



UNIVERSITY
OF WOLLONGONG
AUSTRALIA

University of Wollongong
Research Online

University of Wollongong Thesis Collection
1954-2016

University of Wollongong Thesis Collections

2010

Knowledge and knowers in online learning : investigating the effects of online flexible learning on student sojourners

Rainbow Tsai-Hung Chen

University of Wollongong, uow_chenr@uow.edu.au

UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG

COPYRIGHT WARNING

You may print or download ONE copy of this document for the purpose of your own research or study. The University does not authorise you to copy, communicate or otherwise make available electronically to any other person any copyright material contained on this site. You are reminded of the following:

This work is copyright. Apart from any use permitted under the Copyright Act 1968, no part of this work may be reproduced by any process, nor may any other exclusive right be exercised, without the permission of the author.

Copyright owners are entitled to take legal action against persons who infringe their copyright. A reproduction of material that is protected by copyright may be a copyright infringement. A court may impose penalties and award damages in relation to offences and infringements relating to copyright material. Higher penalties may apply, and higher damages may be awarded, for offences and infringements involving the conversion of material into digital or electronic form.

Recommended Citation

Chen, Rainbow Tsai-Hung, Knowledge and knowers in online learning : investigating the effects of online flexible learning on student sojourners, Doctor of Philosophy thesis, Faculty of Education, University of Wollongong, 2010. <http://ro.uow.edu.au/theses/3099>

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library: research-pubs@uow.edu.au

NOTE

This online version of the thesis may have different page formatting and pagination from the paper copy held in the University of Wollongong Library.

UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG

COPYRIGHT WARNING

You may print or download ONE copy of this document for the purpose of your own research or study. The University does not authorise you to copy, communicate or otherwise make available electronically to any other person any copyright material contained on this site. You are reminded of the following:

Copyright owners are entitled to take legal action against persons who infringe their copyright. A reproduction of material that is protected by copyright may be a copyright infringement. A court may impose penalties and award damages in relation to offences and infringements relating to copyright material. Higher penalties may apply, and higher damages may be awarded, for offences and infringements involving the conversion of material into digital or electronic form.

**Knowledge and knowers in online learning:
Investigating the effects of online flexible learning
on student sojourners**

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the
requirements for the award of the degree

Doctor of Philosophy

from

University of Wollongong

by

Rainbow Tsai-Hung Chen

B.Ed., M.A.

Faculty of Education

2010

Certification

I, Rainbow T.-H. Chen, declare that this thesis, submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy, in the Faculty of Education, University of Wollongong, is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. The document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

Rainbow T.-H. Chen

5 May, 2010

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my two supervisors, Associate Professor Sue Bennett and Dr. Karl Maton. I thank them both for providing me with inspiration and unwavering support during my Ph.D. candidature and throughout the writing of this thesis. I thank them both particularly for their enthusiasm for this research, and for encouraging me at various stages that I was capable of accomplishing this project. Their constant challenging of my intellectual thinking helped me immeasurably.

I also owe special thanks to all the people involved in the research. I wholeheartedly thank the teacher and student participants for contributing their time to this study. Particular thanks also go to the University of Wollongong and its staff for the financial, academic and technical support they provided me, especially in awarding me a University Postgraduate Scholarship, which made full-time study possible. I am additionally grateful to my fellow Ph.D. students with whom I shared this journey, particularly Catherine Wormald, for her friendship and intellectual companionship.

Finally, I dedicate this thesis to my husband and best friend, Michael Yeldham, for his unflinching intellectual and emotional support through the entire project.

Abstract

This study investigates the effects of online flexible learning on international students in Australian higher education. It brings together two issues widely viewed as key to the future of higher education worldwide: online learning and international students. The focus of this research is on Chinese students because they are presently among the largest international student cohorts in English-speaking countries that have embraced online education, including Australia. The study was motivated by the paucity of empirical research on international students' experiences of online flexible learning, and particularly the lack of research in this area underpinned by theory. The aim of this investigation was to explore Chinese international students' perspectives and experiences of online flexible learning by systemically analysing these learners' educational dispositions, the pedagogic practices involved in this form of learning, and the relations between these two factors. The study seeks to generate findings that contribute to the theorisation of online educational experiences.

The research employed a qualitative case study approach, drawing on postgraduate Chinese students' online experiences in the Faculty of Education at an Australian university. Three key questions guided the research:

- (1) What are the characteristics of the teaching practices that have helped shape the educational beliefs and values that Chinese student sojourners bring to the online learning context in Australia?
- (2) What are the characteristics of the online teaching practices at the Australian university, including the pedagogical beliefs underpinning them?
- (3) How do Chinese students interpret and respond to these online teaching practices?

The research design comprised three main parts that addressed these three questions respectively. These involved conducting: focus groups with Chinese students from various faculties; interviews with Australian teachers of online units in the Faculty of Education, and a review of their unit outlines; and multi-session interviews with individual Chinese students who had previously been or were currently enrolled in an online unit in the Faculty of Education.

The theoretical framework used for the research drew primarily on three principal sources. First, Berry's acculturation approach (1980, 1997a, 2005) provided an organising framework for analytically distinguishing what the 'heritage culture' or dispositions students brought with them from China, the 'host culture' or pedagogic practices they encountered in Australian online courses, and the outcomes of the meeting of these two educational cultures. Secondly, the conceptual framework of Basil Bernstein (1977, 1990, 2000) enabled each of these to be analysed in terms of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. Thirdly, Maton's 'Legitimation Code Theory' (LCT) (Maton, 2000, 2007, 2009; Moore & Maton, 2001) provided a further means of conceptualising their underlying structuring principles in a manner that enabled a systematic analysis.

The instructional approaches used in the online units examined in this research were identified as constructivist-inspired. A major finding of the study was that there was, in the terms of legitimation codes, a 'code clash' between the students' prior 'knowledge code' educational experiences (where explicit procedures, skills and specialised knowledge are emphasised) and the teachers' 'knower code' notions of education (where learners' dispositions are emphasised as the basis of achievement). This code clash in the students' online learning experiences led to 'relativist code' consequences (where neither specialist knowledge nor particular dispositions is emphasised – a kind of vacuum of legitimacy), which were associated with feelings of isolation, guilt and depression. The study argues that online constructivist teaching assumes a particular kind of knower, with particular socially-based dispositions and experiences, and systematically disadvantages other kinds of knowers. The thesis concludes with a detailed theoretical explanation for this form of learning experience, and a discussion of the findings in relation to constructivist teaching practice and online learning.

One contribution of the study is that it expands the knowledge base concerning Chinese learners' experiences with online flexible education. More prominent and enduring contributions of this research, however, reside in the wider application of the findings to other learner populations, and in the demonstrated utility of exploring online educational practice and experience through a sociology of knowledge approach.

Table of Contents

Certification	i
Acknowledgements	ii
Abstract	iii
List of Figures	x
List of Tables	xi
Chapter 1 – Introduction.....	1
1. 1 Background to the study.....	1
1.1.1 Online flexible learning in Australian higher education.....	1
1.1.2 Chinese international students in Australian higher education.....	4
1. 2 The research problem	5
1. 3 Aim of the study and research strategy	5
1. 4 Significance of the study	8
1. 5 Overview of the thesis.....	9
Chapter 2 – Literature Review	10
2. 1 Introduction	10
2. 2 Online flexible learning in Western universities.....	11
2. 3 Learners’ experiences of online learning	17
2.3.1 Learners’ general experiences of online learning.....	18
2.3.2 Learners’ experiences in particular online contexts	22
2. 4 Chinese learners’ experiences of online learning.....	29
2.4.1 Chinese learners.....	29
2.4.2 Chinese learners’ online experiences.....	32
2. 5 Conclusion.....	38
Chapter 3 – Methodology	40
3. 1 Introduction	40
3. 2 Theoretical perspectives.....	40

3.2.1 Conceptualising the research problem: Berry’s acculturation framework	41
3.2.2 Characterising educational practices: Bernstein’s concepts of educational knowledge codes	45
3.2.3 Integrating the knower: Maton’s Legitimation Code Theory.....	50
3. 3 Research approach	53
3.3.1 Qualitative research	53
3.3.2 Case study approach	55
3. 4 Research setting	56
3. 5 Data collection	56
3.5.1 Phase One: The focus groups	57
3.5.2 Phase Two: Teacher interviews	61
3.5.3 Phase Three: Case study student interviews.....	63
3.5.4 Translation	69
3.5.5 Role of researcher	70
3.5.6 Ethics	72
3. 6 Data analysis	72
3.6.1 Empirical thematic analysis.....	73
3.6.2 Organisational coding.....	74
3.6.3 Analytical coding.....	76
3. 7 Quality of research	85
3. 8 Summary of the chapter	88

Chapter 4 – Heritage Educational Culture: Students’ conceptions of and beliefs about learning..... 90

4. 1 Introduction	90
4. 2 Curriculum	90
4.2.1 Relation to everyday knowledge	90
4.2.2 Relation to other forms of educational knowledge.....	92
4.2.3 Types of knowledge to pursue.....	93
4.2.4 Discussion.....	98
4. 3 Pedagogy	100
4.3.1 The sequencing of learning.....	100

4.3.2 The pacing of learning	102
4.3.3 Favourable learning strategies	103
4.3.4 Relationships between teacher and students	104
4.3.5 Relationship with fellow students	109
4.3.6 Discussion	110
4. 4 Assessment	113
4.4.1 Rules of achievement for exam-based assessment	113
4.4.2 Rules of achievement for non exam-based assessment	115
4.4.3 Discussion	117
4. 5 Summary of the chapter	118

Chapter 5 – Host Educational Culture: Teachers’ conceptions and designs of the online units.....119

5. 1 Introduction	119
5. 2 Curriculum	119
5.2.1 Relation to everyday knowledge	119
5.2.2 Relation to other forms of educational knowledge	121
5.2.3 Learner development	122
5.2.4 Construction of personal knowledge	124
5.2.5 Discussion	126
5. 3 Pedagogy	128
5.3.1 The sequencing of learning	128
5.3.2 The pacing of learning	131
5.3.3 Relationships between teacher and students	134
5.3.4 Relationships with fellow students	140
5.3.5 Teachers’ overall view of online learning	144
5.3.6 Discussion	146
5. 4 Assessment	149
5.4.1 Assessment methods	149
5.4.2 Assessment criteria	152
5.4.3 Measures of achievement	153
5.4.4 Discussion	156
5. 5 Summary of the chapter	158

Chapter 6 – Sojourners’ experiences in the host culture: Student experiences of online learning	159
6. 1 Introduction	159
6. 2 Curriculum	159
6.2.1 Relation to everyday knowledge	159
6.2.2 Relation to other forms of educational knowledge.....	163
6.2.3 Types of knowledge gained.....	164
6.2.4 Discussion.....	172
6. 3 Pedagogy	176
6.3.1 The sequencing of learning.....	176
6.3.2 The pacing of learning	179
6.3.3 Relationships with the teacher	181
6.3.4 Relationships with fellow students	186
6.3.5 Discussion.....	189
6. 4 Assessment	194
6.4.1 Assessment criteria	194
6.4.2 Perceived measures of achievement	197
6.4.3 Discussion.....	202
6. 5 Views of the online delivery mode	206
6.5.1 Discussion.....	208
6. 6 Summary of the chapter	209
Chapter 7 – Conclusion	210
7. 1 Introduction	210
7. 2 Summary and discussion of findings	210
7.2.1 Characterisation of the teaching practices in the students’ formative educational context.....	211
7.2.2 Characterisation of the constructivist teaching practices in the online units	218
7.2.3 Student sojourners’ experiences of constructivist-inspired pedagogies in the online context	226

7. 3	Conclusions and implications	234
7.3.1	Code clash.....	235
7.3.2	The intrinsically invisible knower code.....	241
7.3.3	Findings in relation to constructivist teaching approaches.....	243
7.3.4	Findings in relation to flexible online learning	246
7. 4	Strengths, limitations and issues for future research.....	247
7. 5	Conclusion.....	249
References.....		252
 Appendices		
Appendix 1:	Interview guide for focus groups	273
Appendix 2:	Stimulus material used in focus groups	274
Appendix 3:	Interview guide for teacher interviews.....	276
Appendix 4:	Interview guide for the first student interviews	277
Appendix 5:	Interview guide for intervening student interviews	278
Appendix 6:	Interview guide for the final student interviews	279
Appendix 7:	Information sheet (example)	280
Appendix 8:	Consent form (example).....	281
Appendix 9:	Coding scheme for themes emerging from the data	282

List of Figures

Figure 1: A general framework for understanding acculturation (Berry, 2005, p.703).	42
Figure 2. Adapted framework for understanding acculturation in this study (adapted from Berry, 2005).	43
Figure 3. Legitimation codes of specialisation (Maton, 2007, p.97)	51
Figure 4. Data collection phases	57
Figure 5. Analytical stages in this study	76

List of Tables

Table 1. Demographic information for focus group informants.....	60
Table 2. Demographic information for teacher participants	63
Table 3. Demographic information for case study participants	66
Table 4. Student interview schedule	67
Table 5. General topics for student interviews	68
Table 6. Examples from the coding scheme for emerging themes	74
Table 7. Results of data organisation based on Berry’s framework	75
Table 8. Language of description for classification and framing	80
Table 9. Manifestations of the epistemic and social relations in this study.....	81
Table 10. An external language of description for epistemic and social relations	83
Table 11. Detailed summary of analysis approach and procedures employed in this study.....	84
Table 12. Summary of strategies used to enhance the quality of the research	87
Table 13. Summary of the assessment tasks included in the online units	150
Table 14. Assessment criteria for different types of tasks	152
Table 15. Teachers’ descriptions of a successful learner in their online units	154
Table 16. Students’ descriptions of a successful learner in their online units	198
Table 17. Code clash and its effects.....	240