



Collaborating for Success



# The Intercultural Challenges of Chinese Students and Australian Lecturers on Public Relations Programs

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## Background to the project 'Collaborating for Success':

- Funded by the Office of Learning and Teaching
- Runs for 2 years: 2013-4
- A collaborative project involving universities in China and Australia.
- Principal partners: Murdoch University, Victoria University and Communication University of China.
- To date, 4 other participating universities in Australia

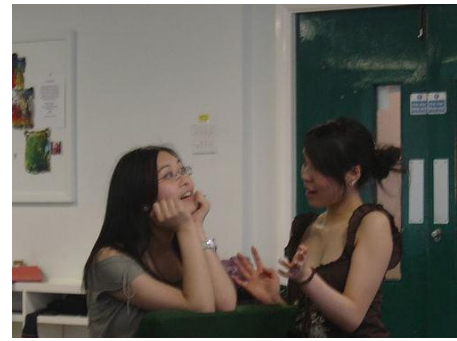
Today's presentation:

What are the learning expectations, and intercultural experiences and challenges of students from China and their Australian lecturers on (postgraduate) public relations courses in Australia?

How are public relations, communication and media students taught in China and how does this influence their transition into learning in Australia?

- 40.6% of international students studying at tertiary level in Australia are from China (AEI, 2012)
- Literature indicates challenges for learners from China when abroad
- Reform of tertiary sector at a policy level in China
- But not operationalised across the board

# Methodology



- Collaborative and reflective research: learning from one another (Shi-xu 2005, 2009)
- In Australia and China by researchers from both countries:
  - Interviews with 100+ students and staff
  - Classroom observations
  - Document analysis of learning materials
  - Reviews of published articles in English and Chinese language journals

# PR lecturers expectations. On arrival, all students will:

- be proficient with the language of their discipline and/or profession
- know what is expected about how to study and will understand the academic system of teaching and learning
- have the ability to engage successfully with the Anglophone academic learning culture

# For example, they will have skills in:

- Thinking critically (to an extent)
- Communicating effectively
- Working independently and in groups/teams
- And more ...

So how prepared are students in China to transition into the Australian learning environment?



# Inside China



Mostly lectures. Few if any tutorials or seminars in China.



# Inside China

- ‘Duck-filling’ = transmission of knowledge

‘Teaching style always speaking ... students will listen – always act like they understand but often they don’t. Teacher is speaking up at the blackboard ... Teacher is **speaking, speaking.**’

‘In China students must be **obedient**. And teachers are the centre of the teaching, and the **centre** of the classroom, they are the authority.’

‘Chinese students expect to be spoken to. They just **want to get**, not talk and give.’

‘Being proactive is not part of the experience in China.’

# Inside China

- Study = 'memorisation'

Lectures: listen and remember

Textbook: read and memorise for exams

=> No note-taking skills

# Inside China

- Reliance on a single textbook
  - ‘In my major, I seldom entered the library to search for something. All I needed was just to open the book and find the result.’
- No need to think from multiple perspectives/or think critically and creatively

Lecturers ask questions to check comprehension or for description

- ‘It’s very hard for students to comprehend a theory in another language. You have big words, very difficult grammar ... the readings we use: is a scholar using a theory to explain another theory? I can’t understand theory A, [so] how can I understand some professor using theory A to explain theory B? It’s just like I even can’t understand A, then I can’t understand B, then comes C, so the whole unit is totally a mess.’

- Authority of teacher, textbook, tradition

⇒ dampened initiative, curiosity, innovation ⇒  
dependent learners

- PLUS limited use of English for interactional purposes in real time

How does this learning context influence students' expectations and experiences in Australia?

# Challenge: Participation and group work

Chinese student **WANT to participate** BUT often don't know the conventions associated with tutorials and discussions – turn taking, interjection, role of tutor, expectations of students

- 'We have the **habit** of being passive when listening to lectures. So even though I'm here, I'm not actively engaged... It makes me feel uncomfortable ... [because] even if I know the answer I just keep silent.'
- 'If I have got questions, I feel **ashamed**.'
- 'Chinese postgraduate students are always **obedient** and are **afraid** to express themselves in front of teachers'

Issues of self-esteem, face, conformity



# Challenge: learning independently including use of library and electronic databases

- ‘I still have a **habit of being dependent** on my teachers and my supervisors. Sometimes it’s hard to change.’
- ‘I was expecting the teacher would **tell me what to do**, which book to read, which paragraph you should remember to pass the exam, and that’s the failure. After I come to Australia, the teacher tells you: ‘you have to read this, this, this, and this – and maybe one of them will be in the exam, maybe not’, so sometimes I feel very **confused**.’

# Challenge: thinking critically (in Western style)

## Reading critically

'I think that **we lack this kind of critical literacy**. I think that this is one significant fact that will have an impact on my present study – that is to read something critically... before I just accepted what I was taught because I think they are right. What the teacher says, what the textbook tells us... **When we read something, we just read it, but without thinking about it critically.**'

- unused to engaging from their own point of view
- authority of the textbook and the lecturer

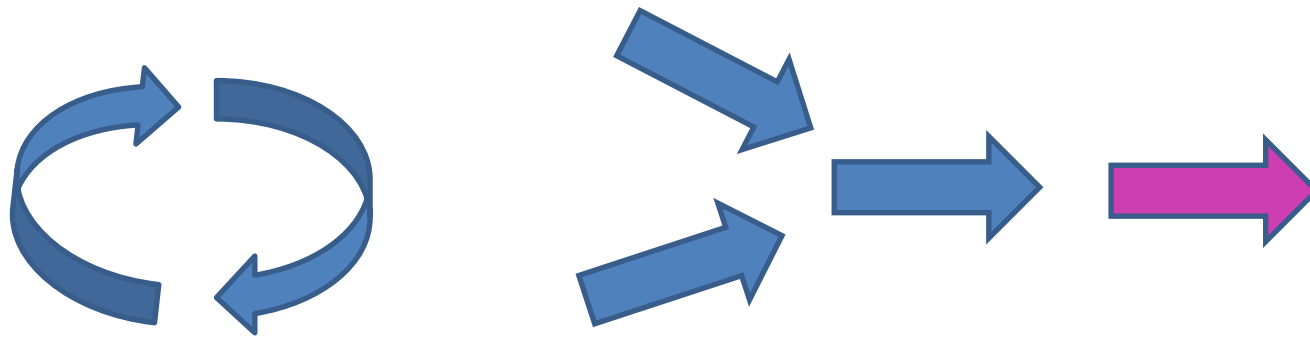
## Discussing critically and arguing

'In China, we don't need to prepare questions [in tutorials], we only need to accept what the teacher taught us. So the first time the lecturer asked us to think critically, we just could not understand **what rule it is.**'

# Challenge: thinking critically (in Western style)

- **Writing critically (and referencing)**

‘The Chinese people write articles with a **very different structure**. We sometimes talk about things in circles and maybe don’t hit the target so sometimes I write an article that way in English and have a problem.’



- ‘We are asked to write 300 words report in a foreign language, which I **barely did in my native language**, so I found this... sometimes... it’s too difficult.’

Interpreting the data

Our findings indicate that:

- To learn/transition successfully requires a “crisis of engagement” (Heyward 2002)
- Challenges faced by students from China stem from their encounter with/entry into a different learning culture
- Where they do not possess the requisite social/education skills
- Our project is about assisting students to manage (not avoid) this crisis/ process of cultural learning

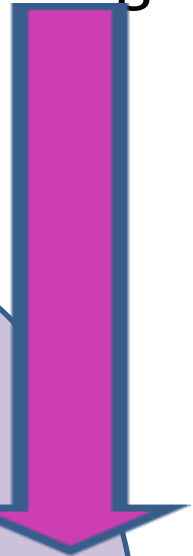
- How? By encouraging students and lecturers to explicitly articulate and negotiate difference as a strategy to support this transition
- Universities (in both countries) need to provide tailored socially, culturally and educationally responsible support to assist Chinese students to deal with different cultural practices and discourses

# Supporting students



## INFLUENTIAL FEATURES

- Styles of Learning and Assessment
- Teaching practices and expectations
- Education traditions
- Beliefs and Values



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## What next?

‘Toolkits’ of learning materials and teaching strategies:

- For students and lecturers:
- Prior to departure from China
- Pre-course and in-course in Australia
- In student learning centres and relevant discipline Schools

**Transferability of findings and further research?**





Collaborating for Success

If you'd like to take part in this project, we'd love to hear from you.

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Plus

Workshop this afternoon at 2.20 p.m. as a space for discussion