond (1996), amongst others, suggests that East Asian cultures contrast strongly with that of the U.K. Hofstede, in his seminal research, identified a number of cross cultural dimensions which describe various cultural characteristics. According to his findings, East Asian cultures are characterised by large power distance, low individualism and high uncertainty avoidance, whereas the U.K. is characterised by low power distance, high individuality and low uncertainty avoidance.

One might, therefore presume that East Asian students face significant challenges in adjusting to U.K. academic norms. Indeed, Phuong-Mai, Terlouw and Pilot (2006) have argued that Confucian Heritage Culture (CHC) learners (from China, Vietnam, Japan, Korea, Singapore, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Malaysia) find Western pedagogy culturally inappropriate. For example, these learners place great emphasis on avoiding disagreement and conflicts and saving both one's own and the other's 'face' at any price (Hofstede & Hofstede 2005). Consequently, many East Asian students avoid expressing their personal opinions in class so as to avoid embarrassment by either appearing silly themselves or by humiliating others (Cocroft & Ting Toomey 1994; Ting-Toomey 1988; Tsui 1996). Subsequently, the open 'low power distance' (Hofstede & Hofstede 2005) debating style of Western seminars, where the views and opinions of other students and indeed of the lecturers themselves, are open to critique and challenge can be both threatening and perplexing to many East Asian students. The Western model of a social constructivist learning environment where the teacher acts more as a guide and facilitator, of near equal status with the students (especially at masters level) is in contrast to the view of the teacher's guru-like role of absolute authority and knowledge in the CHC (Phuong-Mai et al 2005, Durkin 2004).

Some argue that these cultural differences are reflected in traditional/cultural discourse patterns (e.g. Gee 1994, Street 1994). The individualistic, low uncertainty avoidance Western-style critical argumentation common in U.K. universities involves rigorous debate, an aggressive search for truth and a discerning of error, bias and contradiction (Paul 1994; Ennis 1996). This has been described by Thayer-Bacon (1993) as 'the battlefield mentality' which often results in polarized critiques, with theories and ideas rejected or accepted on the basis of supporting evidence and logical argument. It is based on the premise that evidence should be held in doubt and subject to scrutiny until it can be proved legitimate and truthful. Likewise, teamwork and open discussion encourage brainstorming of ideas with a readiness to reject any that do not stand up to rigorous critical analysis. It can therefore be described as 'wrestling' debate (Durkin: forthcoming). As well as the promotion of free expression and of direct, public disagreement, a need for explicitness is another characteristic of the low context communication (Hall 1976) of Western academia. Furthermore, the requirements of Western higher education, where Socratic /Aristotelian rhetoric and argumentation is expected, may be unfamiliar to some East Asian students who may be more used to a transmission style of teaching and learning (Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars 2000, Scollon & Scollon 1995).

In contrast, maintaining harmony and avoiding offence or confrontation appear to be of greater value in East Asian cultures than the search for absolute truth (Hofstede and Bond 1984). Hence, any evaluation of ideas would first require an acceptance of all contributions with a view to conciliatory accommodation (Orr 1989). Also, in these high context cultures, inference rather than explicitness is preferred and there is an emphasis on listening and 'mindfulness' (Ting Toomey 1999) of others, exposition of accepted fact, and restraint in expressing personal opinions, especially when these are contrary to the common consensus. Relationships among team members are more important than task completion, and critical evaluation of team members' ideas to achieve the best solution carries less weight than maintaining harmony. East Asian culture favours the more empathetic, 'constructive' thinking advocated by Thayer-Bacon (1993), and the conciliatory, 'caring' reasoning which values maintenance of relationship above the need to push forward one's own opinion on others (Orr 1989, Tannen 1998). As East Asian cultures

score higher than Western cultures on Hofstede's femininity dimension, a more nurturing, less aggressive approach to debate may be more appealing to East Asian students.

It follows that many East Asian students may need to adjust their cultural assumptions and expectations if they are to succeed in their studies in the U.K. Likewise, there is a need for lecturers in the U.K. to increase their understanding of these issues so as to help speed the students' understanding of the new expectations. The question arises, however, over how similar or different this adaptation process is from that of British masters students.

A number of research studies have examined how Western undergraduates pass through a number of developmental learning stages. This process involves a slow transformation of beliefs and concepts about the nature of knowledge and the process of teaching and learning (Saljo 1979, Perry 1988, Marton, Dall'Alba & Beaty 1993, King & Kitchener 1994, Kember 1997). These studies found that these students, similar to many East Asian students, generally start with the view that knowledge is absolute, defined by an authority as right or wrong and expect expository teaching with the focus on content and reproduction of material in their assignments. They move on from this position to one where they recognize multiplicity of viewpoints, uncertainty and relativism and finally reach the stage where they make reflective judgements through problem-solving enquiry, based on contextual evidence. Other studies have found that students in the West need to likewise make adjustments in their belief systems as they pass from school to higher education (Perry 1988, King & Kitchener 1994). The emphasis of all these studies lies with the gradual nature of the developmental process and how it generally applies to students in Western universities.

East Asian students, however, embark on a masters course in the U.K. with their own particular set of cultural norms, values and beliefs about the nature of knowledge, how best to teach and learn, and what makes a good student. As a result, a cross cultural gap in expectations may emerge as 'students and lecturers participate and act according to unexamined assumptions about what is normatively appropriate' (Mann 2005:48).

These beliefs manifest themselves in classroom behaviour, in assignment writing, and in their perceptions of what roles teachers and learners should take. It could, however, be argued that the learning journey of East Asian students proposed in this paper should be equally applied to all students, regardless of culture. Indeed Court (2003) found that some British undergraduate students face similar challenges in developing the required level of critical thinking skills. There may then be some parallels or similarities between the learning journeys of East Asian students and those of some British students, but British students who enrol on masters courses in the U.K. are more likely to be 'experienced students' (Kember 2001) who are already enculturated into Western style argumentation:

The whole educational environment and society in the U.K. encourages one to ask questions and query things without being 'sat on'. I felt very well prepared for this masters course. We've all been institutionalised into the argument culture. (British student)

To sum up, then, this study aims to explore these cultural gaps in expectations for East Asian masters students in the U.K., and to identify any stages in their adaptation to Western norms of academic critical thinking/writing.

## **Methodology**

A grounded theory approach was followed in this study and fifty nine in-depth interviews were conducted at two U.K. universities. The choice of university, school and subject discipline for the case sites depended on three criteria:

- Large numbers of East Asian students recruited onto masters programmes
- Course assignments that demand a high level of critical thinking/ writing.
- Accessibility

## **Sampling of interviewees**

The sample of East Asian students was a non probability sample, and the range and proportion of East Asian nationalities (the five target cultures) were determined by, and approximately reflected, the parent population of East Asian students recruited onto the selected courses in the two case sites. The sampling was based mainly on volunteers, although there was some purposive sampling to ensure adequate levels of spoken English.

In total, 41 full time East Asian students were interviewed (23 Chinese, 6 Taiwanese, 3 Japanese, 7 Thai, 2 Indonesian). Of these, ten were males and thirty one females. The disproportionate number of male and female student participants, and the limited number of target cultures was unavoidable, dependant as they were on student recruitment onto the target courses. Data triangulation was sought by also interviewing twelve British lecturers and six full time native British students from the same courses.

## **Data Analysis**

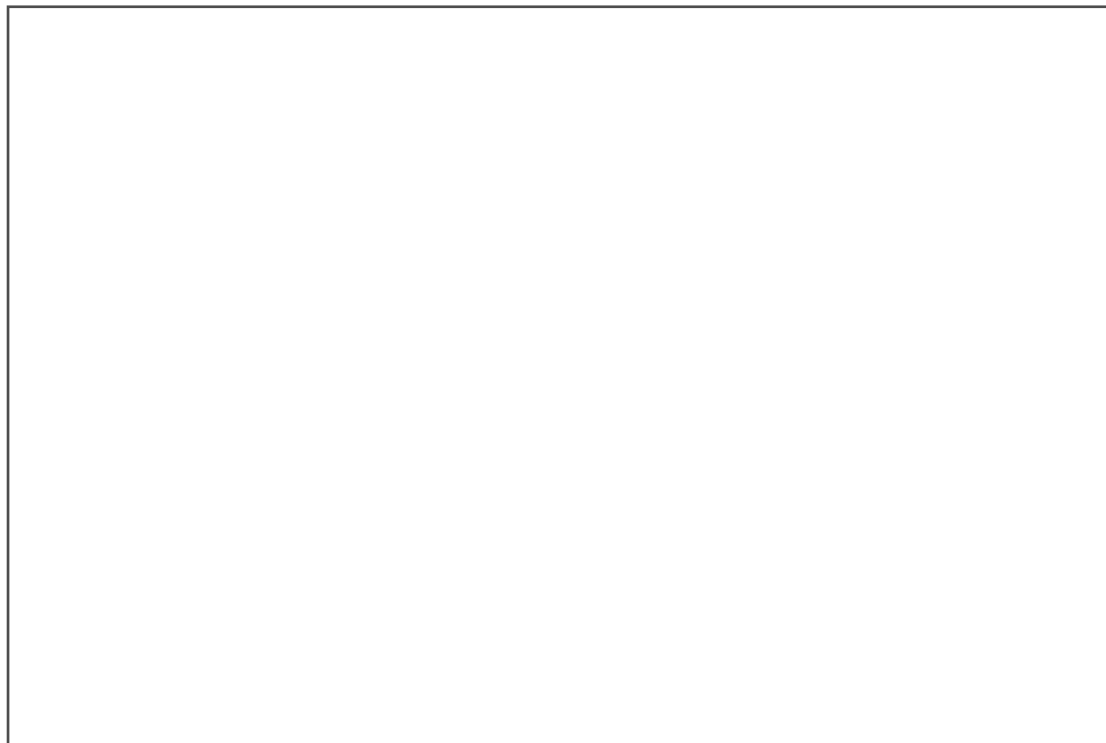
Three stages of analytic coding took place – open, axial and selective (Glaser & Strauss 1967) simultaneously with on-going data collection, in line with the grounded theory approach. The early open coding acted as signposts to interesting data, aiding developmental thinking (Seale 1999:154). As trends and patterns emerged using the ‘constant comparative method’ (Strauss 1987:25), similarly labelled segments were categorised into topics.

Once the data had been analysed, coded and categorised in this manner, the process of more abstract conceptualisation began. From this emerged probabilistic (Goetz & Le Compte 1984) theory (Figures 1 and 2). Fig. 1 metaphorically represents the process, or adaptation journey of East Asian students as they deal with the challenge of Western style critical debate and argumentation, and Fig. 2 the students’ preferred option, the ‘Middle Way’.

## **Findings and discussion**

East Asian student interviewees spoke of their learning experiences and the process of adaptation during their masters degree. The quotes selected in this next section articulate the general viewpoint of the majority of the interviewees. The analysis indicated that they appeared to pass through stages, the process being facilitated by self reflection and/or critical incidents which brought the students to new levels of understanding and awareness. This process has been summarised into five stages (Fig.1).

These are represented, metaphorically, as a sailor's learning journey in developing the necessary skills to move out from the safety of the harbour onto the open seas – from 'learning the ropes' to 'innate expertise', and eventually to full internalisation of the skills. Although represented as a linear process, in reality some students experienced overlap or back and forth movement between stages.



### The Learning Journey

There are several entry points to this journey (see Fig. 1), and the ease with which students enter depends on four key factors:

- E** = Experience of Western teaching methodology/work experience
- A** = Aptitude (intelligence, mental flexibility)
- S** = Skills already developed (English competence, referencing, structuring essays, reading / writing skills)
- E** = Enthusiasm (motivation, teachability, open-mindedness, willingness to take

risks and face uncertainty)

Most students in this study entered at stages 1 or 2, although some who had high competence in English and had been taught by Western teachers in their home countries entered at stage 3.

### **‘Learning the Ropes’**

At the initial stage, there are many new skills to master. Like a novice sailor, still in harbour, they need to familiarise themselves with the equipment, maps, compass and basic sailing skills, before venturing out of the harbour. They need to understand, for instance, the rationale behind the West’s emphasis on referencing and its penalising of plagiarism. They also need to appreciate the extent to which they are expected to read critically.

Contributing to class debates may appear alien at first to many East Asian students. Some may choose to remain silent, preferring to listen, for fear of making mistakes, looking unintelligent, or offending others – all of which might cause loss of face, as the following quote from a Chinese student expresses:

The majority of Chinese tend to watch and evaluate within themselves, and then they decide whether they want to say it out or not. They evaluate it in many ways, for example ‘Will the teacher accept it? ‘What will the authority think? What will be the danger if I speak out?’ ‘What will the other students think? ...losing face. It’s a very big struggle for them. They may change but you have to encourage them.

At this stage they may still be seeking the ‘correct’ answer to every assignment question, and be fearful of veering ‘outside the box’. Some students at this stage believe that what is required of them is merely to learn a new set of rules, and so they are anxious to discover what these are, conform to them and avoid making mistakes. Many view lecturers and authors as the ultimate authorities on ‘truth’, and so do not engage in questioning, disagreeing or challenging their views. Others are fearful of causing loss of face or offence:

If you disagree it could be taken personally. It’s like you are offending this person by disagreeing with them and especially somebody who is above you.

### **‘Battling the Elements’**

In this stage students still hold misconceptions about what critical evaluation means. They may see it in purely negative terms and seek to find fault in all they read:

An author gives a theory and I say that according to my experience there is something wrong with his theory or his definition.

Metaphorically speaking, the sea tends to be viewed as ‘the enemy’; the sailor has not yet learned to work with the elements, but is battling against them. There is still a tendency to seek out and agree with the lecturers’ viewpoints and critical thinking may be perceived as argumentativeness, and culturally inappropriate. Even though they see critical thinking modelled by lecturers and Western students, there is still a sense of uncertainty and risk. They tend to be guarded in what

they say, and may have little confidence in their own opinions and thinking abilities:

We'd rather believe in somebody else than believe ourselves.

I will do some self-criticism before I express my ideas. I have to check myself first, whether my ideas are too naïve. It might be that freedom of speech results in ignorance.

During this stage the students gradually move away from the idea that critique is only negative confrontation, towards a search for which argument is more convincing in its evidence.

Students may experience inner conflict when engaging in dialectical debate, and challenging scholars' ideas may conflict with their cultural sensitivities:

It is very hard to confront with ourselves, it is a struggle to write. Thinking in English is like arguing with another person. I am not allowed to confront or to conflict with myself in Chinese.

### **'Becoming competent but not yet adventurous'**

In stage 3 the sailor has ventured out of the safety of the harbour and is on the open sea, whilst keeping to the relative safety of the coastline. Nothing too adventurous is attempted, but confidence grows as the journey proceeds. They are skimming and scanning material more confidently and reading more critically, although competence in this skill is dependent on their English language skills. The students are now engaging in comparing and contrasting views. They critically analyse the various viewpoints and weigh up conflicting evidence and arguments to reach a reasoned opinion or conclusion. Because of extensive reading around subjects, the student is realising that "published authors differ a lot in their thinking and opinions, and everything needs analysing". They see that published work must first be analysed before personal opinions can be reached.

Although they have acquired the basic techniques of critique and are practised in evaluating alternative viewpoints, they are not yet creatively synthesising the various perspectives and there is little originality or evidence of risk-taking in their judgements and opinions. Indeed, some students feel that Western norms of relying on academic referencing to strengthen an argument prevent freedom of thought and creativity:

I don't see why we always have to write so much about what other people have written. Often I have a lot of individual thoughts, but I don't find them in journals or books. What about these? Can I mention these? I just feel I can agree with A and disagree with B. Of course I think it's important for us to read a bit about what others think, but I especially like to express what *I* think.

They are, however, learning to question the text and feel that they have 'a right to make mistakes' and contribute their opinions, and are hence more relaxed:



*Participant:* At the beginning of term I didn't want to make mistakes, but by the middle of the term I didn't care.

*Interviewer:* What made you change?

*Participant:* Maybe the others don't care. And the lecturers don't care if it's wrong. They just say 'That's interesting. O.K. Any other ideas?'

*Interviewer:* How does it make you feel when there is no 'wrong' or 'right'?

*Participant:* Easier to participate. Encourages me.

### **'Developing Expertise'**

Stage 4 involves original and creative critical evaluation of concepts, which gains students the highest marks in their written assignments. At this stage self reflection is evident: the ability to evaluate one's own thinking and a willingness to challenge and question one's deepest beliefs and assumptions. Critical evaluation is feeling more 'natural' to them. They find they are automatically and spontaneously questioning whilst processing information. They engage in creative synthesis of ideas and are confident, more relaxed and may even begin to enjoy this approach.

### **'Acculturation'**

The data analysis indicated that the students exited at various stages, some at the early 'surface learning' or 'semi-internalised learning' stages (see Fig. 1). However, none of the East Asian students in this study chose to progress on to stage 5, not because they were unable to, but because they chose not to. For the majority this appeared to be a conscious choice. To attain this stage a student would have to acquire native expertise, and have internalised the new cultural academic behaviours so as to fully operate in the host environment with minimal influence from their own cultural norms and values. To many of these students, Western critique was perceived as being insensitive and unnecessarily offensive. They felt uncomfortable when they saw critical thinking and debate degenerate into hurtful cynicism. This is in agreement with Tannen's argument that 'the scale is off balance, with conflict and opposition over-weighted' in Western debate (1998:6):

It is hard to judge the line between critical and cynical, because sometimes people may just cross the line and become cynical and sarcastic instead of looking at things critically. It may also hurt people around you if you are critical all the time.

By the end of the masters course many of the East Asian students had rejected aspects of Western style open debate, and in this respect they had no desire or intent to leave aside their own cultural norms and values and to embrace a Western mindset:

Sometimes when you are talking they (the British/European students) will stop you in the middle with disagreement. That makes you very embarrassed and scared. They should listen, at least until people have finished talking.

British students have been encouraged to challenge – too much. Rebellious!

There are other potential reasons for students not wanting to progress to stage 5. Some of the students made the conscious decision that, as they were only transient and would be returning home to fit back into their own culture, there was no long-term benefit in pursuing this final stage. Yet others recognised that they did not have the time in one year to fully adapt:

I am not sure if this kind of critical thinking will fade away or not after I go back home. But if I don't do any academic research like this in the future, or apply this kind of thinking to other general things, I think it will fade gradually. After all, it's just like you don't use it, and it's gone, because since it can be 'developed', I think it can be 'undeveloped' as well.

All the students who attained stages 3 and 4 opted for what I have termed 'The Middle Way', which synergises Eastern and Western approaches to academic critique (Fig. 2).

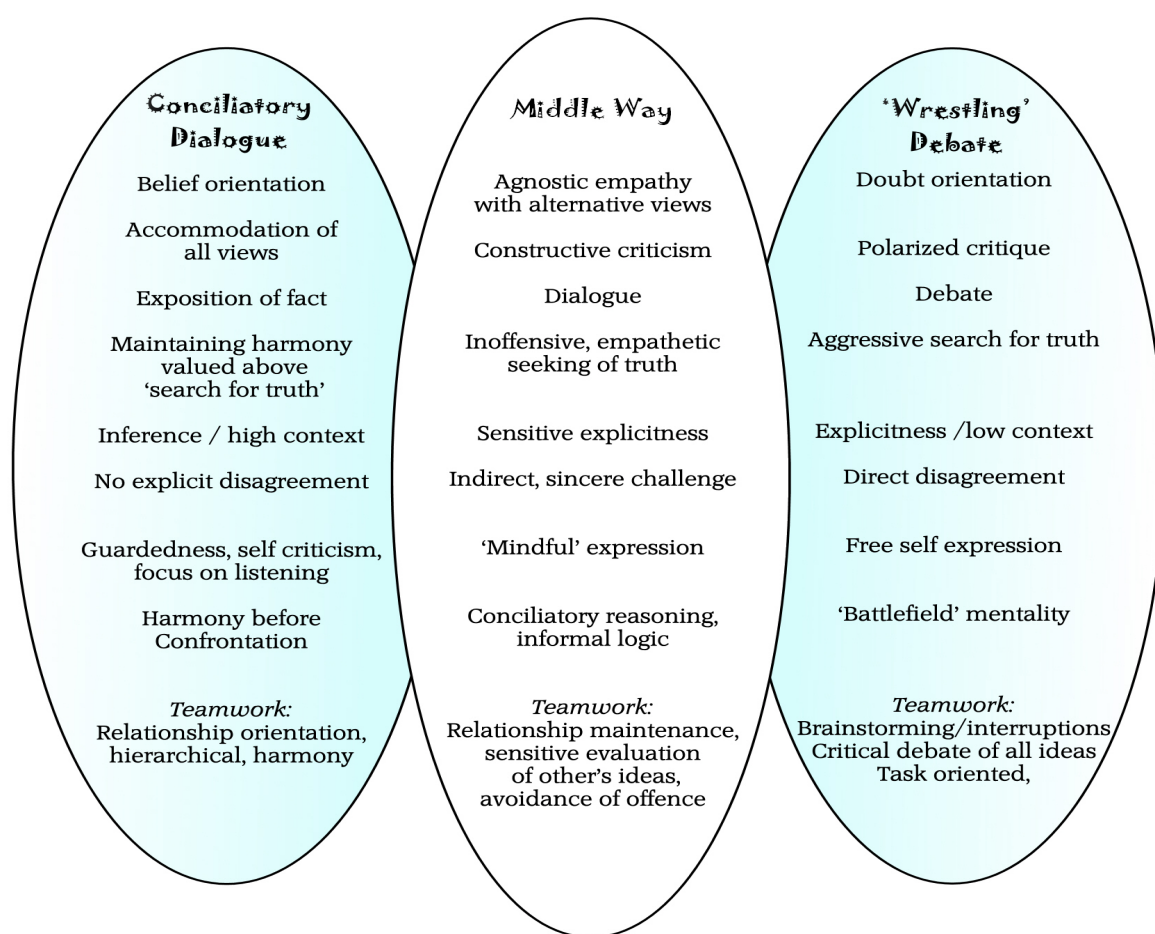


Figure 2: The Middle Way

Although characterised by constructive dialogue which is inoffensive and which involves empathetic listening to the other's viewpoint, the Middle Way nevertheless does allow challenge. This, however, is indirect and the focus is on reasoning which aims to bring together rather than separate. The research participants claimed they were very 'mindful' of their use of language and were sensitive and circumspect in their use of explicitness in positing an idea. The aim of this

Middle Way is not to battle between two polarized positions, as in the Western adversarial approach to debate, but to sustain a more conciliatory approach which allows ample space for diversity of opinions. In this 'gentler' approach to critical debate, one of the top priorities is to maintain relationships and preserve the dignity and integrity of all participants. What students appear to be rejecting is the confrontational, battlefield approach, which is doubt orientated, and which emphasises an aggressive search for truth. The Middle Way thus begins the search for truth with an 'agnostic empathy' towards all views presented. This involves a sensitive 'openness' to another's viewpoint, a determination to listen fair-mindedly and delay judgement and critical evaluation until the other's position is fully understood and 'entered into' in a sympathetic fashion.

The Middle Way also synergises the U.K.'s stress on low context explicitness with East Asia's preference for high-context inference, resulting in what I term 'sensitive explicitness' (Fig. 2). The participants claimed that they wanted to retain their 'mindfulness' towards others when engaging in dialogue and debate. This kind of sensitivity towards others' feelings and face, merges with a search for truth, so that one can be true to oneself and honest, without being offensive. This would also mean a moving away from having to always infer, or guess at what people are really thinking which, as one Chinese student admitted, can be very tiring and difficult.

Durkin's (2004) findings indicate that many East Asian students choose the Middle Way as a means of retaining those elements of the Western mindset which they believe can be accommodated with relative ease within their traditional cultural norms and values, and which pose less risk and uncertainty on return home. However, some traditional values such as maintaining harmony were retained, basically in tact, and were not deconstructed at all. The students acted autonomously and exercised their individual rights to terminate the journey when they felt they had gained what they personally wanted from it. The majority seemed to reach a stage in the journey when they decided 'thus far and no further'. At that point they exited. The extent of adaptation to Western style critique seemed to depend on many factors, such as how far the students were willing and able to engage in reflexivity; their competence in English; and the amount of encouragement and understanding they received from lecturers and fellow students.

The question arises, therefore, whether this Middle Way, as Tannen (1998) and Thayer-Bacon (1993) suggest, is the more creative and caring, more ennobling and humane way of managing opposition and disagreement. Or does it go beyond Western educational goals in attempting to avoid conflict and in emphasising harmony and conciliatory dialogue? Does the Middle Way have a place in Western higher education and is it possible, appropriate, or even desirable for universities in the West to adopt such a constructivist approach to critical thinking and debate?

## **Conclusion**

This study aimed to explore East Asian students' perceptions of their adaptation to Western norms of argumentation and debate. The findings indicate that many students reject acculturation and instead choose a 'middle way' which synchronises culturally accepted elements from both their

own and Western culture.

Recent research into the academic adaptation of international students point to similar findings (Fougere 2003, Burnapp 2006), where the new approaches to learning encountered by the students were compared and blended with existing practices. These studies also found that the learning journey is not a single process with 'a shared end-point' – complete acculturation - but rather a hybridisation and creation of a 'third space' where 'the new approaches to learning are inevitably compared and blended with their existing practices' (Burnapp 2006: 90/91). Thus experienced international students become 'empathetic insiders' (Relph 1976) who understand and value the new practices, seeing them as opportunities for growth and development, without becoming fully acculturised.

The findings would suggest that U.K. lecturers could raise their awareness of these issues by reflecting on their own academic assumptions and traditions, and by entering into dialogue with each other and with their students regarding these issues. Such mutual understanding will provide 'a legitimate space for expressing and hearing difference' (Mann 2005:52). If this were done, a way may even be brokered for university educators to develop their own 'Middle Way' which does not lose the perceived strengths of traditional Western argumentation, but which accommodates more elements of conciliatory dialogue. This need not result in reducing the rigour of academic critical thinking; one could argue that it would enhance it by making it more caring, humane and holistic. It would soften the 'masculine', linear logic of the Socratic dialectic tradition, and bring more conciliatory reasoning into the often cynical scepticism of post modernist thinking in the West. Again, this need not lead to what I term 'agnostic empathy', however, where no firm convictions or convincing evidence underpin and drive an argument, and where direct challenge is avoided. A 'Middle Way' for lecturers would be a merging of the best of both conciliatory dialogue and 'wrestling' debate, whilst leaning more on the heritage of the West - even as the Middle Way of East Asian students' leans more towards East Asian traditions and values. In this way, U.K. lecturers and East Asian students could move closer together in their expectations, without either group abnegating their unique cultural identities and beliefs.

## Further Research

There are a number of ways in which this current research could be extended. First and foremost, the theoretical concepts proposed in this paper could provide a useful starting point for other case study researchers to build on and the emerging theory may be transferable to other academic contexts. As this study was limited to the population studied in the two cases, and in the disproportionate numbers of students from the target cultures,

A longitudinal study could also be undertaken, whereby postgraduate East Asian students are tracked for a year or two on return home, and re-interviewed for any changes in their perceptions of Western-style critical thinking and of its appropriateness in their own cultural context.

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