The perception of referencing and plagiarism amongst students coming from Confucian heritage cultures

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Abstract This paper attempts to explore the perception of referencing and plagiarism amongst students coming from Confucian cultural heritage. The focus of this paper concentrates on these students' learning approaches and styles and associated problems. This paper evaluates research conducted among all such students who are studying in Australia. The paper identifies both positive and negative perceptions and highlights several misperceptions on students from Confucian cultural heritage that are commonly held by Western academics. Finally, the paper presents an overview of strategies that might be adopted by Western academics in order to make these students' experiences in Australian universities more enjoyable and successful.

Key Ideas

- This paper examines the differences in perception of plagiarism amongst Chinese students who have been relying on rote learning and blending ideas and concepts with their own original thoughts.

- As in a typical examination, the memory of knowledge would be tested through short answers, Multiple Choices and Short Essays. Their practice research and hand-on skills are less emphasized.

- Borrowed ideas are widely accepted to advance their argument, esp. ideological ones;

- Referencing has less importance in their scholarship and academic accomplishment;

- To contribute to the mutual pool of human knowledge is perceived as a duty and privilege, to be widely copied or quoted are good indication of their success.

- Intellectual properties are bestowed by some sacred blessing, traditionally, so to reap financial awards are not part of Confucianism.

- Students are picking up Australian requirement for proper reference and acknowledgement of others' works.

- Some have embraced the ideas, some with reluctance.

Discussion Question 1 Does strict requirement of reference contribute to the students' learning?

Discussion Question 2 Shall we encourage a free contribution of ideas to advance the intellectual and economical well being of the human race?

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to explore how the knowledge derived from previous research can assist universities and lecturers in developing supportive institutional structures and learning environments for international students coming from Confucian heritage cultures. Globally, more people than ever before are choosing to undertake an international education. International students have diverse needs when undertaking education in a foreign university. It is the interest of both international students and the host institution to ensure these students achieve success in their studies. The large-scale movement of students between education systems means that academics need to consider the learning and teaching implications of the increased numbers of international students in university classes. Notably, international students now form a large part of the diverse student community that exists in different universities. Many of these students are originally from countries where English may be spoken as a second or third language, or where English is only learnt as a foreign language in school. It is important to not make assumptions about these students' learning strategies because of their cultural background.

Much discussion of international students has focused on stereotypes: a presumed reluctance to talk in class, a preference for rote learning and an apparent lack of critical thinking skills (Melles, 2003). Implied within this stereotyping is an 'us' and 'them' approach to the students and a deficit view of this group of learners, as people who perhaps 'lack' the desirable qualities for succeeding in higher education as we understand it. However, this is simply not true. International students are some of the highest achieving students at the University. Research has found that academics are aware of the learning needs of their students, but may be unclear about how best to address and meet those needs (Kyna, 2007; Zhang, 2002).

Definitions

To clarify our argument, we need define some critical concepts. These include the following:

Students coming from Confucian heritage cultures: Biggs (1996), in Watkins and Biggs, (eds) used the term to refer to students from countries or regions such as Mainland China, Taiwan, Singapore, Hong Kong, Malaysia or Korea, where Confucian heritage was shared historically.

Chinese students: the term is not limited only to students from mainland China. It refers to international students coming from Chinese Confucian heritage cultures. Therefore, international students with at least one parent from Mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, or Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand, are included as "Chinese students" in a broader context.

Culture is defined by Barrett (1991) as "the systems of agreed-upon meanings that serve as recipes, or guidelines, for behaviour in any particular society." Terpstra and David (1991) warn that cultural misunderstandings cause problems 'stemming from differences in values and codes of behaviour' between parties involved in intercultural communication. They believe that: 'Culture is a learned,

shared, compelling, interrelated set of symbols whose meanings provide a set of orientations for members of a society. These orientations, taken together, provide solutions to problems that all societies must solve if they are to remain viable'.

In this study, culture includes belief, values, tradition, behavior, codes of practice, social norms that members of a society share in their daily life.

What is plagiarism?

Misunderstandings about plagiarism can occur for international students because of cultural and language issues. Students need to know what constitutes plagiarism. "The copying we (in Australia and Western Countries) call plagiarism is, however, is not considered a problem in many other cultures (Angelil-Carter, 2000; Bell, 1999; Brennan & Durovic, 2005). In some cultures it is acceptable, even flattering, to copy the work of 'masters'. In some cases it is considered more humble than boldly advocating your own opinions about something (Bell, 1999) and students who want to make a point, particularly clearly see paraphrasing the source as a strange thing to do when the source itself makes the point better than they could ever reword it in an imperfectly mastered language." (Watkins & Biggs, 1996). For example, in a case where a Chinese student was accused of plagiarizing, there was an obvious difference in interpretation of the definition of plagiarism. The student did not think it was correct to rewrite an author's words since the author was well known and respected. Hence, he/she included it in his/her text. This reverence for authority clearly comes from a cultural worldview where a respect for predecessors and elders is paramount.

The differences in these practices lead to the mismatch of expectations between students and staff. These are implicit expectations that are hidden by obvious language difference, and therefore are not immediately obvious. While international students may be aware of what plagiarism is, they may lack the English language skills required to read information, extract the relevant points and then put it into their own words, so that they can avoid plagiarising (Baty, 2007; Erlenawati, 2005).

For international students, plagiarism can be an intercultural issue. They may come from cultures where writing involved repeating the collective wisdom and there is little need to acknowledge the source of information. Plagiarism can also be an English language ability issue. Asian international students from Confucian heritage cultures often have different expectations of higher education compared to those of their teachers, which leads to difficulties in those students do not know what the appropriate behavior is in the academic culture of an Australian university. For example, students from Asian cultural heritage have much higher regard for their lecturers than many staff members themselves are aware of. Also, in Western culture, the development and extension of knowledge is highly valued and encouraged; while in Eastern culture, the respect of written knowledge and authority is the norm, and critical analysis is not required or encouraged (Ballard & Clanchy, 1988; Ballard & Clanchy, 1991).

Why students commit academic dishonesty

The author of "Understanding Plagiarism", presented at University of Maryland University College Writing Conference 2007, listed the following reasons for plagiarism: pressure to achieve higher grades; time management issues; language difficulties; cultural differences (with respect to pedagogic and writing practice); attitude/belief that cheating is acceptable; inattention to citation practices.

As in a typical examination, the memory of knowledge would be tested through short answers, multiple choices and short essays. Their practice research and hand-on skills on researching, critical thinking and writing, citation and referencing are less emphasized.

1. Borrowed ideas are widely accepted to advance their argument, esp. ideological ones;

2. Referencing has less importance in their scholarship and academic accomplishment;

3. To contribute to the mutual pool of human knowledge is perceived as a duty and privilege; to be widely copied or quoted are good even flattering indication of an author's success. To focus on financial rewards for a piece of literary work might be perceived as selfish and narrow-minded.

4. Intellectual properties are bestowed by some sacred blessing, traditionally, so to reap financial awards are not part of Confucianism or Buddhism. e.g.: Fokuangshan Buddhist group, which has a huge Nantian Temple in Wollongong, claims copyright on their publication whilst Queensland-based Pure Land Buddhists relinquish copyrights on their publications. No publication by Pure Land is for sale or re-sale. A free distribution is to ensure the maximum number of people get the chance to access their faith, which is an accomplishment they intend to achieve.

5. Students are picking up Australian requirement for proper reference and acknowledgement of others' works. As part of international education experience, they are learning the new academic practice and ethics.

6. Some have embraced the ideas; others accepted them with reluctance.

Challenges faced by international students

There are some conclusions we can draw about the particular challenges faced by international students that distinguish their experiences from those of domestic students. These include the challenges of:

- learning and living in a different culture;

- learning in a foreign university context;

- learning while developing English language proficiency; and

- learning the academic disciplinary discourse

Culture

However, Ballard and Clanchy (1991) and Burke (1986) have identified that culture, as well as language, contribute to the challenges facing international students in their study in Australian universities. For example, in traditional Chinese culture students are expected to listen in class most of the time and follow the instructions issued by the teacher. The teachers are highly respected, and are expected to provide answers to questions. This is in sharp contrast to the Western culture, where the active participation of students is sought and encouraged.

Teaching and learning

Teachers work as facilitators to students' learning in Western culture (Ramburuth & McCormick, 2001; Wehrly, 1986). Closely related to and overlapping with culture are the different expectations which students bring to the learning experiences, and the unfamiliar teaching and learning approaches used in Australian universities. They present further challenges to international students. Whereas all students go through a transition in the first year study at universities in the areas of adjusting to the increasing independence of tertiary education, and the different learning and teaching approaches (Erlenawati, 2005; Kevin Nield, 2004), international students need to make these transitions, as well as adjusting to a new cultural and educational environment.

Research has highlighted that the educational expectations of international students are as diverse as those of domestic students (Carroll & Ryan, 2005). These students can range, for example, in academic ability, English language proficiency, motivation, educational experiences, as do many of the local students. It has been shown that international students including Chinese ones were often less likely to perform well than their Western peers.

Given the increasing internationalisation of the Australian higher education, numerous previous studies have addressed issues of transition from a foreign to a western study environment and the significance of cultural origin in this process (Kennedy, Rushdi, & Willis, 2000; Ramburuth & McCormick, 2001). Previous literature also explains some of the processes by which lecturers develop stereotypical views that in turn prevent them from adjusting their teaching methodologies to suit the needs of culturally diverse students (Watkins & Biggs, 2002) .

Language

Language poses as an immediate and the most obvious challenge to international students in their day-to-day communication and classroom function. In the academic pursuit of reading, writing, understanding lectures and participating in tutorials, language skills can help or hinder their progress. Most often, staff members attribute the lack of progress of a student to lack of language proficiency, and in many cases students themselves make the same attribution.

Different education system

A study by Watkins (2002) identified significant differences between Western systems of education and other cultures. In Western cultural environment self-esteem, internal locus of control and academic achievement are highly correlated to deep approaches to learning (Matthews, Lietz, & Darmawan, 2007; Ramburuth & McCormick, 2001). The common understanding that a deep approach to learning was stimulated through higher level cognitive tasks such as abstraction and evaluation can be countered by proposing that also lower level cognitive tasks such as memorisation and repetition, typically associated with Confucian approaches to education, can lead to deep learning (Chan, 1999). Subsequent studies conduced by Dahlin and Watkins (2000) supported this by pointing out that, in Chinese schools, repetition served two purposes, firstly to memorize but then to develop or deepen understanding. This has been supported by Nield (2007) who added that Chinese learners could be, however, regarded as learning strategically by engaging primarily or exclusively with material that formed part of the assessment.

There are significant *cultural differences* in the approaches to teaching and learning strategies in Australian and overseas contexts. Ballard and Clanchy (1991, 1997) have summarized these key differences suggesting that in Western culture, tertiary education is oriented towards *extending* knowledge. Consequently, teaching approaches adopted are designed to develop the analytical and speculative ability of students.

By comparison, in more 'traditional' cultures, for example, Chinese culture, the education systems are mainly oriented towards conserving knowledge, and the teaching approach emphasizes the reproductive ability of students (Peterson, Hayhoe, & Lu, 2001; Pyvis & Chapman, 2005; Van Oord, 2005). It would, therefore, seem that students who, prior to entering a university in Australia, have only been provided with specific materials by their teachers would be disoriented and disadvantaged when they realize that they have to study independently. In addition, they will need to read more widely than their prescribed texts to meet the requirements of their studies, and they would be unfamiliar with their lecturers posing a question and leaving it unanswered. In many students', home countries, the words of teachers are highly credited and the students' expectations are that teachers will always supply answers for students, which the students are expected to memorize and reproduce (Ballard & Clanchy 1991).

Because the majority of international students enter Australian higher education with overseas secondary schooling and have no exposure to analytical or speculative styles in education, academic adjustment to this situation is clearly a difficult one. It should be noted that sometimes students from Western high schools also seem to have had little exposure to analytical or speculative education, and for them too, the transition to higher education is difficult.

Students' general attitudes towards their studies

Existing research suggests that a characteristic of Western educational psychology is the role of achievement and achievement motivation, which is viewed as individualistic or ego enhancing (Hui, 2005; Phuong-Mai, Terlouw, &

Pilot, 2005). A relevant contribution was made by Watkins and Biggs (1996) who concluded that students from Western cultures tend to view their studies as a means to an end, a degree, a job or a high salary.

Contrarily, students from Far Eastern cultures were found to be motivated by a more complex mix of personal ambition, family face, peer support and material reward. In East Asian societies the notion of success needs to be reinterpreted in a collectivist framework which may include diverse stakeholders, such as family, peers and the wider local society, so that a child's success becomes a matter of saving the "family face" (Melles, 2003; Zhiheng & Brunton, 2007).

Asian students had most difficulties in expressing their ideas clearly, using logical arguments, writing essays, participating in class discussions and applying theory to practice (Townsend & Poh, 2008). From a Western perspective, teachers were regarded as a facilitators promoting learns autonomy (the Socratic approach to teaching) whereas from an Eastern perspective the teacher was viewed as transmitter of knowledge (the Confucian approach to teaching) (Ha, 2006; Introna, Hayes, Blair, & Wood, 2003; Zhang, 2002).

Different styles of learning and writing

Previous research has highlighted that student attitudes and their cultural background to a significant degree influences approaches to learning and teaching. Many students studying in the west come from cultures where learning styles are vastly different from Western educational practices. Nearly 40 years ago, Kaplan(1966) investigated how different thought patterns in language lead to different ways of learning and writing. In his analysis of various writings of students from different cultural backgrounds he deduced that the way students write was influenced by their cultural background. For example, he found that English students write with a linear progression of ideas while oriental students' writing is of a spiral nature. These differences in learning and writing styles can lead to difficulties for international students studying in a western environment.

The most documented learning style is that of the Chinese. Chan (1999) shows how the Chinese style of learning evident in China, Hong Kong and South East Asian countries, is influenced by Confucian philosophy. These societies are often termed Confucian Heritage Cultures (CHCs). Confucius' teachings began as a set of moral rules for society (Chan 1999). Rulers were to govern with benevolence and justice while the people must obey and respect their leaders (Zhang, 2002). By providing a clear hierarchical structure based on mutual respect society would be able to live in harmony. Confucianism has developed into a philosophy that permeates all aspects of Chinese society today and is a critical element of Chinese cultural identity (Chan 1999). It is particularly evident in education influencing the relationships between students and teachers. This relationship is strongly hierarchical, with a deep respect from both sides (Biggs 1994). Chinese learners have been brought up to avoid challenging authority and to respect those who provide knowledge.

Chan (1999) states that the connection between Confucian philosophy and the behavioral practices are obvious. Because of the pressure to preserve societal

harmony, to conform to the system and avoid loss of face, she suggests that Chinese students prefer particular methods of teaching and learning that endorse these cultural beliefs. These include memorization of texts and the acceptance of taught ideas.

This style of learning involving rote or repetition and memorization is often viewed disparagingly by western academics, leading to the conclusion that it produces surface learning rather than deep understanding of a subject. Biggs & Watkins (1996) view this as a western misconception saying that CHC students often achieve considerably higher academically than their western counterparts. If their levels of understanding were only surface deep then this would not be possible.

Biggs & Watkins (1996) make a distinction between rote and repetition learning. Rote learning is memorizing without understanding whereas repetition learning can lead to a deepening of understanding over time. They believe that many western academics confuse these types of learning stereotyping Chinese learners as rote-learners. The Malaysian students in O'Donoghue's (1996) study recognize that 'rote learning is not good' and had a desire for a deeper level of understanding. Therefore, this learning style should not be dismissed by western educationalists. Memorization is valued highly in Chinese society.

Chan (1999) says that the traditional Chinese view of an educated civilized person is one who could memorize the classics. Children are taught social obligations by memorization from an early age and throughout schooling, students are expected to memorize large amounts of texts. In this way, students show respect and acknowledgement for an author. However, Chan (1999) acknowledges that for Chinese students taught to memorize in this way problems may arise in relation to plagiarism when studying in Western institutions.

Conclusions

The perception on referencing and plagiarism amongst students coming from Confucian heritage cultures are inherently different from domestic students in Australian universities. Students from Confucian heritage cultures are striving to overcome cultural barriers, grasp the new academic concepts, juggling between different standards or criteria. Australian education providers need to pass on the ethical and legitimate academic practice to their international students while acknowledging the different learning styles and academic criteria. Australian educators should encourage a free contribution of ideas to advance the intellectual and economic wellbeing of the human races.

Students from Confucian heritage cultures may find strict requirements concerning referencing limit their learning. Being caught by accusations of plagiarism make them less encouraged to articulate their academic arguments fully.

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