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Rainbow Tsai-Hung Chen  
University of Wollongong

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**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.

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Rainbow T.-H. Chen

5 May, 2010

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## **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.



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# **Chapter 1**

## **Introduction**

### **1. 1 Background to the study**

#### **1.1.1 Online flexible learning in Australian higher education**

Australia has long been faced with the challenge of providing education for learners in inland and rural areas because of its widely distributed population across large distances. It has a strong tradition of distance education (Richards, 2002; Stacey & Visser, 2005). The advent of networked technologies and the pressure from global competition for educational markets drove the development of more sophisticated forms of distance education. Distance education has transformed from the Correspondence Model (first generation), the Multimedia Model (second generation), the Telelearning model (third generation), to the Flexible Learning Model (fourth generation) and the Intelligent Flexible Learning Model (fifth generation) (J. Taylor, 1995; Taylor, 2001). In the fourth and fifth generation models, a convergence between distance and on-campus learning has gradually emerged, leading to the notion of ‘flexible learning’ or ‘mixed mode study’ (Cunningham, Tapsall, Ryan, Stedman, Bagdon & Flew, 1998; Nicoll, 1998; Nunan, 2005). This form of enrolment allows students to choose to participate in a study unit via the internal (on-campus), external (distance) or online (flexible) mode, therefore allowing universities to increase student enrolment. Universities have experienced this pressure to increase enrolment mainly because of reductions in government funding to the tertiary sector (McConachie & Danaher; Scott, 2003). In addition, other factors providing impetus for flexible learning include growing demand for tertiary qualifications by students, high mobility of learners, and advances in technologies that have made flexible learning possible (Johnston, 1999; Smith, Ling & Hill, 2006). Statistics show that flexible course offerings have gained increasing popularity in the Australian university sector over recent years (Nunan, 2005; Riddiford, 2009).

Despite the widespread adoption of the notion of ‘flexible learning’ within higher education, many educational critics have pointed out that the idea of flexibility



remains elusive (Cloonan, 2004) or ‘in flux’ (Nicoll, 1998). Flexibility can mean different things to people in different roles in the university system (P. Taylor, 1995; Normand, Littlejohn & Falconer, 2008). Consequently, the term ‘flexible learning’ has been used inconsistently in the research literature. The present study explored this form of educational provision in the context of teaching and learning, and adopted a definition provided by a large-scale, government-funded research project that investigated the effectiveness of flexible learning in Australian universities (Ling et al., 2001). The project describes flexible learning as offering guided choice to the learner in one or more of the following domains:

- “The *time* at which study occurs.
- The *pace* at which the learning proceeds.
- The *place* in which study is conducted.
- The *content* that is studied, which includes the concept of flexible *entry* and *exit* points to a programme.
- The learning *style* adopted by the learner.
- The form(s) of *assessment* employed.
- The option to *collaborate* with others or to learn independently.” (Ling et al., 2001, p.xvii)

At the heart of flexible learning, as indicated by this definition, is student-centeredness. Moreover, even though by this definition, flexible learning does not necessarily involve using networked technologies, the confluence of the two is common in educational practice and research (Bigum & Rowan, 2004; Cloonan, 2004; Collis & Moonen, 2001; Cunningham et al., 1998; Johnston, 1997). This is because the new technologies are capable of reshaping temporal and spatial boundaries thereby offering opportunities to enhance flexibility. As a result, several terms are currently treated by the literature as synonymous with flexible learning, including ‘distance education’, ‘open learning’ and ‘online learning’. Despite the intertwined meanings of these provisions of learning, each originally had a different focus. Distance education differs from the other two forms of learning in that it usually does not require face-to-face attendance. Both open learning and flexible learning emphasise student choice in relation to time, place and pace of study. Open learning, though, usually refers to programs that allow greater flexibility in terms of students’

prior credentials (Cunningham et al., 1998). Both open learning and flexible learning may comprise face-to-face and electronically-mediated learning experiences, with the face-to-face component often being offered in intensive time periods. The fourth type of learning mentioned above, online learning, tends to be used as an umbrella term to refer to a study unit that is delivered entirely or mostly online.

The focus of this study was on *online flexible learning*. In limiting the scope of investigation to this particular form of learning, the study was specifically concerned with the type of educational experience that highlights flexibility and is provided mainly through online communication technologies with no or very few optional face-to-face sessions. An *online unit* is defined in this study as a semester-long study unit comprising part of a degree course that is mainly delivered through online technologies with few or no face-to-face meetings.

Australian higher education institutions have embraced online flexible learning for its capacity to expand educational opportunities for learners and increase income for universities. However, a number of commentators have cautioned that the effects of this form of educational practice on teachers and learners have not received due attention (Bigum & Rowan, 2004; Brabazon, 2007). Overall, in discussing flexibility, universities have commonly stressed the need for globalising their educational product (e.g. Tapsill, 2001; Teghe & Knight, 2004; Wood, Tapsall, Soutar, 2005) rather than showing a concern for improving teaching and learning (Cloonan, 2004; Johnston, 1999). This notion is reflected in a comment by Bigum and Rowan (2004) that the prevailing view of flexibility in Australian universities is a ‘how’ (in terms of catering to the market), rather than a ‘what’ and ‘why’ approach to education. In a similar vein, Chen (2003) remarked that flexibility has “become an end, rather than a means to the pursuit of quality learning” (n.p.). Many researchers and commentators endorsing the notion of flexibility believe, however, that online flexible delivery has the potential to transform learning (Lockwood & Gooley, 2001; Salmon, 2000). This belief has given rise to a series of claims made about student-centred instructional approaches being compatible with online flexible learning. These claims are discussed in Chapter 2.

### 1.1.2 Chinese international students in Australian higher education

As well as online flexible learning, another stimulus to the recent change in the university landscape in Australia – and also part of the discourses of higher education worldwide – is the ‘globalisation’ of universities. As a result of declining public funds for universities since the mid-1990s, Australian higher education institutions have been promoting themselves as attractive destinations for international students (Dessoff, 2009; Niland, 2008). Australia is now recognised as a major player in the global education market and education has become Australia’s third largest export industry, worth more than AUD14 billion a year (Australian Education International, 2009a; Healy, 2009). In 2007, international students accounted for 26% of the overall enrolments in Australian universities (Marginson, 2009). In particular, there has been a significant rise in the number of Chinese international students in Australia over the last decade. Australia is the third largest recipient of Chinese students, following its two English-speaking competitor countries, the USA and the UK (Australian Education International, 2007). Currently, over one quarter (28%) of international students enrolling in Australian higher education are from Mainland China, and sustained future growth has been predicted (Australian Education International, 2009b). These students are referred to as *Chinese student sojourners* in this study. Sojourners are “individuals who travel abroad to attend a particular goal within a specified period of time,” usually intending to “return to their country of origin after completing their assignments” (Bochner, 2006, p.181).

Students from Chinese cultural backgrounds have been traditionally viewed as rote learners with a drive to attain high levels of achievement. They have also been seen as reluctant to challenge the opinions of authority figures and to show little enthusiasm for verbal interaction in class (see Ballard & Clanchy, 1984; Bradley & Bradley, 1984; Samuelowicz, 1987). Recent research has provided evidence refuting the notion that Chinese students simply learn by rote (Grimshaw, 2007; Watkins & Biggs, 1996; 2001a). However, studies continue to indicate that these learners are largely passive in class discussions and reliant on the teacher’s instruction in Western classrooms (Campbell & Li, 2008; Huang, 2005; Turner, 2006). Given the apparent incongruence between these characteristics and the key notions of student choice and learner-centeredness in online flexible learning, it is foreseeable that Chinese student

sojourners entering an online flexible educational context may find adapting to the learning environment difficult. That is, they may experience an educational culture clash. Catterick (2007), for example, posited that teaching approaches typically espoused by Western academics for online learning are very likely to disadvantage Chinese learners due to these learners' cultural attributes.

## **1. 2 The research problem**

Despite the growing uptake of online flexible learning and the ever increasing population of Chinese international students in the higher education sector in Australia, there is a dearth of research into the effects of online education for Chinese students. In fact, an exploration of the online learning literature found that the field has been dominated by *claims* about the educational *potential* of the new technologies and instructors' designs and practice of new, innovative pedagogies associated with these technologies (e.g. Collis & Moonen, 2001; Palloff & Pratt, 2001; Salmon, 2000). Thus far, little empirical research has been undertaken to examine learners' experiences of online flexible learning, with very little on Chinese learners' experiences in this area. Furthermore, the body of research into learners' online experiences is dominated by survey methods, which often reduce learners' experiences to their ratings of the merits and drawbacks of online learning. Therefore, significant aspects of learners' perceptions and concerns, as well as the reasons for these perceptions and concerns, have been largely neglected by researchers. In the relatively small number of qualitative inquiries conducted, there has been a tendency to concentrate on *either* the learner *or* the learning context rather than on relations between the two. In these survey and qualitative studies, investigations of students' online learning experiences (including those of Chinese student sojourners) have not systematically described or theorised learners' expectations, the nature of the learning context, or learners' interpretations of the learning context.

## **1. 3 Aim of the study and research strategy**

The aim of this study was to explore the online educational experiences of Chinese student sojourners in Australian higher education with a view to understanding the effects of this form of learning for these students.

The exploratory nature of this study and its focus on participants' perspectives lent itself to a qualitative paradigm (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000; Creswell, 2007). To address the limitations of previous research, the study sought to understand how learners' educational dispositions related to the learning context. A case study approach was selected for the investigation as this research strategy allowed the study to focus on the interconnection of the variables relevant to the entity being investigated (Stake, 1995, 2005). The study consisted of seven cases, each one of a Chinese student enrolled in a postgraduate coursework program at an Australian university.

The following questions were formulated to anchor the research:

- 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?
- What are the characteristics of the teaching practices in the online environment at the Australian university, including the pedagogical beliefs underpinning them?
- How do the student sojourners experience the teaching practices in the online environment at the university?

In response to the first two questions, the study investigated the teaching practices in Chinese education and in Australian online education, through the eyes of Chinese students and the teaching staff at the Australian university, respectively. The aim was to characterise the underlying structuring principles of the two educational practices, so they could be compared. This comparison enabled the study to locate degrees of potential harmonies and conflicts between the students' educational dispositions and the demands of the online teaching practices on learners. It also helped to contextualise the student sojourners' cross-cultural educational experiences in their online units at the university. The third question examined the outcomes of the meeting of the two sets of educational beliefs underpinning the Chinese and Australian educational cultures. Specifically, the study investigated how the students interpreted and coped with the online learning environment.

Data was collected in three phases, which corresponded, respectively, to the three research questions. In the first phase, three focus groups were conducted with Chinese postgraduate students from various faculties. The participants in these focus groups included students from Mainland China and Taiwan. The second phase involved individual interviews with eight Australian teachers of online units in the Faculty of Education, and a review of their unit outlines. The third phase included multi-session individual interviews with seven postgraduate Chinese students who had experience with online learning or who were currently studying online in the Faculty of Education. These seven students were drawn from different online units in this faculty, and all were from Mainland China.

In terms of the theoretical approach of this research, the study incorporated three theories: Berry's framework for understanding acculturation (1980, 1997a, 2005); Bernstein's theory of educational knowledge codes (1977, 1990, 2000); and Maton's Legitimation Code Theory (LCT) (Maton, 2000, 2007; Moore & Maton, 2001). Berry's acculturation theory was used as an organising framework to orient the study towards important issues relating to the students' intercultural experiences during data collection and in the initial data analysis stage. This initial data analysis (organisational coding stage) also involved examining the issues that emerged in educational terms by using Bernstein's notion of 'three message systems' (curriculum, pedagogy and assessment). In a further stage of analysis (analytical coding stage), Bernstein's 'classification' and 'framing' concepts, and one dimension of Maton's LCT were utilised to characterise the students' educational dispositions brought from China and the underlying structuring principles of the teaching practices in the Australian online context. These theoretical concepts from this analytical coding stage were also used to analyse the outcomes of the students' online educational experiences. When applying these concepts from this analytical coding stage to the study, an 'external language of description' (Bernstein, 2000) was developed. An 'external language of description' is a reading device that allows theory and data to be translated from one into the other. Chapter 3 provides details about how this translation device evolved. The study intended to theorise the students' online learning experiences, so that the findings and implications of the research would have wider application.

## **1. 4 Significance of the study**

As explained above, Chinese students were selected for this research because they comprise the largest international student group in Australia, as well as being among the largest groups in other major English-speaking countries (Australian Education International, 2007). The online educational experiences of this student population are thus of particular significance not only to Australian higher education but also to other Western universities that utilise online flexible learning. An immediate contribution of this study is to expand the knowledge base on the educational concerns and needs of Chinese students. This knowledge, in turn, provides valuable insights for state leaders, policy makers, designers of online learning environments, and online instructors regarding what learning support Chinese students may require when studying online.

The relevance of the problem investigated in this study is increased as the findings from previous research have shown that Chinese students' views of online learning do not vary greatly from those by students from other cultural backgrounds (see Chapter 2). This indicates that insights gained from this research may also apply to learners from other backgrounds. Moreover, unlike past investigations of Chinese students' learning experiences in Western countries, the focus of the present study was not on the influence of Chinese students' cultural attributes on their experiences. Rather, this study was primarily concerned with how Chinese students' educational dispositions relate to the online learning context. It could be expected that such a research focus, systematically theorised, would allow some extrapolation of the results of the study to other student populations.

On a theoretical level, the theoretical frameworks adopted by this research will increase knowledge relating to the utility of exploring online educational practice and experiences through the theoretical lenses provided by Berry, Bernstein and Maton. Thus far, very little research in this area has employed these concepts in combination or on these issues.

## **1. 5 Overview of the thesis**

This chapter has provided an overview of the study. The remainder of the thesis consists of a further five chapters. In Chapter 2, relevant literature is reviewed. The review focuses on current educational thinking about online flexible learning and empirical investigations of students' experiences of this form of learning. Chapter 3 gives a detailed account of the theoretical and methodological approaches utilised in the research. The chapter introduces the site of the investigation, the study participants, the three data collection phases, and the multistage analytical process based on the three theoretical perspectives drawn upon by the study. The results of this analysis are presented in three chapters, chapters 4, 5 and 6. Each of these chapters addresses one of the three research questions: Chapter 4 reports the results relating to Chinese student sojourners' experiences in China (research question 1); Chapter 5, the teaching practices in the online context at the Australian university (research question 2); and Chapter 6, the case study students' experiences of their online units (research question 3). The final chapter, Chapter 7, concludes the study by synthesising the findings presented in chapters 4, 5 and 6, and interpreting these findings in light of the theories used. This final chapter also discusses the implications of the study and suggests possibilities for further research.



## **Chapter 2**

### **Literature Review**

#### **2. 1 Introduction**

This study is concerned with Chinese international students' experiences of online flexible learning in Australian higher education. The previous chapter has introduced the research by establishing its general background and the problem motivating the research, along with the aim and the research strategy of the study. The purpose of this chapter is to examine the conceptual and research literature relevant to the problem being investigated. This literature review is structured into three main sections. The first section outlines the current nature of online flexible learning in higher education in Western countries (focused mainly on Australia, the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, and New Zealand) and the rhetoric associated with this educational practice. The aim of this first section is to familiarise the readers with current academic thinking in the area. A conclusion drawn from this conceptual literature is that online flexible learning is often equated with constructivist-inspired pedagogies, and claims about the pedagogical value of this combination are characteristic of scholarly writing in this area. To critically discuss evidence for these claims, as well as to establish an empirical base upon which the findings of the present research can build, the second section of the chapter surveys recent research into learners' online experiences in Western countries. The third section of this literature review is devoted to issues surrounding Chinese student 'sojourners' (students who come to a country temporarily to study), as they are the focus of this research. This section provides a critique of the notion of 'the Chinese learner' and a review of selected research into these learners' online experiences. The aim of this third section is to explore how the experiences of this particular student group have been researched and understood prior to this investigation. The chapter concludes with a summary of the current understanding of online flexible learning and students' experiences of this form of education, and what remains to be explored.

## 2. 2 Online flexible learning in Western universities

The literature of online flexible learning has been dominated by conceptual articles discussing what online learning *should* be, how it *should* be practiced, and its *potential* educational benefits. Much of this literature links online learning to student-centred or constructivist instructional approaches (see, for example, Herrington, Reeves & Oliver, 2005; Holmes, Tangney, FitzGibbon, Savage & Mehan, 2001; Huang, 2002; Laurillard, 2002; Leask & Younie, 2001; Pallof & Pratt, 2001; Rovai, 2004; Salmon, 2000; Tam, 2000; Yoder, 2007). This section explores and critiques online flexible learning in higher education by first establishing the association between flexible learning and student-centred pedagogy and then detailing how this has been strengthened by the incorporation of online technologies.

Flexible learning is understood not merely to be a delivery method for education, but also entailing a reappraisal of the fundamental educational approach. Specifically, this form of learning emphasises flexibility in several key respects: what is considered valid knowledge, how teaching is organised, and how learning is achieved and assessed. What is highlighted is how teaching and learning system can be adapted to meet the needs of individual learners. At the very minimum, flexible learning offers students education that is time and place independent, and it allows students to learn at a pace that they consider suitable for themselves:

In effect, these “flexible access” technologies (Taylor, 1992) allow the student to turn the teacher on, or off, at will as lifestyle permits. Similarly, access to the Internet facilitates interactivity, without sacrificing the benefits of flexible access, since it can be used to support asynchronous communication. Such flexibility has a major pedagogical benefit – it allows students to progress at their own pace. Thus varying rates of individual progression can be accommodated, unlike typical conventional educational practices where the whole class tends to progress at the same pace in synchronisation with the delivery of information through mass lectures and tutorials. (Taylor, 1995, ¶ 6)

Flexible learning also aims to accommodate individual students’ learning styles, collaboration preferences and selection of content, and to allow alternative assessment tasks (Ling et al., 2001). In short, it is envisaged as an individually-tailored approach to education, with the students’ needs and circumstances being central concerns (Willems, 2005). As a result, flexible learning is often coupled with student-centred instructional strategies (Collis & Moonen, 2001; Kirkpatrick & Jakupiec, 1999) and a more democratised partnership between teacher and student (Hall, 2008). In sum, it

embodies a shift of power and control from the institution and the teacher to the learner.

The strong association between flexibility and student-centeredness has been further augmented by the incorporation of online technologies which have emerged since the mid 1990s. In particular, advocates of the new technologies often connect the move to online flexible learning with the adoption of constructivist-inspired pedagogies (Herrington, et al, 2005; Huang, 2002; Jonassen, Davidson, Collins, Campbell & Hagg, 1995; Tam, 2000). This seems to be because an emphasis on student-centeredness underpins both agendas. In online flexible learning, it appears that this shift from a teacher-led to learner-centred practice has occurred because the immediacy of the teacher's presence is weaker in an online context than in a face-to-face one. In terms of learning theory, the blending of online learning and constructivist teaching procedures reflects the increasing popularity among academics in the past decade, of a constructivist-inspired, learner-centred approach over a more traditional, expository one (Lockwood & Gooley, 2001).

The advent of online technologies coincided with a movement in Western higher education calling for new learning outcomes in reaction to growing criticism over the poor alignment between university learning and the knowledge and skills required for professional practice (Visser, 2008). Knowledge taught via traditional instructivist pedagogy in abstract form was argued to be decontextualised and inert, and thereby unable to be applied to real-life problems and situations (Grabinger and Dunlap, 1995). In answering this criticism, many academics have come to identify with a variety of teaching approaches sharing the basic assumption that knowledge is not acquired passively but constructed actively by the learner and therefore teachers should avoid direct instruction. Drawing on sociocultural activity theory (Vygotsky, 1978), situated cognition (Brown, Collins & Duguid, 1989), communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) and adult learning theory (Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 1998), these new pedagogies aim to facilitate learners constructing their own knowledge individually, socially and collaboratively by engaging in solving complex, realistic problems in their local contexts. These changes in views of instructional methods are often held to represent a paradigm shift from objectivist to constructivist epistemologies that underpin pedagogy, a shift that has also been reflected in the field

of online learning (Jonassen, 1991, Jonassen, Cernusca & Ionas, 2007). On a further note, some commentators have even coined terms like ‘e-constructivism’ and ‘electronic constructivism’ to refer to the marriage of the new technologies and constructivism (Snyder, Marginson & Lewis, 2007; Yoder, 2007).

Apart from the pedagogical assumptions that academics usually bring from their face-to-face teaching to the online context (Bain & McNaught, 2006), the coupling of constructivist-inspired pedagogies and online learning has at least partly stemmed from the intent to capitalise on the affordances of technology in order to improve teaching and learning. Proponents have argued that these affordances enhance student-centred, constructivist teaching strategies (Oliver & McLoughlin, 2001; Oliver & Herrington, 2003). For example, it is believed that the new technologies can provide a rich, authentic context and complex problems for learners to resolve by virtue of critical and reflective thinking (Barab, Hay & Duffy, 1998); facilitate collaboration and interdependence between learners (Holmes et al., 2001, Leask & Younie, 2001; Palloff & Pratt, 2001); and encourage high-quality interaction (Harasim, 1995; Taylor, 1998). Van Merriënboer and Brand-Gruwel (2005, pp.413-414) summarised the “added pedagogical value” of the new technologies as follows:

- students can be confronted with large amounts of relevant as well as irrelevant information when using the Internet;
- new forms of communication and collaboration between learners can occur through the utilisation of external representations and tools; and
- realistic or authentic learning tasks can be designed to simulate the complexity of real life situations, thus helping learners transfer what is learned to their daily life or work settings.

Instructional approaches underpinned by constructivist philosophy have assumed different names, including situated learning, authentic learning, problem-based learning, self-regulated learning, and active learning. In pedagogical contexts of this kind, the teacher acts as a facilitator or a coach rather than as a lecturer. This is to enable learners to construct knowledge and develop the skills they need through the process of generating solutions to the learning tasks. As Lave and Wenger (1991)

have claimed, there should be “very little observable teaching; the more basic phenomenon is learning” (p.92). In other words, direct instruction should be minimal.

The role of instruction in constructivist teaching is considered a process of supporting learners’ knowledge construction (Duffy & Cunningham, 1996). This kind of support is also referred to by adherents of the pedagogy as ‘scaffolding’, which allows students to perform tasks that usually would be slightly beyond their ability without the teacher’s assistance (Vygotsky, 1978). Oliver and Herrington (2003) maintained that scaffolding differs from direct teaching, in that it is to “create ways to *encourage, guide* and *enable* learning” (p.116, italics added), such as creating opportunities for learners to collaborate and reflect, and encouraging them to articulate and express their understanding. In an online context, scaffolding can be provided through teacher-student and student-student interactions as well as through technological tools that offer models and opportunity for higher-order thinking. Most importantly, scaffolding should gradually fade with the learner being able to take more responsibility for their learning and to work independently (Hannafin & Land, 1997).

In effect, some discussants insist that terms suggesting instructivist or didactic teaching methods be eliminated from the discourse of online learning, the following comment being typical:

... we need to ban the term “delivery system” in any discussion of distance education or online instruction, and go instead with conceptual frameworks that emphasize student-initiated access; thus, terms such as “organize instruction” or “create learning materials” are more appropriate in thinking about online instruction. The new online paradigm calls not so much for providing instruction at a distance, as for making available learning resources and instructional activities to students. This holds true wherever the students are (just down the street or on another continent) and whenever the students need the resources and activities. (Carr-Chellman & Duchastel, 2000, p.231)

Herrington, et al. (2005) have further characterised teacher-led and student-centred Web-based courses as indicative of ‘information-oriented’ and ‘education-oriented’ approaches respectively. The former focuses on the teacher delivering content, whereas the latter stresses the process of educating students how to learn. Herrington et al. contend that the information-oriented approach is ‘myopic’ and would likely lead to the ultimate downfall of online learning in higher education.

Along with these claims about what constructivist pedagogy is and what it is capable of achieving in online contexts have come a large number of publications on instructional principles, recommendations and frameworks for practitioners of this form of teaching practice (e.g. Carr-Chellman & Duchastel, 2000; Honebein, 1996; Jonassen, 1999; Oliver & Herrington, 2003; Salmon, 2000; Savery & Duffy, 1995). To summarise, according to these texts, constructivist teaching is characterised by the following key elements:

- *Authentic* tasks and context: Learning tasks and environment reflect the complexity of the real world, and are relevant and meaningful to the learner. Moreover, learning must be anchored towards a larger task or problem (Savery & Duffy, 1995), of which the purpose is to involve learners in generating “fluid, flexible and usable knowledge” (Grabinger and Dunlap, 1995, p.19).
- Learners’ *ownership* of learning: Learners develop ownership of their learning processes by employing strategies they see as appropriate for solving the problem rather than being forced to adopt particular strategies.
- *Personally constructed* reality: The learning context encourages learners to construct their personal understanding of the world by continually interpreting and negotiating with their environments. Learners’ prior knowledge is therefore essential, as they construct new understandings based on what they already know.
- Opportunities for *collaboration*: The learning environment offers alternative perspectives and social interactions to assist learners in testing the viability of their understanding.
- Opportunities for *reflection*: Learners are encouraged to reflect on both the content learned and the learning process. This element is linked to the emphasis on learners taking responsibility for their own learning (Grabinger and Dunlap, 1995).

The implications of these teaching principles for learners are that in such an online educational context, they are likely to find themselves being expected to:

- (1) receive information from original sources, without interpretation by the instructor;

- (2) contextualise and personalise the information themselves, and apply it in a practical situation they consider relevant to their real-life contexts;
- (3) take the initiative to interact with other learners and the instructor, and to create a sense of presence and community;
- (4) make decisions about their own learning goals with some guidance from the instructor; and
- (5) reflect on their learning processes through means such as learning journals (Ally, 2008).

Constructivist epistemology has continued to dominate educational discussions of online learning for more than a decade (Jonassen et al., 2007). Nevertheless, critics (Kirschner, Sweller & Clark, 2006; Sweller, 2009) have persistently commented that there is a lack of empirical evidence for the effectiveness of constructivist-inspired, minimally guided instructional approaches. In their influential article examining evidence supporting this pedagogy, Kirschner et al. (2006) has pointed out:

After a half-century of advocacy associated with instruction using minimal guidance, it appears that there is no body of research supporting the technique. In so far as there is any evidence from controlled studies, it almost uniformly supports direct, strong instructional guidance rather than constructivist-based minimal guidance during the instruction of novice to intermediate learners. Even for students with considerable prior knowledge, strong guidance while learning is most often found to be equally effective as unguided approaches. (pp.83-84)

Kirschner et al. (2006) also suggested that despite the ongoing popularity of a constructivist instructional approach among researchers and commentators, many classroom practitioners may not be convinced of its efficacy. In terms of using these teaching procedures in online contexts, similar concerns have arisen. Merrill (2008), for example, has argued that guided instruction is a form of ‘intervention’ necessary for efficient and effective learning, “a deliberate attempt to structure a learning environment so that students will acquire specified knowledge or skill” (p.270). Brabazon (2007) is critical of the replacement of traditional lectures and tutorials by online flexible learning, describing this common practice in Australian online education as discrediting the teacher’s expertise and scholarship in the name of student-centred learning or flexibility.

In summary, this overview of the current views of online flexible learning by scholars and commentators demonstrates an alignment of constructivist pedagogies and online educational provision. This section has also outlined an array of assumptions about learning and teaching made by adherents of constructivist-inspired methods. Although studies have provided evidence indicating that this constructivist approach may not be the most effective one, the focus has been on whether this approach is superior to direct instructional guidance in terms of helping students to perform better (see Kirschner et al., 2006). Since many of the claims about the benefits of a constructivist approach are based on learners' personal reflections of their learning, evaluating this approach based on learners' performances may not suffice. It is also important to understand how students experience this form of education. Thus, two questions of particular relevance to this study have emerged from this overview of the literature in this area. First, do students experience teaching practices in online contexts as reflecting the instructional principles described in this section? Second, where such experiences are identified, what are the effects of the blending of online learning and student-centred pedagogies for the students? The remainder of this chapter surveys research studies of learners' online experiences in response to these questions.

## **2. 3 Learners' experiences of online learning**

Most research into learners' experiences of online learning examines a specific and narrow aspect of the learning environment (Sharpe & Benfield, 2005). There are relatively few studies of learners' experiences of the whole learning environment. Two principle types of research have been conducted in this latter group of studies that are relevant to the present study. The first is studies of learners' general concerns about online learning. These studies investigate students' attitudes, perceptions or opinions of online learning across different online contexts. Many of these studies aim to characterise the general challenges of online learning for students, irrespective of the particular features of the learning context. This line of research is dominated by quantitative investigations, using survey instruments. The second type of research explores students' experiences of particular innovative teaching approaches in online contexts. The teaching approaches examined are predominantly constructivist-inspired. These studies tend to be descriptive case studies, utilising mainly interview data. Overall, the research literature on learners' online experiences has concluded



that learners' satisfaction levels are high. However, despite this general conclusion made by researchers, many studies have reported noticeable dissatisfaction by some learners with online learning. The following sub-sections discuss the principal themes that emerge from an exploration of this literature.

### **2.3.1 Learners' general experiences of online learning**

Studies of learners' attitudes and perceptions of online learning have typically been conducted through surveys of large numbers of students (e.g. Eom, Wen & Ashill, 2006; Ortiz-Rodriguez, Telg, Irani, Roberts & Rhoades, 2005; Reisetter & Boris, 2004; Song, Singleton, Hill & Koh, 2004; Young, 2006). These studies have reported a number of benefits and challenges identified by participants. Some studies have also investigated factors affecting students' satisfaction levels (Bolliger & Martindale, 2004), factors influencing students' perceived success (Eom et al., 2006; Menchaca & Bekele, 2008), or students' definitions of an effective online environment (Ortiz-Rodriguez et al., 2005; Reisetter & Boris, 2004; Young, 2006). Despite small differences in focus, this line of research has generated similar findings, where the studies have identified three factors as the salient influences on participants' views of online learning – the course, the instructor and peer interaction. Other, less prominent, influences identified have been technology and time management.

In relation to the influence of the course, research has highlighted a major barrier to student learning as a lack of clarity in course objectives, task requirements or instructional materials. There has been little further examination of the influence of these course-related factors in this mostly survey research. This lack of further examination appears to be because the influences of the instructor and the course have often been investigated together. For example, students tend to designate the organisation and quality of the course content as the responsibility of the instructor (Bolliger & Martindale, 2004; Menchaca & Bekele, 2008; Young, 2006) and hence instructor issues have been more dominant.

In relation to the influence of the instructor, research has emphasised that the key barrier to learning is delayed or insubstantial amount of teacher feedback. Participants in some studies have also emphasised their need for individualised or personalised

feedback (Reisetter & Boris, 2004; Ortiz-Rodriguez et al., 2005). Young's (2006) investigation of learners' definitions of effective teaching best illustrates the rationale behind these student expectations of the online instructor. Young summarised students' expectations of online instructors as follows: to deliver valuable course content; to provide meaningful examples; to motivate students; to facilitate the course effectively; to adapt to student needs; and to show concern for student learning (p.73). The first two factors suggest that students desire explicit principles and instructions from their teachers, and the remaining factors highlight students' expectations that teachers monitor and ensure their learning. These teaching roles can be construed as a strong and active 'teaching presence', which one study (Shea, Li & Pickett, 2006) suggested is positively related to students' sense of learning and their feelings of connectedness to peers. Based on their research findings, Shea, et al. (2006) equated teaching presence to the provision of "directed facilitation" (p.184), which involves the teacher "creating an accepting climate of learning, keeping students on track, and diagnosing misperceptions", as well as "reinforcing student contributions, injecting their own knowledge, and confirming student understanding" (p.185). Overall, students' responses generated by these studies indicate that online learners give primacy to the teacher's delivery of course content, reflecting the central message in a recent editorial of the *American Journal of Distance Education*, titled "What students really want":

[Y]ears of experience and research (including research and experience with Web 1.0) informs us about the different perspectives of distance learners, most of whom are adult learners. In particular, we know that these learners attribute overwhelming importance to course content. Indeed, unfashionable though it is to say so, and welcome though learner-to-learner interaction might be, for the vast majority of students, course content is much more important than interaction. Their participation in interaction with other learners is appreciated only for its contribution to mastering course content. (Moore, 2008, pp.1-2)

Compared with the apparent consensus amongst students about the importance of the instructor and course content in influencing their online learning experiences, research has shown that their opinions of peer interaction in the online environment are more complex. Although students across numerous studies say they value peer interactivity and identify the 'opportunities' to communicate with their classmates using computer-related technologies as an advantage of online learning (Bolliger & Martindale, 2004;

Kim, Liu & Bonk, 2005; Menchaca & Bekele, 2008), research results repeatedly show low levels of learner participation in online peer discussions (see Wallace, 2003).

This apparent conflict between students' reported need for interactivity and their non-participative behaviours is clarified when barriers to their participation in online interaction are brought into view. While this line of quantitative research provides little information in this regard, insights can be drawn from other investigations employing interview techniques. From these, the most often quoted reason by students for low engagement in online discussions is time constraints (Gilbert, Morton & Rowley, 2007; Kim et al., 2005; Thorpe & Godwin, 2006). This comes as little surprise to researchers as the demographic information of most studies indicates that the participants involved are typically working adults with family commitments. Another barrier is students' feelings of discomfort or lack of confidence in communicating via written interactions (Beaudoin, 2002; O'Regan, 2003; Zembylas, 2008). In addition to these two commonly-cited reasons, which have little connection to the pedagogical environment created by the teacher, a number of studies have identified other factors relating to teaching practices. These include learners' perceptions of a lack of community; low participation level by the instructor (Shea et al., 2006; Thompson & Savenye, 2007); and poor quality discussion (O'Regan, 2003).

Thompson and Savenye's (2007) program-level study, for example, is among the few that have systematically examined the factors that enhance or undermine learner participation in non-mandatory online discussions. The main data source for this quantitative study was computer conferencing transcripts, collected from 3 student cohorts (n=149), 15 study units and 8 instructors in an online MBA program. The study identified prior experience with online learning, course content and the instructor as having greatest impact on the extent of students' engagement with online activities. Since prior online experience was measured by the number of online units the participants had taken within the program, the researchers speculated that one reason for the positive relationship between prior experience and participation level was the participants' familiarity with their fellow students. In other words, a sense of community had been established. In terms of the instructor factor, Thompson and Savenye found that low levels of participation by an instructor were linked to low

engagement of the learners. Nevertheless, the quantitative data could not explain why these particular factors influenced learner participation.

In terms of learners' views of the quality of online discussions, participants in some studies (Beaudoin, 2002; O'Regan, 2003; Ortiz-Rodriguez et al., 2005; Song et al., 2004) expressed concern about a lack of structure and poor content of learner-controlled discussions. For example, the students interviewed in a study by Stodel et al. (2006) commented that the discussions in their online unit were "loose and drawn out" (p.11), unchallenging and uninspiring. Another study by O'Regan (2003) examining students' experiences across different online learning environments reported strong learner emotions regarding this issue. Several students in the study articulated frustration over the superficiality of unmoderated discussions. One student dismissed this type of discussion as an un-academic "group therapy session" (p.85). Another complained that it consisted of "people who really don't have any better understanding of the issues than you do, all offering opinions and there doesn't really seem to be very much comes [sic] out of that" (p.85). These comments echo what Merrill (2008) calls "pooled ignorance" (p.271) in the communities of learners, and may account for some students' preference for teacher-directed and monitored online discussions. However, this possibility so far has received little research attention. In the studies reviewed, there is a tendency for the researchers to explain the students' reported need for structured discussions as their reliance on the instructor to direct and monitor learning (Ortiz-Rodriguez et al., 2005; Song et al., 2004).

In addition to recurrent findings regarding students' concerns about the instructor, course and interactivity, several studies have identified technology and time management as challenges for some online learners (Bolliger & Martindale, 2004, Gilbert et al., 2007; Menchaca & Bekele, 2008; Song et al., 2004). However, one large-scale survey study (n=1,056) by Muilenburg and Berge (2005) which analysed the data through factor analysis found that these two factors of technology and time management did not emerge as crucial concerns for students compared with the other three factors mentioned previously (the course, the instructor and peer interaction). This conclusion offers counter-evidence for the claim that online learners are time-poor and so prioritise convenience as a major factor in their learning (Wood, Tapsall & Soutar, 2005).

To summarise, the research literature on students' general experiences of online learning indicates that online learners emphasise: the importance of clear task requirements and instructional materials; strong teaching presence in the sense that the teacher delivers course content, provides students with an abundance of feedback, and moderates online discussions; and feelings of being connected with their peers. As the central interest of this strand of quantitative research is to classify merits and drawbacks of online learning to students, it tends to ask very broad questions and does not consider contextual factors that may influence learners' views. To be specific, few studies describe what students are learning, how teaching is conducted and how learning is evaluated in the educational environment. Neither are learners' educational beliefs and the reasoning behind their perceptions explored. Hence this line of research tends to lack depth in describing how students experience the learning environment and explaining why they experience it the way they do.

### **2.3.2 Learners' experiences in particular online contexts**

Turning to studies that provide more insight into contextual factors affecting learners' feelings and reactions towards online learning, the second strand of research consists of investigations exploring students' experiences in particular online contexts. Much of this literature focuses on learner-centred, constructivist-inspired pedagogies, reflecting the convergence of online learning and these instructional approaches. However, compared with the body of research outlined in the previous section, there is a paucity of studies belonging to this category. Although many studies describing new online teaching designs have collected data from students indicating their satisfaction with the innovative features of the learning environment, the studies have revealed little about the nature of students' experiences and thus are not included in this review (e.g. Gunawardena et al., 2006; McAlpine, 2000). Overall, the effects of this type of pedagogical environment on learners are largely unknown (Frederickson, Reed & Clifford, 2005; Guliker, Bastiaens & Martens, 2005; Martens, Bastiaens & Kirschner, 2007). Moreover, unlike the investigations of learners' general experiences of online learning, this line of research tends to take the form of descriptive case studies and the findings derived from them do not point to consistent themes.

The biographical stories of four online learners reported by Milhauser (2006), for example, represent successful, transformative learning experiences. The students were all working adult learners. To quote one participant, each of the learners is a “working professional with a context for learning application” (p.224). The students were interviewed about their experiences in a 13-month graduate program in educational technology, which was described by Milhauser as a social constructivist learning environment. Constructivism-related learning theories (e.g. social learning, metacognition, communities of practice) were included in the course content. Two of the biographical stories uncovered students’ struggles, frustrations and fears of failure due to a lack of direct guidance by the teachers. However, Milhauser reported that both these students eventually came to realise that the design of the course was meant to drive them to become interdependent on their peers and local communities. Like the other two participants involved in the study, they completed the program with, according to Milhauser, a ‘dramatic’ surge of confidence and excitement about being able to transfer what they experienced in the program to their professional lives. Milhauser attributed the students’ successful ‘transformations’ to two specific teaching strategies: applying ‘less’ structure in the environment to avoid impeding group interactivity; and grounding learning within the students’ local contexts to facilitate their development as ‘reflective practitioners’.

Another positive example is a study conducted by a teacher-researcher about students’ experiences of collaborative learning in an online context (Gabriel, 2004). The eight participants interviewed in the research shared overwhelmingly rewarding learning experiences in an online unit in a Master of Education course. All the participants were either teachers or university staff. Placing a strong emphasis on learners solving real-life problems through collaboration, this online unit required students to join pair, roundtable and group discussions. The frequent, mandatory participation in these activities, according to the participants in the research, was the greatest strength of the online unit. All of the learners said they experienced a strong learning community in the class and benefited from encountering multiple perspectives by working collaboratively. Some commented that their conceptions of learning were transformed, saying they had come to the realisation that learning is about knowledge building rather than knowledge accumulation.

The findings and contexts of these two studies bear strong similarities, which may in turn limit the utility of the positive results reported. First, the professional backgrounds of the participants in the two studies suggest that they entered the learning contexts with significant prior knowledge and experience, and a current work context ready to be utilised. This learner profile corresponds to the image of an ideal virtual learner:

Successful virtual students are *open-minded* about sharing personal details about their lives, work, and other educational experiences. This is particularly important when we ask online learners to enter into learning communities in order to explore course material. Virtual students are able to use their experiences in the learning process and also are able to apply their learning in an ongoing way to their life experiences (Palloff & Pratt, 2003, p.6)

Nevertheless, these students are not typical learners in higher education, most of whom are not working professionals. Moreover, being educators and university staff, the learners in Gabriel's research were likely to be interested in and reflective about the teaching and learning processes (Sharpe & Benfield, 2005), which would further suit this style of learning. Another limitation of these two studies is that constructivism was part of the course content of the online units. This may have shaped the responses of the students about their experiences in the unit, or affected their appraisal of the pedagogy, as they came to realise the goals of this form of instruction.

Another study by Agostinho, Meek and Herrington (2005) found divided responses among the learners. The researchers examined learners' experiences of scenario-based learning in an online environment. The postgraduate online unit in educational technology required students to complete tasks by playing the roles of new employees in a fictitious company. Qualitative data was gathered from seven students enrolled in the online unit, including interviews and questionnaires. The study concluded that generally the students deemed the pedagogical design to be effective in helping them achieve the intended outcomes and to construct their understanding of the course content. However, three of the seven students also expressed feelings of a superficial understanding of the course content and insufficient development of skills, or did not view the scenario-based context as useful. Unfortunately, these negative learning experiences by the students were left unexplored in the study.

Turning to the studies that report negative learning experiences, Hara and Kling (2000) found that all of their six participants experienced feelings of distress persisting throughout a whole semester. The ethnographic research was initially undertaken to investigate learner isolation in an online unit in educational technology, but the researchers quickly found that physical isolation was less an issue for the participants than feelings of frustration, anxiety and confusion caused primarily by the student-centred teaching methods. Observation and interview data showed that the sources of the students' distress were: perceptions that the teacher's instructions were minimal, untimely and ambiguous; the large amount of time required to read voluminous postings; and a lack of technical support. This finding is similar to results from research into learners' general experiences of online learning, presented in the previous section (2.3.1).

Another finding of interest from Hara and Kling's study was that in the course evaluation at the end of the online unit, the students did not report to their instructor unfavourable opinions of their experiences that they had disclosed to the researchers. This suggests the unsuitability of teacher-researchers conducting evaluation research, where reasons such as wanting to please the teacher or fear of negative teacher responses may shape participants' responses to the teacher. Additionally, in teacher-researcher evaluation studies the personal investment of the teacher-researcher also opens him or her to criticisms of bias and subjectivity. Hammersley and Gomm (1997) describe this as a form of "motivated bias" (n.p.), which can be "conscious or unconscious ... [where the researcher] uses genuine evidence to make the best case possible for a preconceived conclusion (n.p.).

So far little attention has been paid in research of online learning to the issue of why some learners feel their expectations are not fulfilled in such environments. One exception is a case study by Stodel et al. (2006), in which the researchers interviewed 10 of their students who had expressed some dissatisfaction about their online experiences, in order to identify what these students considered missing from these experiences. The online unit studied was *Introduction to Research in Education*. In this unit, students were expected to facilitate each other's learning through learner-moderated discussions. They were asked to act as learning consultants to each other by providing feedback and supporting each other's work. The study found the



participants felt they did not engage in high-level discussions through the forums, and that the instruction they received from the teachers was insufficient. In interpreting the first of these two results, Stodel et al. (2006) contended that learners' critical thinking may occur elsewhere, such as in their own reflections, their dialogues offline, or in their assignments. Similar arguments have been made by other researchers and commentators (Agostinho et al., 2005; Beaudoin, 2002; Gulati, 2008).

In terms of instruction from the teachers, Stodel et al. (2006) found that in their study the students' perceptions of the instruction they received differed greatly from those held by the teachers. The teacher-researchers argued that they had "provided intellectual and scholarly leadership and shared their subject matter knowledge with learners" (p.16) through the instructional content, detailed feedback of students' assignments, and responses to individual questions and forum discussions. Yet, the study participants reported receiving inadequate guidance. Stodel et al. explained that this was because the students had different assumptions about learning to the teachers and therefore did not view the forms of input contributed by the latter as valuable. Stodel et al. ascribed students' dissatisfaction with the amount and type of guidance provided online to the expectations they carried over from their prior face-to-face learning experiences, and this:

raises questions regarding learner expectations and the need for a paradigm shift to separate the underlying learning assumptions of online learning from classroom learning. Are learners' expectations for online learning higher than they are for F2F [face-to-face] learning? ... The way we define our roles as teachers and learners and our attitudes, practices, and expectations need to be fundamentally different in an online context compared to F2F. We need to understand these elements if we are to transform education and liberate the way we design and deliver online learning. (p.17)

Specifically, Stodel et al. argued that online learning is a "fundamentally new learning experience", and that learners need to "shift their focus from an individual perspective to one of community" (p.18). This line of reasoning appears to assume that pedagogy adopted in the online context was conducive to high quality learning, and so where students' expectations were not met the fault must lie with these students' expectations. Given that in this case the guiding principle of the teaching practice in the online context was student-centredness, this argument is paradoxical. To say that student expectations and demands are ill-fitted to the learning environment seems to contradict with the fundamental philosophy underpinning the environment. It also

leaves such studies open to the accusation of moving the goal-posts: if the new learning experience is not provided in online courses, then it may be provided elsewhere or the students themselves are not providing the correct form of participation, insulating the form of pedagogy from criticism.

Lastly, two studies (Gulikers, et al., 2005; Martens et al., 2007) have produced findings challenging the motivational effect of constructivist-inspired, authentic online learning environments, that is, online environments that are held to resemble the real world with real-life complexity (Herrington & Oliver, 2000; Newmann & Wehlage, 1993). Martens' (2007) survey study compared 61 university students' perceptions of their experiences against the pedagogical intent of the 5 designers of the learning environment. In this authentic online environment, students assumed the role of a counsellor or lawyer to solve 'real cases'. The findings based on a statistical analysis of the data revealed a gap between the two parties in their interpretations of the environment. The designers intended learning tasks to be realistic and ill-structured with a view to challenging the learners and thereby stimulating their intrinsic motivation in the problem solving process. The students, however, did not find the tasks particularly complex, and as challenging and motivating as the designers anticipated. Neither did the students value the role-playing activity as much as the designers had expected.

In another example, Gulikers, et al. (2005) investigated the impact of two different pedagogical designs on students' experiences, one 'authentic' and the other 'non-authentic'. The experimental study was conducted on 34 university students and included a questionnaire measuring learner motivation. The learning tasks for both groups of students were identical (i.e. writing a report for a bus company as a junior advisor of a consultancy agency). However, in the authentic group, students were provided with a complex, interactive, virtual environment modelled on the real world, containing relevant as well as irrelevant information and resources about the task they had to complete. The non-authentic group was given the same content minus the authentic environment. The study concluded that the participants' views of their experiences were not affected by whether a learning context was authentic or not. Like Martens et al. (2007), this study undermined the claim that an authentic pedagogical approach in itself has an intrinsic motivating effect on learning.

Although these two quantitative studies found discrepancies between the intention of constructivist teaching designs in terms of motivating students and learners' experiences of these online learning environments, the studies offer little insight into how such discrepancies arise. Goodyear and Ellis (2008) provide a possible explanation when confronting the assumption of learner compliance held by educational technologists. They point out that students' responses to a learning context is "a compromise between what they value for themselves and what they believe to be the demands of the higher education system in which they are working" (p.149). Hence, to further research this area, greater insight into learners' expectations of their educational experiences and what they perceive to be the keys to success in their learning environments are needed.

To sum up, three major issues have become apparent through this exploration of studies of learners' experiences of online learner-centred, constructivist-inspired pedagogies. First, contrasting reactions from learners are reported, both across different studies (e.g. Milhauser, 2006; Stodel et al., 2006) and within a single study (Agostinho et al. 2005). However, the factors underlying these variations remain unclear. One possibility suggested by the present review of this literature is that this form of pedagogy may benefit learners with certain characteristics – such as prior knowledge and experience relevant to the learning situation. This assumption, however, needs further investigation. Secondly, a methodological concern has been identified for research into learners' experiences of instructional approaches. In short, it is argued that practitioner-led evaluation-oriented research has inherent risks which may diminish its contribution to the overall literature base. Thirdly, both types of research introduced in this section – learner's general experiences of online learning and learners' experiences in particular online contexts – lack a coherent theoretical underpinning, and so the findings from these studies are generally descriptive in nature. Even though some studies reported that the teaching was guided by constructivist-related theories, the teaching practices were not systematically described and analysed. Relations between the learning environment and learners' experiences, therefore, could not be clearly discerned. As a result, findings generated by both types of studies have limited transferability to other educational contexts.

Research guided by robust theoretical and analytical frameworks for exploring learners' experiences is yet to be conducted in this area.

## **2. 4 Chinese learners' experiences of online learning**

Thus far, this chapter has described the current nature of online flexible learning in higher education. It has also summarised the major concerns for learners about online learning, and examined students' experiences of learner-centred teaching approaches in online contexts. The remainder of this literature review discusses the online experiences of Chinese student sojourners, which is the central focus of the current study. The aim of this last part of the chapter is twofold: to describe who Chinese learners are; and to examine what previous research has said about these learners' online learning experiences in Western countries. This section begins with an introduction and critique of the notion of 'the Chinese learner', followed by a review of recent research into Chinese students' online experiences in Western countries.

### **2.4.1 Chinese learners**

In educational research, Chinese learners are commonly referred to as Confucian Heritage Culture (CHC) learners, which consist of students from Mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore. The presence of these students on Australian campuses has aroused considerable controversy, not the least of which is expressed in ongoing, heated discussions about the issue of compromised academic standards (Alexander, 2007; Birrell, 2006; Devos, 2003; McGowan & Potter, 2008). On whichever side of the debate one stands, the ways these students learn and their expectations of Australian education have piqued a heightened interest among academic circles.

The image of 'the Chinese learner' among Australian academics in the 1980s, when research on these students began in earnest, was one of a rote learner with high achievement motives but who rarely questioned authority figures or written texts and showed little interest in participating in class discussions (Ballard & Clanchy, 1984; Bradley & Bradley, 1984; Samuelowicz, 1987). This stereotype has subsequently been challenged. Watkins and Biggs' book *The Chinese Learner: Cultural,*

*Psychological, and Contextual Influences* (1996) expounds the so-called ‘paradox of the Chinese learner’ by investigating the influence of cultural factors on approaches to learning in Chinese societies. The ‘paradox’ refers to the apparent contradiction between Chinese students’ surface approach to learning and their internationally acknowledged high academic achievement (Biggs, 1996; Watkins & Biggs, 2001b). The surface approach to learning is based on extrinsic motivation, of which the aim is to fulfil the required outcomes with the minimum effort. Specifically, Watkins and Biggs asked, how it is possible that Chinese students can outperform Western students if they tend to learn through memorisation. Numerous empirical studies have examined this paradox, and Chinese learners are now portrayed as learners who view memorisation as an integral part of understanding (Dahlin & Watkins, 2000; Marton, Dall’Alba & Tse, 1996; Sachs & Chan, 2003), are oriented towards deep learning (Biggs, 1996; Kember, 2000; Watkins, 1996), and prefer tutorials to studying alone (Volet & Renshaw, 1996).

Care should be taken in interpreting the findings of the aforementioned paradox. Despite the changing understanding of the notion of ‘the Chinese learner’, new misconceptions about Chinese learners can be formed if these changing views are held to mean the learners would thrive in a learning environment that promotes deep or collaborative learning. First, the memorisation–understanding paradox indeed challenges the labelling of Chinese students as rote learners. However, the way Chinese learners seek to understand sets them apart from their Western counterparts; that is, it would seem likely that Chinese learners are acculturated to *listen* to understand, while Western learners are encouraged to *question* to understand. The students in Cortazzi and Jin’s study (2001), for example, defended themselves against accusations that they were passive learners by asserting that their minds were active when listening to the teacher. Such an argument, however, can be difficult to reconcile with the Western conception of an active learner. Some commentators, for example, have questioned the effectiveness of this “relatively passive form of learning” in developing qualities like critical thinking, problem solving, and independent learning (Gow, Balla, Kember & Hau, 1996, p.122).

Secondly, Chinese students’ preference for a deep approach to learning (i.e. a learning orientation that is based on intrinsic interest in the subject matter) does not guarantee

an easy practice of this approach. Didactic teaching and passive learning are still the norm in the Chinese education system (Cortazzi & Jin, 2001; Kember, 2001). To manage the large size of classes, tightly structured courses and assignments with prescribed correct answers are common practices (Kember, 2000). These practices have also stemmed from the standardised external examinations that are typical of Chinese educational settings. Therefore, despite their self-reported orientation to deep learning, in reality Chinese students are constantly exposed to a teaching environment that is associated with a surface approach to learning.

Lastly, Chinese students' predilection for tutorials and their spontaneous 'collaboration' outside the tertiary classroom (Tang, 1996) should not be elided with the Western notion of collaborative learning. The former may tend to relate to seeking one another's cue perceptions when the cues to solving or conducting a task provided in class are insufficiently perceived by the individual learners (Biggs, 1996). In contrast, the latter focuses on knowledge creation rather than task completion. Put another way, students involved in (Western notions of) collaborative learning are expected to be creative and innovative rather than jointly arrive at a 'correct' answer to meet the pre-determined expectations (Murphy & Valdéz, 2005).

In short, while the mystery of the 'paradox of the Chinese learner' has been explored, the paradoxes *for* the Chinese learner studying in a Western educational environment have yet to be investigated. These paradoxes were illustrated by a qualitative investigation of Chinese students' learning experiences in New Zealand (Campbell & Li, 2008). The researchers found that their participants valued independent learning, interactive teaching methods and a pressure-free environment, but at the same time they anticipated being motivated by lecturers, were reticent about interacting with others in class, and felt uncomfortable studying in a context where competition and pressure were lacking.

In conclusion, in spite of our developing understanding of the notional 'Chinese learner', research continues to produce evidence indicating that students from Chinese cultural backgrounds demonstrate dispositions identified by researchers more than two decades ago – an inclination towards conformity, passivity and dependence on authority figures (Campbell & Li, 2008; Huang, 2005; Turner, 2006). There is an

apparent mismatch between this inclination and the characteristics viewed as critical for success by the student-centred, constructivist-inspired pedagogies common in Western online learning, such as being self-directed, self-motivated, self-disciplined, and committed to peer collaboration (Dabbagh & Bannan-Ritland, 2005; Palloff & Pratt, 2003). Thus it can be extrapolated that Chinese student sojourners studying in online contexts may experience an educational ‘culture clash’. The rest of this chapter examines whether this conjecture is borne out by empirical evidence.

#### **2.4.2 Chinese learners’ online experiences**

There is a small but growing literature on Chinese international students’ experiences of online learning in Western countries. This thread of the literature shows two common characteristics. Methodologically, it comprises mostly qualitative case studies of a small number of participants who are full-time, on-campus students. Secondly, in terms of theoretical perspectives, there is a consistent emphasis on the influence of cultural factors on participants’ views and experiences. The cultural theories heavily drawn upon are Hofstede’s (1980, 2001) cultural dimensions and Hall’s (1989) theory of high- and low-context cultures (e.g. Ku & Lohr, 2003; Morse, 2003; Thompson & Ku, 2005; Tu 2001).

Based on the findings of these studies, Chinese students’ attitudes towards online learning and their patterns of participation do not differ greatly from those of their Western counterparts, as described in the preceding sections. For instance, most Chinese students appreciate the temporal and spatial flexibility afforded by the use of online learning contexts, but feel frustrated with a lack of immediate feedback and interaction (Ku & Lohr, 2003; Thompson & Ku, 2005; Zhao & McDougall, 2008). Chinese students also express discomfort about communicating in a context where non-verbal cues are absent. However, this is not to suggest these issues of concern are of the same intensity for both groups of learners. For instance, a comparative research study (Morse, 2003) found that although all students agreed upon the same key advantages to studying in an online environment, Chinese students prioritised the ability to express their thoughts and opportunities to think about their own contributions, whilst Western students ranked time-place flexibility and time to reflect on others’ opinions as most important. Other studies have also discerned additional

benefits and challenges of online learning for Chinese learners in relation to the communication medium, cultural factors and online pedagogies. These are discussed below.

#### **2.4.2.1 Computer-mediated communication**

Many of the strengths and weaknesses of online learning experienced by Chinese students revolve around computer-mediated communication. These text-based forms of communication (e.g. online discussion forums) have been identified by some students as benefiting their learning, but by others as impeding it. In terms of benefits, students have reported higher levels of participation and greater confidence and assertiveness in stating their views online than in a face-to-face environment because the medium removes some language barriers by allowing them to edit what they want to articulate (Ku & Lohr, 2003; Thompson & Ku, 2005; Zhao & McDougall, 2008). On the other hand, research has consistently indicated that this communication form poses a great challenge for Chinese students in that the process of reading, composing and editing messages result in heavy demands on their time. Two studies found that Chinese students put more time and effort into online than traditional classes (Thompson & Ku, 2005; Zhao & McDougall, 2008), and one researcher asserted that these demands reduce Chinese students' online presence because of their substantial time spent reading, composing and editing messages (Tu, 2001).

In addition to language barriers, Chinese students' participation in online discussions is also hampered by their perception of the purpose of computer-mediated communication. Discussion in online forums is generally seen as task-oriented and more formal than communication taking place in face-to-face contexts, thereby requiring extra effort to produce acceptable contributions (Tu, 2001; Zhao & McDougall, 2008). This perception may also be the reason why Chinese students tend to be reluctant to engage in discussions unless they believe the content of their postings will contribute to the development of the discussion (Zhao & McDougall, 2008).

Lastly, in terms of their sojourner status, Chinese students identify two major drawbacks of online learning. The deficiency in face-to-face contact decreases their



opportunities to be immersed in the host culture and to improve their spoken language skills, which are two important aims of these students' sojourn (Ku & Lohr, 2003; Thompson and Ku, 2005; Zhao & McDougall, 2008).

#### **2.4.2.2 Cultural factors**

Studies in this area tend to interpret challenges confronting Chinese learners in light of their cultural attributes. In summary, students' responses to online environments are said to be impacted by:

- face-saving intentions, that is, the maintenance of a positive image for oneself and others (Morse, 2003; Smith, Coldwell, Smith & Murphy, 2005; Tu, 2001; Zhao & McDougall, 2008);
- a desire to avoid uncertainty, for example, the pursuit of clear directions and correct answers (Ku & Lohr, 2003; Thompson & Ku, 2005);
- collectivist culture, for example, an emphasis on group harmony and social relationships and a tendency to avoid conflict (Ku & Lohr, 2003; Thompson & Ku, 2005; Tu, 2001; Wang & Reeves, 2007);
- high-context culture, for example, the use of an indirect and less explicit manner of communication (Morse, 2003; Tu, 2001);
- reverence for authority figures and an expectation of their expertise (Ku & Lohr, 2003; Zhao & McDougall, 2008); and
- motivation towards high achievement (Zhao & McDougall, 2008).

Whilst these cultural characteristics are mostly associated with challenges for students, some studies have generated conflicting results. For example, although many researchers link Chinese students' self-consciousness about the quality of their written messages to their face-saving intentions (Morse, 2003; Smith, et al., 2005; Zhao & McDougall, 2008), others argue that the text-based medium may in fact enable students to manipulate their images (Tu, 2001; Zhao & McDougall, 2008). Also, in regard to Chinese students' reverence for authority figures, one study found that while some participants preferred not to challenge the instructor's opinions, others stated that they were more persistent in defending their opinions online than in a face-to-face situation because the teacher's authority in online contexts is weakened (Zhao & McDougall, 2008).

### **2.4.2.3 Student-centred pedagogy**

As with most of the research into Western students' experiences of online learning, studies of Chinese students often give little detail about the pedagogy underpinning the learning context. It is therefore difficult to examine the contextual factors that may influence students' views. Of the few studies that have done so, one claimed that the teaching approach employed espoused 'student-centred' and 'self-regulated' learning (Ku & Lohr, 2003). According to the two teacher-researchers, their participants were strongly in favour of this pedagogy. Nevertheless, an examination of the learning tasks outlined in the research revealed that they were highly structured. The assessment consisted of a major project that was broken down into weekly tasks. Every week, students were provided with a mini-lecture and required to complete an assignment. These weekly tasks asked them to repeat a cyclical process of composing a draft, giving and receiving peer feedback, writing a second draft, obtaining comments from the instructor, and further revising. The highly structured environment does not seem to allow students much opportunity to take control of their learning processes. It is therefore questionable whether the participants would have similar appraisals of their experiences if the teaching had been less orchestrated and visible, and therefore in closer alignment with self-regulated, student-centred pedagogies.

Another study, whilst offering little information about the exact teaching strategies, described the online environment as supporting student-centred, self-paced and interactive learning, which aimed at promoting self-discovery (Thompson & Ku, 2005). The researchers suggested that the reason why their participants felt their learning was encumbered by a deficiency of the instructor's authoritative opinions was that they were unaware that a less directed approach to teaching is most appropriate to online learning:

Two concerns about distance learning addressed by Chinese students were not getting immediate feedback from their peers and instructors and the lack of face-to-face communication, which were echoed by most online students regardless of cultural background .... We believe that Chinese students are used to seeing instructors as authoritative figures and might feel disappointed not receiving authoritative opinions from them. Also, Chinese students might not be aware that on online courses the role of the instructor is as facilitator rather than lecturer and that learning is more likely to

occur during interactions among students and through self-discovery. (p.44)

This interpretation has also been applied to Western learners (Gilbert, et al., 2007; Stodel et al., 2006). It is, in essence, a deficit view of learners who do not possess the attitudes or qualities required for success in the online learning environment. To blame students' dissatisfaction with their experiences on their lack of understanding of the pedagogy is unreasonable in two respects. First, it is naïve to expect students to be equipped with knowledge about the changes in educational practices. Secondly, whether students are aware of these changes is irrelevant to their feelings that the quality of their learning is diminished.

Finally, there is evidence indicating that compared with Western students, Chinese students are less prepared for constructivist-inspired pedagogies. Smith et al. (2005) compared Chinese and Australian students' attitudes and behaviours when conducting problem-solving learning in an online context at an Australian university. Data collected from a *Readiness for Online Learning Questionnaire* and computer conferencing transcripts showed that the two cohorts were equally willing to manage their own learning, but Australian students exhibited a significantly higher level of comfort with this form of learning. The Chinese students in the class were also found to be less inclined to take the initiative to search for learning materials and to interact with others online, and they contributed fewer messages of an intellectual nature. The researchers related the differences between the two student groups to language barriers and cultural factors. However, this interpretation is hypothetical, as the quantitative research instruments were not designed to study language barriers or cultural factors.

In sum, Chinese students tend to mostly undergo similar online experiences to Western learners. The two topics of concern for all of these online learners were the teacher's feedback and peer interactivity. While both groups of students expect direct instruction by the teacher, there is a marked difference in their discussions about peer interaction. That is, Western learners tend to focus on how the organisation and content of a discussion can benefit them, whereas Chinese students highlight the ability to express themselves using the online medium. However, this does not mean that the latter are not concerned about the quality and structure of online activities. It

could be that such concerns are eclipsed by anxiety over their personal language competency. In-depth qualitative studies are needed to examine this possibility. In terms of pedagogy, the possibility that Chinese students may encounter an educational culture clash in online contexts would appear to be supported by the studies reviewed.

The literature on Chinese students' online learning experiences in Western universities has three major limitations. First and foremost, these studies tend to attribute students' perceived challenges to the influence of their heritage culture and language barriers. This deficit approach ignores the possibility that the nature of the learning context may be a factor as well. The outcomes of educational experiences are the result of what Pierre Bourdieu (1996) called "the meeting of two histories" (p.256): the dispositions brought by the learner to the educational context, and the nature of the educational context itself. Hence, what has created learners' dissatisfaction may not be the assumptions students bring to the learning context or the learning context itself, but rather the interactions between the two.

The second limitation is methodological. The majority of studies collect data through a single interview or through questionnaires. These research methods are not conducive to an in-depth, holistic understanding of students' perspectives and experiences and do not take account of the development of participants' attitudes and behaviours over time. Neither are these methods capable of revealing the dynamic relationships between student perceptions and the learning environment.

Thirdly, with respect to the use of theory in this line of research, using national culture models, such as Hofstede (1980, 2001) and Hall (1989), as the sole framework to examine cross-cultural experiences oversimplifies cultural differences (Myers & Tan, 2002; Signorini, Wiesemes & Murphy, 2009). In educational settings, an evident flaw in this approach is that it neglects important factors *within* the learning context that also contribute to learners' experiences, such as course content, teachers' qualifications and training, and the funding of education (Signorini, Wiesemes & Murphy, 2009). Most importantly, the studies drawing on these culture models often do not make the models an integral part of the research. That is, rather than developing the theories into conceptual frameworks to guide the research and to analyse data, these studies tend to use the theories simply as receptacles into which

they fit their data. Specifically, in these studies, the theories are introduced, then left aside while the researcher carries out his or her own analyses, and only retrieved by the researcher after the analyses are completed to authorise the findings (e.g. Ku & Lohr, 2003; Morse, 2003; Thompson & Ku, 2005; Tu 2001). Consequently, as with the research into students' online learning experiences examined so far in this chapter, the findings on Chinese learners remain descriptive and under-theorised, thereby leaving it difficult to extrapolate these findings to other settings.

## **2. 5 Conclusion**

This chapter has positioned the current research study in the relevant literature in three stages. In the first stage, the current nature of online flexible learning in Western higher education was described, leading to the argument that a convergence between online learning and constructivist-inspired teaching approaches is prevalent in the educational literature. In the second stage, empirical studies of students' experiences were reviewed. This line of research highlights some common broad concerns of students about online learning but yields mixed findings regarding students' experiences of learner-centred, constructivist-inspired teaching practices in online contexts. In the third stage, Chinese student sojourners' online experiences were examined. The literature in this third stage has revealed that while Chinese students' experiences do not differ greatly from their Western counterparts, their difficulties may potentially be exacerbated by some of their cultural attributes. Overall, this exploration of the empirical literature on students' experiences of online flexible learning shows that previous research had tended to focus on *either* the learner *or* the learning context rather than the interactions between the two. Moreover, the literature has not systematically described and theorised learners' expectations, the nature of the learning context, or learners' reactions to the learning context. What remains to be explored, therefore, is:

- characteristics of learners, such as the dispositions, expectations, and prior experiences that learners bring to learning contexts;
- characteristics of online learning contexts, such as what students are learning, how teaching and learning are conducted, and what is being assessed; and

- relations between the two – that is, how the characteristics of learners and those of learning contexts meet, relate and generate different outcomes.

These three aspects of students' learning experiences are systematically investigated in Chapters 4, 5, and 6 respectively. Before doing so, the theoretical and methodological approaches employed in the present study to address these gaps in the literature are described in Chapter Three.

## Chapter 3

### Methodology

#### 3. 1 Introduction

Chapter 2 explored the background literature and identified the direction of this research study. It concluded that to understand Chinese student sojourners' online learning experiences in Australia, systematic characterisations of these learners and their prior educational experiences, the online learning context, and relations between the two are needed. This chapter details the research design the study adopted to address this need. It is divided into five parts. The first part explains the three sets of theoretical concepts that helped to guide the research: Berry's acculturation theory (1980, 1997a, 2005), Bernstein's educational knowledge codes (1977, 1990, 2000) and Maton's Legitimation Code Theory (Maton, 2000, 2007, 2009; Moore & Maton, 2001). The second part of the chapter gives an account of the qualitative case study research approach selected for this investigation. In the third and fourth parts, the research design and analytic devices developed for the study based on the theoretical frameworks are explained. The final part of the chapter details the strategies used to enhance the quality of the research.

#### 3. 2 Theoretical perspectives

Based on the literature review and research questions, there was a need for three different theoretical perspectives working together to illuminate issues relating to Chinese international students' online experiences in Australian higher education. First, this study was concerned with a group of students moving from one culture to another. Prior research, however, has tended to focus on *either* the learners' culture (e.g. Chinese culture) *or* the culture they enter (e.g. Western online environments), rather than interactions between the two cultures and their outcomes. To address this gap in the literature, the current study drew on Berry's acculturation theory as an organising framework to construct the research problem as involving the meeting of two cultures and the resultant consequences. Secondly, the central interest of the research was participants' educational experiences, so the study required a theoretical perspective that enabled descriptions of the participants' intercultural experiences in

specifically educational terms. Moreover, the study sought to describe participants' experiences in ways that allowed the two cultures and their relations to be analysed and theorised, an undertaking that previous research into Chinese students' online learning experiences has not accomplished. Finally, in investigating educational experiences, it was important to understand learners' educational dispositions and the basis of their success in the learning context. To examine these factors, the study turned to Bernstein's concepts of 'educational knowledge codes' and Maton's Legitimation Code Theory.

### **3.2.1 Conceptualising the research problem: Berry's acculturation framework**

This study used acculturation theory to conceptualise the movement of a group of people from one culture to another. This theory was used because it recognises the potential for cultures to be different, and helps to conceptualise the process of intercultural contact and a range of possible consequences arising from it. Acculturation was originally an anthropological concept and has been commonly understood as referring 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" (Redfield, Linton & Herskovits, 1936, p.149). While this definition addresses acculturation at the group level, acculturation at the individual level has come to be known as 'psychological acculturation' (Graves, 1967). This refers to the changes in individual members of an acculturating group, and it is this facet of the acculturation phenomenon that is relevant to this study.

#### **3.2.1.1 Framework for understanding acculturation**

Most influential in the field of acculturation research are the models of acculturation processes and outcomes of Berry (1980, 1997a, 2005), which have been applied extensively to cross-cultural studies, including those of Chinese international students (Burnett, 2004; Wang & Mallinckrodt, 2006; Ying, 2005; Zheng, Sang & Wang, 2004). This study utilised Berry's approach to acculturation as an organising



framework to focus the research on the key issues involved in students' educational adaptation.

As illustrated in Figure 1, Berry's framework conceptualises acculturation at the group and individual levels. To understand acculturation at the cultural/group level (shown on the left of the figure), Berry's approach highlights the need to investigate 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. The dynamic interplay among all these components is then held to affect acculturation at the psychological/individual level (shown on the right of Figure 1). Early acculturation outcomes are described as 'behavioural shifts' and 'acculturative stress'. The former refers to the behavioural adjustments individuals make in order to cope with the new environment, which are, according to Berry, usually achieved without too much difficulty. Acculturative stress, however, results from psychological conflicts between the desire to maintain one's original culture and the desire to participate in the host culture. The strategies individuals adopt 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 socio-cultural adaptation refers to the ability to "fit in" or "execute effective interactions in a new cultural milieu" (Ward, 2001, p.414).

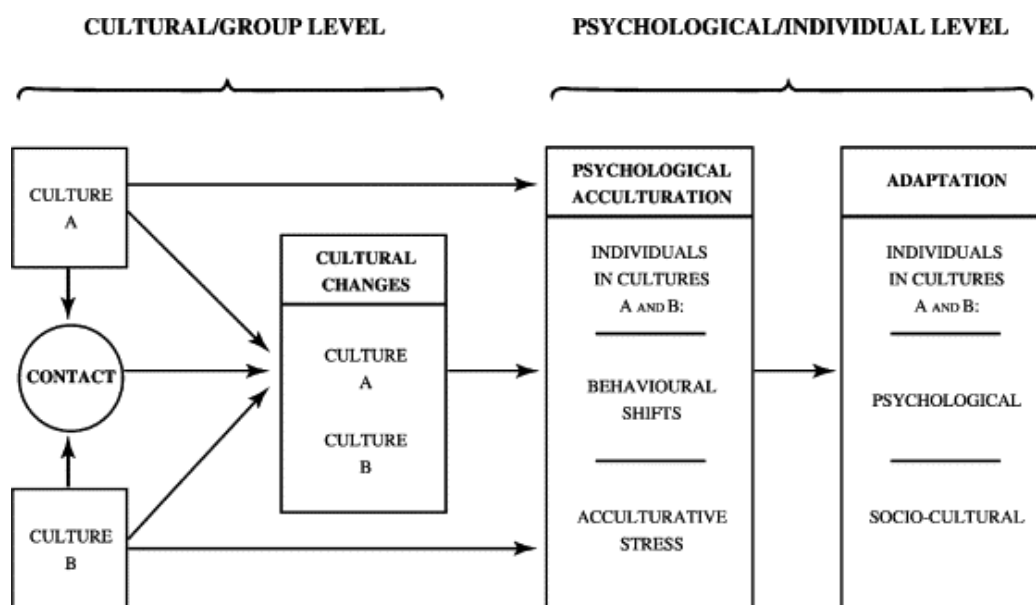
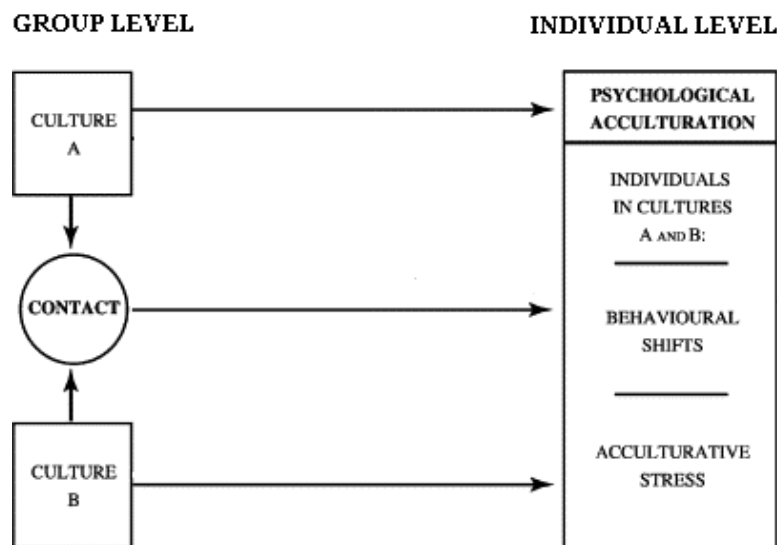


Figure 1: A general framework for understanding acculturation (Berry, 2005, p.703).

The framework was adapted to reflect the focus of the study. The acculturating group in the research comprised student sojourners, whose acculturation is of relatively short duration compared with the other types of acculturation that Berry's framework applies to, such as those of immigrants, refugees, native peoples or ethnic groups (Berry et al., 1987). Taking this short acculturation period into account, most relevant to this investigation were the components of the heritage culture (culture A), the host culture (culture B), and their contact, which included the suggested outcomes in early stages of acculturation, namely, 'behavioural shifts' and 'acculturative stress'. Cultural changes and long-term psychological and socio-cultural adaptation, on the other hand, were unlikely to be identified in sojourners' experiences and so were not investigated in this study. Therefore the adapted framework relevant to the present research is shown in Figure 2.



*Figure 2.* Adapted framework for understanding acculturation in this study (adapted from Berry, 2005).

Berry's framework acted as an organising framework for this study by helping to construct the object of study. It oriented the research towards broad themes involved in the participants' cross-cultural learning experiences. In using the framework for this purpose, however, the issue of globalisation merits attention. Arguments have arisen in educational debates claiming that globalisation is creating hybridised educational cultures. It is asserted that increasingly globalised flows of ideas and

people are leading to a merging of cultures to become ‘glocal’ as cultural products are recontextualised in local settings (e.g. Jameson & Miyoshi, 1998; Tomlinson, 1999). Globalisation, therefore, has been claimed to be eroding national and cultural differences in educational practices (e.g. Burbules & Torres, 2000; Stromquist & Monkman, 2000). Given these claims, it is important to note that by identifying ‘heritage’ and ‘host’ cultures the current study is not suggesting that these cultures are hermetically sealed and internally homogeneous. Making a distinction between two cultures does not necessarily entail any claims about relations within or between the cultures. Neither does it lock one into a logic of polar opposites. Rather, Berry’s model can be understood as making an *analytical* distinction between these two cultures as the first step towards enabling *empirical* research into their complexities and interactions. Whether cultures are hybridised is an empirical question. Such a step enables claims over hybridity to be explored in research rather than simply asserted (Chen, Bennett & Maton, 2008). For example, if Culture A and Culture B are empirically hybridised such that one cannot legitimately talk of two cultures, this becomes apparent in research, but making the distinction for the purposes of analysis enables the research in the first place. Therefore, rather than assuming hybridised identities and practices, this research aimed to critically explore what happened when Chinese students studied online at an Australian university.

### **3.2.1.2 Limitations of Berry’s theory for this study**

Berry’s framework is useful in highlighting key issues of relevance to this study. It does not, however, provide a means for systematically analysing the heritage culture, the host culture, and the outcome of their contact. As Berry (1997b) noted, the framework “serves as a skeleton onto which various bits of flesh can be fitted”, rather than a “theoretically integrated, empirically testable, and refutable” model (p.63). Therefore, the study needed a theoretical framework for analysing and theorising these three key aspects of the student participants’ online experiences and how these aspects related to one another.

Moreover, as the study was concerned with student sojourners’ adaptation to educational contexts, the level of ‘culture’ focused on in this study was *educational* culture. Specifically, in this research, ‘heritage culture’ refers to educational

dispositions the students brought from their formative educational context in China; 'host culture' refers to the online educational contexts they entered in Australia; and 'contact' refers to the outcomes of the students' online experiences. Berry's framework does not provide a means for examining educational practices and contexts. Hence, in seeking a framework for analysing these practices and contexts, the study turned to Bernstein's concepts of educational knowledge codes.

### **3.2.2 Characterising educational practices: Bernstein's concepts of educational knowledge codes**

Bernstein's well-established theory of educational knowledge codes has been acclaimed for its descriptive, explanatory, diagnostic, predictive and transferability potential (Morais, 2002; Morais & Neves, 2001), as well as its power to analyse the structuring of knowledge and social relations at macro, meso and micro levels (Singh, 2002). This research drew upon Bernstein's theory to characterise the educational practices in the student participants' heritage and host cultures. This characterisation enabled the similarities and differences of the underlying structuring principles of the two educational cultures to be compared and analysed, thereby enabling the researcher to relate this comparison to the outcomes of the students' learning experiences in the host culture.

Bernstein's theory was used because it provides concepts that: (1) are suited for analysing educational practices and contexts; (2) can relationally analyse underlying structuring principles of educational practices and contexts in student sojourners' heritage and host cultures, rather than just offering empirical descriptions, and thus enable these to be related; and (3) can be applied to a range of objects, such as schools, classrooms, curriculum and pedagogy.

#### **3.2.2.1 *Bernstein's concepts of classification and framing***

According to Bernstein, formal educational knowledge is realised through three 'message systems': curriculum, pedagogy and evaluation. Curriculum indicates what is considered to be valid knowledge in an educational context; pedagogy relates to how this knowledge is taught; and evaluation, or the assessment of learner outcomes,

defines a legitimate realisation of this knowledge by the learner (Bernstein, 1977). The underlying structures of these three message systems can be analysed using Bernstein's terms of 'classification' and 'framing', two key concepts of his theory of educational knowledge codes.

The strength of *classification* (C) refers to the strength of boundaries between categories or contexts (such as school subjects, teachers and students, school and home). In educational terms, it defines the basic structure of curriculum. Stronger classification (+C) can be used to describe a context where the boundaries between the content of a particular study unit and other kinds or areas of knowledge are sharply drawn. As a result of these distinct boundaries, the content knowledge of this study unit is highly insulated from the content knowledge of other study units (i.e. other kinds of educational knowledge), or from knowledge learned outside the educational context (i.e. everyday knowledge). By contrast, relatively weaker classification (-C) indicates blurring boundaries, thus reducing insulation between categories of content.

The strength of *framing* (F) relates to the strength of control within these categories or contexts; it is about "who controls what" in pedagogic relations (Bernstein, 2000, p.12). Framing, therefore, determines the basic structure of pedagogy. Stronger framing (+F) can be used to describe a context where the control over communications in pedagogic relations (e.g. the selection, organisation, pacing and timing of the content of a study unit) more clearly resides with the teacher. On the other hand, relatively weaker framing (-F) refers to where roles between teacher and student are less hierarchical or defined and students have "more *apparent* control" (Bernstein, 2000, p.13).

Strengths of classification and framing may vary independently of each other. The combination of these differing strengths produces four potential code modalities: +C, +F; +C, -F; -C, +F; and -C, -F.

As noted earlier, this study needed a means of analysing and comparing the educational practices the students experienced in their heritage and host cultures. Empirical description of these experiences is insufficient because it does not enable

the researcher to see relations between the two cultures and the results of their meeting. For example, descriptive terms such as ‘teacher-centred and ‘learner-centred’ are “fuzzy and undefined” (Ensor & Hoadley, 2004, p.96), and do not allow one to compare the *underlying structures* of different aspects of educational practice. Such terms describe the realisations of underlying principles, not the principles themselves. By contrast, classification and framing provide a simple theoretical language to examine these principles. (This is explained more fully in Section 3 of this chapter). Classification and framing have been widely applied in educational research, including to explore: curriculum integration (Chien, 2004), distance learning (Jóhannsdóttir, 2008), portfolio-based teaching (Shalem & Steinberg, 2002), and conservative and progressive pedagogies (Riksaasen, 2001). The concepts have also been used to study unequal access to specialised knowledge by socially disadvantaged learners (e.g. Bourne, 2004; Hoadley, 2007; Lubienski, 2004; Morais & Neves, 2001; Rose, 2004), and to analyse classroom talk (Dooley, 2001) and online interactions (Doherty, 2006; Love & Simpson, 2005).

Among the various modalities of classification and framing, ‘visible’ and ‘invisible’ pedagogies (Bernstein, 1977, pp.116-145) are often drawn upon by Bernsteinian scholars to characterise teaching practices. Visible pedagogy involves stronger classification and framing (+C, +F), whereas invisible pedagogy involves weaker classification and framing (-C, -F). Three main features of pedagogic relations help to define whether a pedagogy is visible or invisible: hierarchy, sequencing rules and criteria (Bernstein, 1977, 1990). Hierarchy establishes the rules of conduct for the teacher and students; sequencing rules regulate the progression of teaching and the rate of learning; criteria relate to evaluative criteria distributed to students concerning what knowledge and behaviour is valued. The teacher’s control over these rules can be explicit or implicit. The more explicit it is, the more visible the pedagogy. A telling distinction between the two types of pedagogy is that a visible pedagogy emphasises the external performances of students and how they meet the criteria, whereas the focus of an invisible pedagogy is on the internal competencies of students and the unique realisations of these competencies by each student (Bernstein, 1990). In general terms, visible pedagogies are typical of traditional, teacher-centred, subject knowledge-based teaching methods, whereas invisible pedagogies represent

progressive, student-centred, interdisciplinary knowledge-oriented approaches (Lubienski, 2004; Morais & Neves, 2001; Riksaasen, 2001).

After this means of analysing and characterising the student sojourners' heritage and host educational cultures were decided upon (i.e. through the concepts of classification and framing, and their two main modalities of visible and invisible pedagogies), two questions arose: (1) Were the students sojourners aware they were moving to a potentially different learning environment (i.e. from the educational practice in their heritage culture to that of their host culture?); and (2) if they were aware of differences, were they able to adapt to the new educational practices? To investigate these two issues, the study utilised Bernstein's concepts of 'recognition' and 'realisation' rules.

Bernstein (2000) stated that the degree to which one can operate effectively in a social field of practice depends on one's capacity to read the requirements of one's context and learn to act in that field. To understand this, Bernstein proposed the concepts of recognition and realisation rules. The recognition rules are the means by which "individuals are able to recognise the speciality of the context that they are in", and the realisation rules enable them to produce "the expected legitimate text" (Bernstein, 2000, p.17). In general terms, to be able to speak and act appropriately in a particular educational context, it is essential that the learner can distinguish the features of the context, such as what is expected and deemed to be legitimate by the context (recognition rules). Following this, the learner also has to be able to communicate what he or she knows in a way that is understandable and acceptable to people in this context (realisation rules). To put it another way, "recognition rules regulate what meanings are relevant and realisation rules regulate how the meanings are to be put together" (Bernstein, 2000, p.18). It is also important to note that possessing the recognition rules of a social or educational context does not necessarily lead to one's ability to communicate appropriately in that context. This is because one may not have learned the realisation rules.

### **3.2.2.2 Limitations of Bernstein's theory for this study**

For this study, Bernstein's theory is valuable because it is particularly suited to

analysing educational practices and enables knowledge to be seen and conceptualised as an object of study (Maton & Muller, 2007). However, as Maton (2007, 2009) argues, the approach focuses on one dimension of social fields of practice: their formations of knowledge. This focus “makes it difficult to fully understand fields where knowledge is less explicit” (Maton 2009, p.160). For example, in Bernstein’s analysis of educational knowledge codes (1977), the identities of actors and basis for measuring achievement are said either to reside in the possession of subject knowledge (for +C, +F; where boundaries between academic subjects are stronger) or to be less certain and require constant negotiation (for -C, -F; where boundaries are weaker). As Maton argues:

Wherever knowledge is explicit ... Bernstein’s analysis is explicit: identity, insight and so on flow from this knowledge formation. Wherever knowledge is less explicit ... Bernstein’s analysis becomes less explicit. (2009, p.160).

Bernstein focuses on structures of knowledge; Maton (2007) suggests that every social field also has a structure of knowers.

This second dimension of fields is highlighted by Maton’s argument that when considering educational knowledge and practices in terms of classification and framing, it is important that one ask *what* is being classified or framed because their values may differ depending on whether one is coding knowledge (‘what’ and ‘how’) or knowers (‘who’). For example, where practices strongly bound and control knowledge (such as in visible pedagogy), the basis of identity and achievement is the explicit possession of this knowledge and the dispositions of the learners are less significant: i.e. knowers are weakly bounded and controlled in terms of their characteristics (-C, -F). Conversely, where practices blur boundaries and weaken control concerning knowledge (-C, -F), they often emphasise the dispositions and characteristics of learners as the basis of identity and achievement (+C, +F), such as the emphasis in constructivist pedagogies on learners’ everyday experiences as a legitimate basis of insight. Maton (2000) highlights these apparently contradictory strengths of classification and framing to show that Bernstein’s ‘educational knowledge codes’ are analysing one dimension – structures of knowledge – and argue that structures of knowers must be brought into the analysis. This knower dimension was crucial to the present study because the dispositions of learners were an important focus of this study. Therefore, the study employed LCT as a third theoretical



framework to complement Bernstein's educational knowledge codes, which it integrates and subsumes, in examining the underlying structuring principles of the student sojourners' educational experiences.

### **3.2.3 Integrating the knower: Maton's Legitimation Code Theory**

Maton (2000, 2007, 2009; Moore & Maton, 2001) introduces a conceptual framework, named Legitimation Code Theory (LCT), that builds on Bernstein to bring knower structures into view. LCT considers education as comprising fields of struggle where actors' beliefs and actions represent competing claims to legitimacy or what should be considered the measurement of achievement within that field. These 'languages of legitimation' are analysed in terms of their 'legitimation codes', which are their underlying structuring principles (Maton, 2000). The current study drew upon one facet of LCT, that of 'LCT(Specialisation)'. Specialisation refers to the basis of distinctiveness, authority and status, or "what makes actors, discourses and practices special or legitimate" (Maton, 2007, p.98). Underpinning LCT(Specialisation) is the notion that educational practices and contexts do not simply set up what is valid to know and how, but they also set up who is an ideal actor (learner or teacher). That is, every practice or knowledge claim is by someone (the subject) and is about or oriented towards something (the object). So, there are always relations to an object ('epistemic relations' or ER) and relations to a subject ('social relations' or SR) when knowledge claims and practices are made. Each of these co-existing but analytically distinct relations may be more strongly or weakly classified or framed. Put more simply, each relation may be more strongly (+) or weakly (-) emphasised as the basis of practices or knowledge claims. Together, these two relative strengths comprise the 'legitimation code of specialisation' (ER+/-, SR+/-). Figure 3 illustrates the four principal legitimation codes of specialisation: knowledge, knower, elite and relativist codes, which are also explained below, based on Maton (2007, 2009):

- a *knowledge code* (ER+, SR-) is given when possession of specialised knowledge, procedures or skills is emphasised as the basis of achievement, while the dispositions of actors are viewed as less significant;
- a *knower code* (ER-, SR+) is given when the dispositions of actors as knowers are emphasised as the basis of achievement, while specialist knowledge or

skills are downplayed. The knowers' dispositions may be considered innate or natural (e.g. notions of 'genius'), cultivated (e.g. an artistic sensibility developed through immersion in great works), or socially based (e.g. a specific gender or race);

- an *elite code* (ER+, SR+) is where the measure of achievement is based on having both specialist knowledge and also being the right kind of knower; and,
- a *relativist code* (ER-, SR-) is where legitimacy is seemingly determined neither by specialist knowledge nor by particular dispositions.

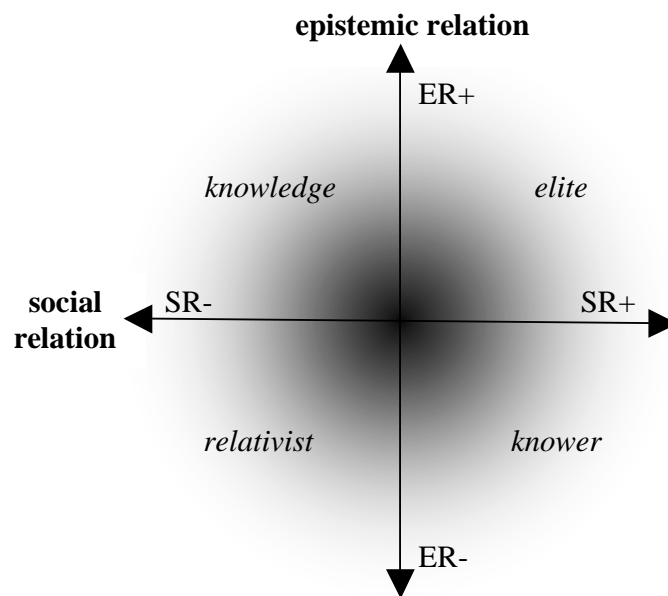


Figure 3. Legitimation codes of specialisation (Maton, 2007, p.97)

These four codes conceptualise different measures of achievement, where the important underlying rules are that what matters is: “one’s demonstrated possession of specialist knowledge or ‘what you know’ (knowledge code); one’s sensibilities and dispositions or ‘what kind of knower you are’ (knower code); both (elite code); or neither (relativist code)” (Lamont & Maton, 2008, p.270). Maton (2009) emphasises there are always knowledge and knowers, always epistemic and social relations; the question is *which* of these relations is *emphasised* in practices and knowledge claims (Carvalho et al., 2009).

Every educational practice or context is dominated by a specific code which embodies the unwritten 'rules of the game'. However, not everyone is able to recognise or realise these rules. This leads to a further term from LCT relevant to the present study, that of a 'code clash'. According to Lamont and Maton (2008), there can be a code clash between the code characterising, for example, the way a student thinks and acts and the code characterising the student's educational context. This clash may make it difficult for the student to achieve success, resulting in a sense of alienation and boredom and rejection of the educational context.

LCT is valuable to this study for a number of reasons. First, it more fully conceptualises educational practices and beliefs by bringing the issue of characteristics of knowers into the analysis. This is especially important for researching constructivist pedagogies which downplay the explicit instruction of knowledge and emphasise more the learners' attributes, dispositions and existing experiences. Secondly, the theory can be used to analyse a diverse range of objects of study, including school curricula, subject areas, specific learning tasks, and classroom interactions (Lamont & Maton, 2008). Indeed, this emerging approach is being utilised for analyses of a wide array of educational issues (Doherty 2008; Lamont & Maton 2008; Luckett 2009; Maton, 2004a; Shay, 2008; Vorster, 2008), and among different disciplines (Carvalho, Dong & Maton, 2009; McNamara, 2009; Thornton, 2008). As these studies have demonstrated, LCT can be used with both qualitative and quantitative methodology, and with a variety of empirical methods, such as interviews (Carvalho et al., 2009), questionnaires (Luckett, 2009), documents (Lamont & Maton 2008), transcripts or field notes of faculty meetings (Vorster, 2008) and online discussions (Doherty 2008). In the current study, LCT was utilised as a means to analyse interviews and documents to explore: the educational dispositions the students brought from their heritage culture; the measures of achievement underlying the host educational culture; and relations between the two. It thus allowed different aspects of the students' online educational experiences to be brought together and triangulated in the same analysis. Lastly, the suggestive notion of 'code clash' (Lamont & Maton, 2008) allowed questions important to this study to emerge, specifically by highlighting the question of whether the underlying basis of success in the host educational culture matches those brought by the student sojourners from their heritage culture.

In summary, Berry's acculturation theory was utilised in the study as an organising framework for making an analytical distinction between the students' heritage and host cultures. It set up the research problem as the meeting of two cultures and enabled an empirical investigation of the outcomes arising from this meeting. Bernstein's educational knowledge codes and Maton's Legitimation Code Theory then allowed the study to explore the underlying structuring principles of the educational practices experienced by the student participants in their heritage and host cultures. This led to systematic characterisations and analyses of the two educational practices, enabling these educational practices to be compared.

### **3. 3 Research approach**

#### **3.3.1 Qualitative research**

As described in Chapter 2, little is known about the effects of online flexible learning from the learner's perspective. Therefore, the study had an exploratory purpose, particularly to examine the happenings, behaviours and perspectives in specific settings and to generate hypotheses from these findings. This exploratory purpose consequently made the qualitative paradigm the most appropriate choice for the investigation (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000). A quantitative approach, through the use of survey or experimental research, for example, would not have been feasible since there were few known variables or hypotheses to control or test. The study, in fact, 'invited' rather than tried to control variables (Holliday, 2007), with the early period of the project, in particular, expected to be spent learning what the important questions were (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). Moreover, a qualitative approach was also suitable because the study sought a detailed understanding of the complex relationships between the experiences and concerns of the individuals involved in the study and their respective varied learning environments (Flick, 2006; Maxwell, 2005), and it was necessary to give voice to the individual participants to obtain this understanding (Creswell, 2007).

Specifically, the study adopted a number of characteristics typical of qualitative research. These included a concern with participant perspectives, naturalistic research

settings, the human research instrument, multiple data sources, rich description, interpretations, and researcher's reflexivity (Creswell, 2007; Flick, 2006; Maxwell, 2005; Merriam, 1998, 2002). These characteristics are expanded on below.

- *Participant perspectives.* The focus on the participants' perspectives is an emphasis on *meaning* (Creswell, 2007; Flick, 2006; Maxwell, 2005; Merriam, 1998). This study not only presented the multiple meanings individual actors attached to their experiences, but also investigated the processes that formed these meanings (Maxwell, 2005).
- *Naturalistic settings.* By studying people or events in their actual settings, the study aimed to explore the particular contexts and their impact on the participants' views and behaviours (Maxwell, 2005).
- *Emergent design.* The research design was responsive and adaptive (Merriam, 1998; 2002). This openness and flexibility were exhibited throughout the research process, from the shaping of research foci, and the selection of the participants and context, to collection and analysis of the data (Stake, 2005).
- *Multiple sources.* Gathering data from more than one source allowed the researcher to examine the topic of interest in depth and to triangulate her interpretations.
- *Researcher as key instrument.* The researcher gathered, translated and transcribed the (primarily interview) data herself. This process enabled her to develop deep insights for analysis (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003), as well as to make adjustments to the research design.
- *Richness of data and description.* The findings of the study were delivered through rich descriptions of the context, actors and events (Merriam, 1998). This account was intended to reflect the complexity of the issue in question, and thus assist readers in experiencing the events vicariously (Creswell, 2003, 2007; Stake, 2005).
- *Interpretive.* All the features mentioned so far are inextricably bound to the interpretive characteristic of this type of inquiry. Creswell (2007) stated that not only the participants and the researcher but also the readers are making interpretations based on their own understanding of the issue.
- *Researcher's reflexivity.* The recent literature on qualitative research places great emphasis on the researcher's reflexivity (Creswell, 2003; Denzin &

Lincoln, 2005; Flick, 2006). The researcher in this study documented in this thesis the factors that had potential effects on her interpretations.

### **3.3.2 Case study approach**

A case study approach is characterised by its emphasis on the wholeness of the 'case'. A 'case' is consistently defined as a bounded system – “a phenomenon of some sort occurring in a bounded context” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p.25), or “a thing, a single entity, a unit around which there are boundaries” (Merriam, 1998, p.27). Another important definition of a 'case' is that it is an 'integrated system', or 'a functioning body' (Stake, 1995, 2005). Consequently, case study research differs from other forms of qualitative research due to the wholeness of the entity being investigated (Stake, 1995, 2005). This wholeness allows a focus on the variables relevant to that entity only, together with keen insight into how these variables interconnect.

The study adopted a case study approach because it sought to examine integrated systems within specific boundaries, and the interconnection of the relevant variables within the systems. The entire study was a single case as it examined the contemporary phenomenon of Chinese student sojourners' online experiences at a single Australian university. The unit of study exhibited the essential boundedness of a case study: it was bounded by place, time, and limited to a small number of participants with particular characteristics. The study was also an integrated system where students' perceptions, their behaviours and the events in the setting interacted and mutually affected one another.

In addition, multiple cases (Yin, 2003) in the form of seven individual Chinese learners who were the focus of the research were also embedded within this wider case study. Involving a number of such cases enabled variation among the participants, and hence, more compelling interpretations by the researcher (Merriam, 1998) as these interpretations needed to account for a variety of participant experiences. It thus led to higher precision, validity and stability of the findings (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Stake (1995) makes a distinction between ‘intrinsic’ and ‘instrumental’ case studies. The intent of the intrinsic case study is to understand the case itself rather than what it represents, whereas in an instrumental case study, the researcher’s main purpose in studying a case is to develop insights into a wider issue. By this definition, the case studies in the present investigation can be described as instrumental case studies. As previously noted in Chapter 2, the research into students’ online learning experiences is poorly theorised, with studies generally producing descriptive results that have limited application across contexts. To fill this gap, the ultimate goal of this study was to theorise learners’ online experiences by drawing insights from the cases studied.

### **3. 4 Research setting**

The research was conducted in a regional Australian university. In 2007, according to the university’s annual report, student enrolments at the university reached 23,171 across nine faculties and three campuses. Thirty percent were international students, with nearly one-third undertaking postgraduate studies. Personal communication with the Vice Chancellor’s Unit (22 July, 2009) indicated that students from Mainland China accounted for 27.4% of the university’s international student population. These figures correspond closely to the national statistics on the average number of student enrolments in Australian universities (Australian Education International, 2009b), indicating the university’s representativeness in this regard. As with most of the other Australian universities, the university that was the site for this study placed a strong emphasis on internationalising the curriculum and enhancing the international student experience. For instance, the university offered free academic services to international (as well as local) students through a specialised academic division which organised individual consultations, workshops and online resources to facilitate the development of students’ general and discipline-specific academic literacies. In addition, social activities were regularly held by the wide range of clubs and societies to involve students in the university’s diverse cultures.

### **3. 5 Data collection**

Guided by Berry’s acculturation framework outlined earlier in this chapter, data for the study was collected in three phases (Figure 4). In the first phase, three focus

groups with 16 Chinese students from different faculties at the university were convened to explore the ‘heritage’ educational culture of Chinese student sojourners. The second phase involved collecting information about the online learning context at the university by interviewing 8 teachers of postgraduate online units in the Faculty of Education and analysing example unit outlines. The aim of this phase was to characterise the ‘host’ culture. The final phase involved gathering data about the outcomes when these two cultures came into ‘contact’ through 7 in-depth case studies of Chinese students studying postgraduate online units in the Faculty of Education at the university. This section of the chapter provides details of the designs and implementation of these three data gathering phases, and other issues relating to the research methods.

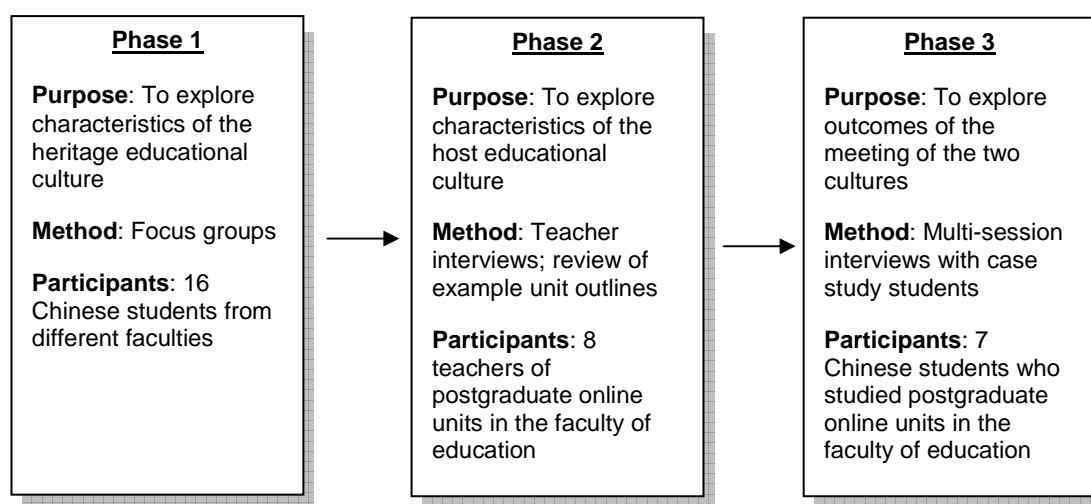


Figure 4. Data collection phases

### 3.5.1 Phase One: The focus groups

#### *Reasons for using the focus groups*

Three focus groups were used to explore the general attitudes, behaviours and aspirations Chinese student sojourners might bring to their learning contexts in Australia. The focus group technique had particular strengths in fulfilling this purpose. It enabled the elicitation of a wide range of issues that were of greatest importance to this student group concerning the research topic in a short period of time (Barbour, 2007; Morgan, 1988). In addition, the researcher could capitalise on the group interactions occurring in the discussions to bring out the collective memories and



shared knowledge of the informants (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005). Furthermore, data collected from focus groups was valuable in investigating the issues of relevance from the perspectives of the Chinese students in the particular research setting, that of the university where the study took place (Morgan, 1988).

The reason for holding more than one focus group was that conducting multiple focus groups with different individuals reduced the impact caused by the different group compositions, thereby enabling the researcher to make more reliable claims about the findings (Barbour, 2007; Marshall & Rossman, 2006). The number of focus groups was decided based on the saturation of information collected (Morgan, 1997). The initial analysis of the data collected from the third focus group revealed that the discussion of the topic had been exhausted, indicated by the fact that no new issues had arisen.

### *Participant selection*

A snowball selection strategy was employed for attracting focus group participants. This method was adopted because it was considered a culturally appropriate strategy for this study. Minichiello, Aroni and Hays (2008) have claimed that snowball sampling relies “on the researcher’s knowledge of a social situation” (p.172). It was anticipated that social entry into the cultural group from which participants would be drawn (i.e. Chinese international students) was more likely to be granted through a mutual contact than direct contact. This was later confirmed by some of the participants, who revealed that they would not have taken part in the study if they had not been initially approached by their friends. In fact, several participants mentioned they had received the researcher’s email advertisement, but decided to ignore it because they did not ‘know’ the researcher. As alluded to here, the snowballing strategy was also used because other recruiting strategies failed. Prior to adopting this snowballing strategy, the researcher had made a number of unsuccessful attempts with other techniques. For example, email advertisements about the research were sent through different channels (e.g. through student clubs and the Chinese student association), and the researcher sought opportunities to approach students at the places Chinese students frequented, such as Chinese restaurants at the university and festival gatherings for Chinese students. Neither of these methods produced satisfactory results.

It is suggested that a potential disadvantage of using the snowballing strategy in selecting focus group participants is that strangers may serve as better informants than friends in focus group discussions because the group effect among acquaintances may lead to similar or convergent answers (Carey, 1994; Fontana & Frey, 2005; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006) — whereas strangers may provide fresh perspectives on the topic (Flick, 2006). Nevertheless, Morgan (1997) has reminded researchers that group dynamics among strangers and acquaintances are simply *different* rather than one being superior to the other, and that the sampling decisions should be based on the research goals and practical concerns. For this study, using acquaintances as members in focus groups had the advantage of removing a particular cultural barrier resulting from Chinese people's reluctance to discuss such issues openly with strangers (Bond, 1991, Russell & Yik, 1996).

### *Participants*

Because the aim of this phase of data collection was to explore the students' heritage educational culture, the Chinese students involved were not required to have online learning experience. In order to explore the spectrum of issues related to the research topic, student sojourners who were from any Chinese cultural background, at any level of study, and in any faculty were recruited for the first focus group. Consequently, this group was composed of 3 informants from China, 3 from Taiwan and 1 from Malaysia (see Table 1 for their demographic information). The results of this focus group discussion revealed that the prior educational experiences of the informants from China and Taiwan in their home countries were very similar, whereas the Malaysian student had experienced a relatively different educational context. The Malaysian student did not identify with many of the classroom experiences recounted by the Taiwanese and Chinese participants. It was therefore decided to remove the data collected from the Malaysian informant from the analysis to ensure that the data collected was coherent.

All informants in the two further focus groups were from China (see Table 1). To obtain a broad understanding of the students' heritage educational culture, the selection of participants for these two groups also aimed to maximise the number of different faculties the students came from, with five different faculties represented.

Table 1. Demographic information for focus group informants

Group	Name	Gender	Faculty	Level of study	Country of Origin
1	Chris	M	Education	Masters	China
	Mary	F	Health & Behavioural Science	Masters	China
	Doug	M	Commerce	Bachelor	China
	Eunice	F	Creative Arts	Doctorate	Taiwan
	Helen	F	Commerce	Masters	Taiwan
	Wayne	M	Commerce	Masters	Taiwan
	Barbara	F	Health & Behavioural Science	Masters	Malaysia
2	Michael	M	Commerce	Bachelor (Senior)	China
	Lynn	F	Commerce	Bachelor (Senior)	China
	Jane	F	Health & Behavioural Science	Masters	China
	Rachael	F	Health & Behavioural Science	Masters	China
	Eva	F	Health & Behavioural Science	Masters	China
3	Lisa	F	Commerce	Masters	China
	Bruce	M	Commerce	Masters	China
	Peter	M	Informatics	Masters	China
	Jack	M	Engineering	Masters	China

Note: Names are pseudonyms.

### *Implementation of the focus groups*

All three focus groups were conducted in Mandarin. With participants' consent, the discussions were digitally recorded, and the entire discussions were translated by the researcher directly from the audio into English for analysis. In moderating the discussions, the researcher focused on creating a congenial atmosphere. Fern (2001) highlights the importance of including a warm-up period for focus groups composed of members of a collectivist culture (which characterises Chinese culture) in cultivating a sense of commonality among the group. Therefore, in this study all three discussions were preceded by a short, informal chat over food, during which the informants were introduced and became familiar with one another. This step of social bonding was, in the researcher's observations, the key factor of the success of all three groups. The participants' enthusiasm was displayed in their generosity with their time. Each discussion was planned to last sixty minutes, but all three groups lasted between 90 and 120 minutes.

The content of discussion was guided by a set of broad, open-ended questions, such as 'What is it like to study in your home country?', 'What kind of student is considered a good student in your home country', and 'What do you expect to get out of your learning experience in Australia?' (see Appendix 1 for the interview guide). Although online learning was not a major discussion topic in the focus groups, several issues related to online learning were raised by the researcher to explore the participants' views of this type of learning. As most of the participants had not had experience of studying online, and therefore were unlikely to have given much thought to these issues, the study utilised past research findings about Chinese students' online learning experiences as stimulus material to elicit their responses (Barbour, 2007) (see Appendix 2 for the research findings used in the discussions).

## **3.5.2 Phase Two: Teacher interviews**

### *Reasons for using the interviews*

To characterise the online learning environment that student sojourners entered in the host culture, semi-structured teacher interviews were undertaken in the second phase of the study. The interview technique was used on the grounds that it enabled the

researcher to collect in-depth information by engaging with each interviewee's perspectives (Patton, 2002). Semi-structured interviews gave an element of structure to the interview process, while additionally allowing the researcher flexibility to explore areas of interest or to examine areas that she may not have been foreseen prior to the interview. Observations of teaching practice (online and face-to-face) were not used because the study was more concerned with characterising the learning context from the teachers' perspectives rather than examining or evaluating whether the teaching practice corresponded to the teachers' accounts.

### *Participant selection*

The selection criteria for teacher participants were that the participant:

- was, or had experience of, teaching an online unit, and
- was teaching in the postgraduate programme in the Faculty of Education at the university.

The second of these selection criteria was introduced because it was found that the postgraduate programme in the Faculty of Education had most uniformly implemented the type of online learning relevant to this study. That is, their units were fully or predominantly delivered online with very little face-to-face contact. The focus group discussions indicated that this was much less likely in other faculties at the time, which continued to use a largely face-to-face model. Moreover, there was no online undergraduate unit at the university at the time of the research.

The teachers were selected to maximise variety among the participants. To maximise this variety, teachers were selected from a number of differing specialisations within the Education Faculty. This aim was balanced by the practical aspect of accessibility to the teachers (Stake, 2005). The participants were recruited through direct invitation.

### *Participants*

Eight teachers from the four specialisations agreed to participate in the study. The four specialisations were: Information and Communication Technologies in Learning; Educational Leadership; Adult Education and Training; and Language and Literacy.

As Table 2 shows, the participants were all experienced university lecturers, who had three to thirteen years of online teaching experience.

Table 2. Demographic information for teacher participants

Teacher	Gender	Tertiary teaching experience (years)	Online teaching experience (years)
Teacher A	M	8	3
Teacher B	F	10	10
Teacher C	F	20	8
Teacher D	M	25	4
Teacher E	M	23	10
Teacher F	M	22	13
Teacher G	F	12	12
Teacher H	F	15	10

### *Implementation of the teacher interviews*

Each teacher participant was interviewed once for approximately an hour. With the participants' consent, all interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis. The researcher obtained an example unit outline from each participant prior to the interview. During the interviews, the teachers were asked to describe an online postgraduate unit they were currently teaching, or one that best represented their teaching philosophy and practices. The interview questions asked participants about their pedagogical beliefs, the design principles underpinning the learning environment, and their observations of student learning in the online unit (see Appendix 3 for the interview guide). Those who had experience teaching Chinese students were also asked about their perceptions of these learners.

### **3.5.3 Phase Three: Case study student interviews**

#### *Reasons for using multi-session interviews*

This third phase of the research comprised multiple semi-structured individual interviews with Chinese students to explore their experiences with the online environment in the host educational culture. This design differs from past studies researching Chinese students' online learning experiences, which often investigated students' experiences of the same online unit using one-off interviews. The present research aimed to invite a broad range of issues involved in students' online learning

experiences by including participants from a variety of online environments. Moreover, the multi-session interviewing design addressed the methodological gap in the literature concerning the limitations of one-off interviews for producing in-depth data.

This design increased the trustworthiness of the results of the study in the following ways. First, it allowed the researcher to observe changes in the participants' views over a period of time and to probe further into any apparently contradictory statements that arose. It should be emphasised here that the purpose of cross-checking the consistency of the respondents' accounts was not to "find out the truth *per se* but rather the truth *as the informant sees it to be*" (Minichiello, Aroni & Hays, 2008, p.111). Secondly, multiple interviews helped the researcher to peel back the layers of the students' experiences. As Glesne (1999) has contended, "Many layers of data exist and single-session interviews give 'thinner' data than multiple interviews because people tend to talk more willingly about personal issues once they know you" (p.99). Thirdly, between the sessions of interviews, the interviewees' sensitisation to the issues being discussed can evoke memories or alert them to new, relevant incidents (Weiss, 1994). This in turn enhanced the richness of the data gathered. For example, one participant emailed the researcher from time to time to inform the researcher what happened in her class and reminded the researcher to ask her about it during the following interview. Another participant sent the researcher an assignment she wrote about her reflections on online learning. Lastly, conducting interviews multiple times reduced the possibility of the participants offering socially desirable responses or answers they believed were being sought by the researcher. One student, for example, admitted during her fourth interview that she avoided mentioning the negative side of her online experience in previous interviews because she assumed that the researcher favoured this form of learning. However, in this later interview she disclosed a different perspective, admitting she generally disliked online learning. In short, all these distinct advantages of multi-session interviewing enabled the study to present a fuller account of the phenomenon being researched.

### *Participant selection*

Informed by the research questions and results from the focus groups, the selection criteria for case study students were that the participant:

- was from Mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong or Singapore, and
- was, or had experience of, taking a postgraduate online unit in the Faculty of Education at the university.

As mentioned above, the students were drawn from different online units in order to maximise what could be learned in relation to students' online learning experiences. As with the focus groups, the participants were selected using the snowballing strategy for many of the same reasons outlined earlier for selecting the focus group participants (see Section 3.5.1). However, recruiting students for this third phase of the study presented an even greater challenge than for the focus groups because unlike the focus groups, participants in this third phase were restricted to online learners. It appeared that there were very few Chinese learners in each online unit, and there was no official data about students taking online units available at the university.

The process for recruiting participants in this third phase lasted for three months. First, the researcher approached chairpersons of student clubs, lecturers, and people in her personal network without success. The researcher then sent an invitation for participation to the lecturers in the Faculty of Education who had experience or were teaching online units at the time to forward to their Chinese students. Two students answered this invitation, one of whom was recruited. The third recruiting channel proved to be most effective: an informal email was sent to a selection of the researcher's contacts who potentially had access to this student group. Four participants were selected through this strategy. Following this, through this snowballing strategy, a further two students were recruited through invitations extended to other Chinese online learners from existing participants. These seven participants represented a diversity of specialisations and online units within these specialisations, so recruitment of more student participants was not considered necessary.

### *Participants*

Table 3 details the demographic information of the seven case study students. The majority of the participants were female students, aged from 21 to 25. Three had been English majors while studying in China. About half of the students were taking at



least one online unit while participating in the study, and the other half had already completed their online units. These units were offered by four different specialisations in the faculty, corresponding to the four specialisations from which teacher participants were recruited. However, it should be noted that the teacher participants were not necessarily the instructors of the units when the students were taking them. This was because the purpose of including teacher interviews in the study was to characterise the general online learning contexts rather than to evaluate specific teaching practices. All the case study student participants had finished at least one semester of their study at the time of the research, and none had any previous experience of online learning.

Note that for ethical reasons it is not possible to mention the students' specialisations here or anywhere else in the thesis. This is because there tend to be only a small number of Chinese students in each specialisation of the Education Faculty, and mentioning the name of the specialisation may alert the teachers to the students' identities. The same teacher also regularly teaches the same online units in each specialisation, so mentioning this may also alert readers to the identities of the teachers.

Table 3. Demographic information for case study participants

Name	Age	Gender	Work experience in China (years)	Level of study	Current online units	Completed online units	Completed semesters
Jennifer	21-25	F	3	Masters	1	0	1
Vivian	21-25	F	1	Masters	3	0	1
Chris	21-25	M	0	Masters	1	0	2
Fiona	36-40	F	5	Masters	1	6	2
Megan	26-30	F	5	Masters	0	6	3
Rita	21-25	F	0	Masters	0	4	2
Diana	31-35	F	3	Doctorate	0	3	1

### *Implementation of the student interviews*

The number of the student interviews was determined by the saturation of data and the time each participant could commit to the study. Students who were studying an online unit at the time of the research were interviewed five to six times over a semester in order to capture the development of their responses and feelings towards

their experiences. Those who had already completed their online units were interviewed one to three times, depending on the saturation of data. Each interview ranged from 60-120 minutes in length. Table 4 records the number, intervals and length of these interviews. All interviews were digitally recorded with participants' consent, and the entire interviews were translated into English for analysis.

Table 4. Student interview schedule

Student	Vivian	Chris	Jennifer	Megan	Diana	Rita	Fiona
Before Week 1			X	X	X		
Week 1	X	X			X		
Week 2	X	X					
Week 3			X			X	
Week 4	X	X		X		X	
Week 5			X				X
Week 6	X	X					
Recess			X	X			
Week 7							
Week 8	X						
Week 9		X					
Week 10							
Week 11							
Week 12							
Week 13							
After Week 13	X	X	X		X	X	
Number of interviews	6	6	5	3	3	3	1
Total length of interviews (hours)	10	7	8	6	5	3	2

The majority of the participants demonstrated a high level of commitment to the research. For example, three out of the four students who were studying at the time of the research, Vivian, Chris and Jennifer, agreed to be interviewed fortnightly. Nevertheless, after about three sessions, a sense of diminishing returns emerged, as the reporting of new incidents, learning behaviours or feelings decreased. The researcher therefore decided to increase the intervals between interviews.

The interview questions were open-ended, and developed based on the research questions, the literature and themes gleaned from the focus group discussions. An outline of the topics is presented in Table 5.

Table 5. General topics for student interviews

<b>First interview</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learning experiences in China and Australia</li> <li>• Views of Chinese and Australian education</li> <li>• Purposes of sojourn</li> <li>• Opinions of technology and online learning</li> <li>• Learning preferences</li> </ul>
<b>Intervening interviews</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Description of the online unit (learning environment, tasks and interactions)</li> <li>• Learning experience in the online unit (behaviours and attitudes)</li> <li>• Relationships with the teacher and the peers</li> <li>• Expectations of the learning experience</li> <li>• Conceptions of knowledge and learning</li> </ul>
<b>Final interview</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Overall learning experience in the online unit</li> <li>• Changes in perceptions and behaviours</li> <li>• Views of the key to success in the online unit</li> <li>• Views of the learning environment of the online unit</li> <li>• Views of the online learning mode</li> <li>• Evaluation of one's own learning outcomes</li> </ul>

A generic interview protocol was prepared for each interview (see Appendices 4-6). This protocol was then customised for each participant and modified after each interview. This approach corresponded to Rubin and Rubin's (2005) 'responsive interviewing model', which urges qualitative researchers to systematically examine an interview immediately after it is conducted to identify emerging topics to pursue in the next interview session.

All interviews were conducted face-to-face except for three phone interviews with one participant who returned to China before the end of the study. The researcher had developed a good rapport with this participant while she was studying at the university, making phone interviews less problematic than if they had been the sole means of data collection. All participants were consulted about the language they preferred to use. As a result, all interviews were conducted in Mandarin with the exception of the first interview with one participant. It is worth noting that although this participant spoke fluent English, the transcript of this particular interview indicated a relative lack of depth in the opinions she expressed compared with the information she offered in the later interviews. This appeared to be due to the difficulty in expressing the complexity of her views in a foreign language as well as

the conceptual differences existing in the two languages, which highlights the advantage of using the participants' native language in the interviews.

#### **3.5.4 Translation**

The translation of focus group and student interview data was carried out by the researcher, who speaks Mandarin as her first language, is a qualified English teacher with thirteen years of teaching experience, and speaks and writes in English on a daily basis. The researcher's fluency in the two languages and her immersion in the two cultures ameliorated problems associated with translation. The conceptual domain (or frame of reference) she shares with the students' community enabled her to heed cross-cultural meanings and conceptual equivalence across the two languages. This served to enhance the validity of the data collected.

The researcher's role as the translator, in effect, intensified the analysis of data. As Marshall and Rossman (2006) have argued, the translation process "entails the construction of meaning" (p.112). When searching for English words to represent the participants' meanings, for example, the researcher developed deep insights into the students' perspectives, and a better understanding of their experiences evolved.

In translating the interviews, meaning-based translation was favoured over word-for-word translation (Esposito, 2001). When there were difficulties finding an English term to match a Chinese phrase or concept in the data, it was transcribed in Chinese and left for further investigation at a later date. During this period of time, the researcher consulted other Chinese-English bilingual references, or emailed the participants and asked them to explain the phrase or concept. This delay in translation prevented the "all too early termination of dialogue" between language and culture (Temple & Young, 2004, p.174), and consequently increased the trustworthiness of the results.

### 3.5.5 Role of researcher

#### 3.5.5.1 Researcher's position

The researcher of this study is ethnically Taiwanese, and therefore shares a similar Chinese cultural background and similar educational experiences with the student participants. This status enabled her to adopt an insider's position on many aspects of the research. As suggested in the previous section, for example, this shared cultural background enhanced the prospects of the researcher understanding the participants' meanings (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006). In addition, being familiar with the cultural mores of the participants' community tended to enhance the researcher's ability to create a rapport with them. This possibly led to greater opportunities for access to the participants during the research, and may also have given them greater encouragement to persist with the study (Glesne, 2006; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006). The insider's status also expedited the building of trust, which proved to be especially valuable for encouraging students to share their views. In one interview, for example, a participant revealed her reluctance to discuss the negative side of Chinese education with people from a different culture, referring to them as 'outsiders':

As outsiders, *they* won't look at *our* situation objectively. *We* understand the background, so *we* know why the negative things exist. *We're* willing to admit this, but *we* are able to remain objective. But if you look at the problems from the perspective of a person from another country, you would probably think the problems are horrible. So I don't want to talk about the problems of *our* education with *them*.  
[Vivian, Interview 6, emphasis added]

As shown clearly in this quote, the participant identified the researcher as an insider with whom she was willing to share her perspectives.

The researcher, however, was aware of the danger presented by this insider stance, for example the potential for the ethnic researcher to make assumptions about the participants' meanings (Glesne, 2006; Minichiello, Aroni & Hays, 2008). To counteract this potential problem, the researcher took a 'native-as-stranger' position (Minichiello, Aroni & Hays, 2008), endeavouring to alternate between the role of an insider and that of a stranger, or cultural outsider. For instance, when conducting the interviews, the researcher adopted 'the mindset of a learner' (Glesne, 2006), suspending her assumptions and judgments while seeking detailed explanations of the information given by the participants. The fact that the researcher was not from the

Chinese Mainland helped to create a slight distance between her and the participants. This not only assisted the researcher in taking this outsider's role but also reduced the possibility that the participants might assume that she understood their meaning and therefore failed to explain their views in detail.

Finally, the researcher's position as a fellow student was also significant. This was because the participants were more likely to share their experiences with someone they considered to have no power over them (unlike for example, an academic as a researcher). The danger of students in practitioner-led research of reporting only positive experiences was pointed out in Chapter 2, Section 2.3.2.

### ***3.5.5.2 Researcher's background and research relationships***

The researcher had taught English in Taiwan for thirteen years before coming to Australia for her doctoral study. She had studied three online units offered by the Australian university that became the research site of this study. In her last online unit, the researcher befriended two students from China, whose negative experiences of this form of learning sparked her interest in undertaking the research. Although the researcher felt that she benefited from the flexible learning mode, she was curious about and sympathetic to these two classmates' different perceptions and experiences.

During the study, the researcher developed friendships with most of the case study students. Nevertheless, the researcher negotiated proximity and distance in relation to the participants (Flick, 2006) by maintaining a clear boundary between her social and research connections with the students. For instance, on social occasions, the researcher did not initiate any discussion about the research or pursue issues relating to the research raised by the participants. In addition, a degree of formality was observed in all interviews. The interviews took place in the researcher's university office and followed an established protocol. During the interviews, the researcher played the role of an empathic listener (Maxwell, 2005), but refrained from expressing her opinions of the issues discussed.

### **3.5.6 Ethics**

Ethical issues were addressed in a number of ways. First, ethics approval was obtained from the University of Wollongong's Human Research Ethics Committee before the commencement of data collection. Secondly, consent forms were signed by each of the participants before the first interview proceeded. The consent form described the objectives and procedures of the study, the benefits of the study to the participant, as well as the participant's rights to participate voluntarily and to withdraw at any time. Channels for the participant to file complaints were also provided (see Appendices 7 and 8 for a sample information sheet and consent form). Thirdly, participants' anonymity was protected by the use of pseudonyms.

Further, to reciprocate the participants' contributions, the researcher offered the student participants assistance in every way she could during the course of the research, on condition this did not compromise the study. Moreover, because of the researcher's role as an empathic listener, the interviews served therapeutic purposes for at least one participant. The student stated that she felt she was in utter isolation and that the researcher was one of the few people with whom she could voice her pent-up frustration. Another example is that the interviews provided opportunities for the participants to learn about themselves (Glesne, 2006). Three students commented that they would not have reflected on the issues about their own learning had it not been for their participation in the research. In addition to these direct benefits to the participants, the researcher also assisted the Chinese learning community in general by disseminating the findings and implications of the research to raise awareness of the phenomenon under study among university educators.

## **3. 6 Data analysis**

The researcher analysed the full data-set collected in the research, which comprised 56 hours of recorded focus group and interview data, and 8 unit outlines. Most data analysis procedures were facilitated by the software tool, NVivo 7 (QSR International Pty Ltd, 2007), including the storing, organising and coding of the data. A detailed overview of how NVivo was used in the analysis can be found in Table 11 in which the data analysis procedures are summarised.

The analytical approach and procedures utilised in the study were inspired by Miles and Huberman (1994), Creswell (2007), Maxwell (2005) and Bernstein (2000). The analysis process consisted of three stages: (1) searching for themes that emerged from the data; (2) organising these themes according to Berry's framework and Bernstein's three 'message systems'; and (3) developing an analytic device (i.e. an 'external language of description', Bernstein, 2000) for using the concepts of classification and framing and Maton's Legitimation Code Theory. In each stage, the analytic procedures involved were interwoven (Miles and Huberman, 1994). This section describes the three stages.

### **3.6.1 Empirical thematic analysis**

In the first stage of analysis, the researcher immersed herself in the data, searching for themes emerging from this data. Each interview transcript was read in its entirety, annotated and summarised (Creswell, 2007). This was followed by a close reading of the data and sorting it into 'substantive categories', which are coding categories based on participants' accounts or the researcher's description of what is going on (Maxwell, 2005). Descriptive labels were assigned to these coding categories. In total, 308 coding categories were generated, which were then compared and modified, and eventually pared down and organised into 26 hierarchical structures. A coding scheme was thus developed based on these hierarchical structures. Two of these structures are shown in Table 6 ('Activity' and 'Assignment'). The coding scheme contains a definition for each coding category and an example quote from the data. The full coding scheme can be found in Appendix 9.



Table 6. Examples from the coding scheme for emerging themes

Code	Description	Example quote from the data
<b>2.2 Activity</b>	This set of codes identifies issues related to learning activities, as raised by the teachers.	
2.2.1 Forum	This category codes teachers' comments that address their intent or implementation of forum discussions.	I guess the group interaction occurs when you raise issues in a forum, I mean it is still a group activity even though it is non-assessable.
2.2.2 Chat	This category codes teachers' comments that address their intent or implementation of synchronous online chat.	I did a synchronous chat weekly. And you know it wasn't compulsory and so some weeks a few people appeared and some weeks only one or two students were online but it was just that opportunity.
2.2.3 Face-to-face meeting	This category codes teachers' comments that address their intent or implementation of face-to-face meetings.	Even if they didn't talk about content but just emotional issues like 'How are you going' or 'I'm struggling with this task'. You know that, and just to have that rapport with other people I think that's really important.
<b>2.3 Assignment</b>	This set of codes identifies issues that relate to assignments, as raised by the teachers.	
2.3.1 Type	This category codes teachers' responses that describe the types of assignments they give students or their reasons for using the assignments.	So I favour very much project based orientation where there is some level of problem solving rather than just simply regurgitating text of literature. I think that's a futile, passive and uninvolved approach.
2.3.2. Criteria	This category codes teachers' responses related to the criteria they use for assessing students' assignments.	It's not like learning medicine, you've got to get it right [otherwise] the patient will die. It's not like that. It's more open to interpretation.

### 3.6.2 Organisational coding

The second stage of analysis was organisational coding, in which the coded data from the 26 hierarchical structures was arranged according to 'theoretical categories', which are coding categories derived from prior theories (Maxwell, 2005). There were two levels of organisational coding: one was based on Berry's acculturation framework and the other on Bernstein's three 'message systems'. As discussed in Section 3.2.1, this study used Berry's theory as an organising framework primarily to distinguish the heritage culture (Culture A), the host culture (Culture B) and the outcomes of the meeting of these two cultures (Contact). To examine how this distinction was reflected in the empirical data, the first level of organisational coding

involved sorting data into these three concepts. The results are presented in Table 7, which offers a definition of each concept modified for this study and the coding categories belonging to each concept.

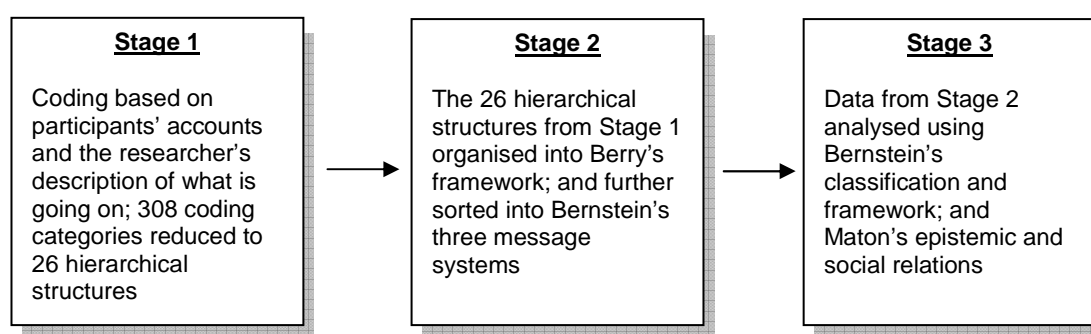
Table 7. Results of data organisation based on Berry's framework

Concept	Description	Coding categories sorted under the concept
Culture A	Features of the heritage culture as embodied by students' prior experiences and perspectives	1.1 Educational system 1.2 Knowledge 1.3 Teaching 1.4 Teacher 1.5 Learner 1.6 Assignment 1.7 Sojourn purpose
Culture B	Features of the host culture as embodied by teachers' practices and philosophies	2.1 Structure 2.2 Activity 2.3 Assessment 2.4 Belief 2.5 Goal 2.6 Teacher 2.7 Learner 2.8 Online delivery 2.9 Teaching Chinese learners
Contact	Students' experiences of and responses to the meeting of the heritage and host culture (including behavioural adjustments and psychological conflicts)	3.1 Strength 3.2 Challenge 3.3 Teacher 3.4 Learner 3.5 Online medium 3.6 Personal preference 3.7 Strategy 3.8 Stress 3.9 Satisfaction 3.10 Change

Following this, within each of the three concepts (i.e. within Culture A, Culture B and Contact), the data was further sorted into Bernstein's three message systems of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. The purpose of this second-level organisation was to organise the data in educational terms. Using Culture A as an example, some coding categories within each of Berry's concepts were sorted into only one of Bernstein's message systems (e.g. 'Educational system' was sorted under 'curriculum' because it was relevant only to that category). However, many coding categories recurred in more than one of these message systems. For example, 'knowledge' recurred in curriculum and pedagogy, because it was relevant to both those categories.

Finally, the researcher reduced the coded data in each message system under Culture A, Culture B and Contact by aggregating the coding categories into a small number of broad themes (Merriam, 1998; Miles & Huberman, 1994). These broad themes are outlined in the subsequent three analysis chapters of the thesis with rich descriptions and illustrative quotes from the data. The structure of these chapters reflects the organisational coding process introduced here: chapters 4, 5, 6 are concerned with the heritage culture, the host culture and their contact respectively. In each of these chapters, the findings are discussed in relation to curriculum, pedagogy and assessment.

Figure 5 provides an interim summary to clarify the first two analytical stages outlined above, prior to the lengthy account of the procedures involved in analytical Stage 3.



*Figure 5. Analytical stages in this study*

### **3.6.3 Analytical coding**

Once organisational coding was accomplished, the next step was to analyse the data within Culture A, Culture B and Contact in terms of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment, using Bernstein's concepts of classification and framing and Maton's Legitimation Code Theory. This stage of analytical coding aimed to understand the underlying structuring principles of the two cultures and their contact, so that they could be compared and characterised. This would in turn lead to an explanation of the various outcomes of the student sojourners' movement from one educational culture to the other.

To be able to use the theories, however, an analytic reading device for these theories had to be developed because the realisations of these theoretical concepts are different when used for different objects of study due to the particularities and specificities of the context of enactment. For example, in Lamont and Maton's (2008) investigation of the low take-up rate of school music as a qualification, a 'knower code' is represented by an emphasis on one's aptitude, attitude and personal expression. However, in Doherty's (2008) research into cultural production in online internationalised education the same concept was manifested as an emphasis on one being a member of a particular culture, or having experience with that culture. Therefore, a 'language of description' (Bernstein, 2000) is needed to understand the data from this study and also to show the 'dialectical' relations between the data and the theory (Morais, 2002), or how the analysis moves between the two. The development of such an analytic device allows new or unexpected information to emerge from the data, thereby preventing a theory being imposed on data. Hence, the main activity in the third analysis stage of this study was to develop a language of description specifically for the study.

A language of description is a 'translation device' that "constructs what is to count as an empirical referent, how such referents relate to each other to produce a specific text, and translates these referential relations into theoretical objects or potential theoretical objects" (Bernstein, 2000, p.133). Bernstein distinguished between 'internal' and 'external' languages of description. An internal language of description ( $L^1$ ) is the theoretical language or theoretical framework of a study (Ensor & Hoadley, 2004). An external language of description ( $L^2$ ) refers to the means by which the internal language is manifested in a particular study. It is therefore an operationalised theoretical language, or theoretical 'apparatus', specific to the data of a study (Moss, 2001). In simple terms, an external language of description serves as a translation device allowing a dialogue between theoretical and empirical descriptions, or between  $L^1$  and the empirical data (Maton, 2004b).

In relation to this study, the researcher started by working with the data, "ignor[ing] the theory and model" (Bernstein, 2000, p.137) and concentrating on the potential meanings that emerged from the data. This was shown by the first stage of empirical thematic analysis (Section 3.5.1). In the second stage the researcher gradually moved

towards theory with the introduction of Berry's framework into the analysis (see Section 3.5.2). Finally, in the third stage of analysis, a translation device was developed based on the movement back and forth between theory and the data.

An example of the movement between data and theory during the creation of a language of description in this study is that the empirical data showed participants spoke of the importance of bringing personal experience to the educational context. From this empirical angle, the researcher worked with the theory, contemplating how this emphasis might be understood in terms of the theory. As the Legitimation Code Theory defines a stronger social relation as referring to a stronger emphasis on the dispositions of the subject as a knower, such as one's sensibilities, attributes and dispositions, the researcher reached a tentative conclusion that this emphasis on personal experience might reflect a stronger social relation. Nevertheless, moving back to the data, asking "How does this work out in other parts of the study?", the researcher found different realisations of the concept of 'social relation' (such as participants' emphasis on the personal dimension of the learning process). Through continuous moving back and forth between data and theory, in relation to this concept of the social relation, the researcher eventually came to the point of having a translation device that shows how a social relation is realised in slightly different forms in curriculum, pedagogy and assessment in this study.

The remainder of this section presents the language of description developed in this study for Bernstein's concepts of classification and framing, and Maton's epistemic and social relations. An explanation of the manifestations of these theoretical concepts in the study is provided before the translation device is displayed.

In generating a language of description for the notions of classification and framing, the study drew on Bernsteinian analyses of educational practice. Classification was manifested in the study as the strength of boundaries between (1) everyday and educational knowledges; and (2) different forms of educational knowledge in a curriculum. The concept of framing was exhibited mainly in pedagogy, by the degree of the teacher's control in: selecting content knowledge; sequencing and pacing the teaching of content knowledge; making evaluative criteria explicit; and regulating the learner's conduct in the pedagogical relationship.

An analytic instrument for translating between theoretical and empirical descriptions was developed to code the data. It should be emphasised that the indicators for determining classification and framing values in this device were derived from the data rather than made on *a priori* grounds. Table 8 shows the language of description that was generated. The table is separated into two sections, one for classification, and the other for framing. The first column of each of these two sections of the table shows the various forms in which classification or framing is manifested in this study. The second column of each of the two sections contains the indicators for classification or framing values, and the third column presents illustrative quotes from the empirical data.

Table 8. Language of description for classification and framing

Classification			Framing		
Concept manifested – Strength of boundaries between:	Indicators	Example quotes from empirical data	Concept manifested – Degree of teacher control in:	Indicators	Example quotes from empirical data
everyday and educational knowledges	+C Personal work and/or life experience is little valued in the educational context.	What we learn and what we do in real life are totally different things.	selecting content knowledge	+F Content knowledge is determined mainly by the teacher.	The information in the textbook – decided by the teacher– was what a study unit was all about.
				-F Students are encouraged to select content knowledge for themselves.	Online education is being selective in the things that you read and not relying on a reading list from the lecturer that is the be all and end all.
	-C Personal work and/or life experience is highly valued in the educational context.	We try to situate the assignment in the context in which these people work and live.	sequencing and pacing the teaching of content knowledge	+F The sequencing and/or pacing of learning is mainly determined by the teacher.	If today you are studying, say, Lesson Five, the teacher will expect you to know everything in the previous four lessons before you come to class.
				-F Students are given abundant autonomy in sequencing and/or pacing their own learning.	It's not like they have to all keep up and do each [task] each week, because they can't. Online learning has to be more flexible than that.
different forms of educational knowledge in a curriculum	+C Knowledge gained in other study units is of little relevance to one's learning of the subject content.	It's very difficult to pass the entrance exam to enter a graduate programme if you're not from that discipline.	making evaluative criteria explicit	+F The teacher makes evaluative criteria clear and explicit to learners.	When a Chinese child paints the moon blue, the teacher will correct the child, saying that the moon shouldn't be blue.
				-F Evaluative criteria are open-ended.	It's not like learning medicine, you've got to get it right [otherwise] the patient will die. It's not like that. It's more open to interpretation.
	-C Knowledge gained in other study units is highly relevant to one's learning of the subject content.	[Students] actually come with a whole range of background and experience ... what they need is a framework to download that.	regulating the learner's conduct in the pedagogical relationship	+F A strong hierarchy is maintained between teacher and student.	The teacher has more knowledge, and they have the responsibility to deliver this to us... Gradually, we move to higher levels. We may have as much knowledge as the teacher does one day and we can pass it on.
				-F A weak hierarchy exists between teacher and student.	I think it's a joint partnership [between teacher and student]. I mean in a sense, you know, the people that I work with are professional adult educators so I learn from them, they learn from me, you know.

Note: +/- indicates 'stronger'/'weaker'

A language of description was developed for Maton's concepts of epistemic and social relations in the same manner as the  $L^2$  for Bernstein's concepts. As outlined in Table 9, the epistemic relation is realised in this study as the degree of emphasis on: content knowledge in terms of curriculum; the teaching of content knowledge in terms of pedagogy; and explicit criteria in relation to assessment. The manifestations of the social relation are: the degree of emphasis on the learner's personal knowledge and experience (curriculum); the personal dimension of the learning process (pedagogy); and the learner's self-evaluation (assessment).

Table 9. Manifestations of the epistemic and social relations in this study

Theoretical concept	Degree of emphasis on:	
Epistemic relations (ER)	Curriculum	Content knowledge of a study unit
	Pedagogy	The teaching of content knowledge
	Assessment	Explicit evaluative criteria
Social relations (SR)	Curriculum	Learner's personal knowledge and experience
	Pedagogy	The personal dimension of the learning process
	Assessment	Learner's self-evaluation

A means of translating between these theoretical descriptions and the empirical data was also constructed. As with the analytic device for classification and framing presented above, this language of description (see Table 10) can be read in two directions: from theory to data and from data to theory. In reading the table it is first important to note that it is divided into two sections. The section on the left relates to the epistemic relation (ER) and the section on the right refers to the social relation (SR). Each ER/SR column is structured so that, when read from left to right, it is a translator of theory into data, and when read from right to left, it is a translator of data into theory. For example, when reading the first row of the ER section of the table from left to right one can see that, in relation to curriculum (Column 1), the epistemic relation refers to "the degree of emphasis on content knowledge" (Column 2). The third column shows that a stronger epistemic relation (ER+) is indicated by the participants' emphasis on content knowledge being predetermined by the teacher, and a weaker epistemic relation (ER-) by the participants' emphasis on the open-endedness of the teaching materials. The last column then provides two participant quotes illustrating data consistent with these degrees of strength of the epistemic relation.



By contrast, moving from right to left in the second row of this ER section of the table, the reader can read from data to theory. At the top of this second row, in column 4, there is a participant comment that: “The teacher ... extracts and refines the best things from what he or she knows and gives this to you in class, and then offers you instructions on the tasks you need to complete.” This comment was coded as exhibiting a stronger epistemic relation (ER+) because it suggests that procedures and methods for learning content knowledge were made explicit to the learner (Column 3). Moving towards a more theoretical level, it indicates an emphasis on “the teaching of content knowledge” (Column 2) in terms of pedagogy (Column 1).

Bernstein’s and Maton’s concepts worked together in this third stage of the analysis. For example, a participant remark such as “the information in the textbook – decided by the teacher – was what a study unit was all about” was coded as showing *stronger framing* (see L<sup>2</sup> for Bernstein’s concepts, in Table 8, Row 1, Last column of the framing section) of *the content knowledge* that emphasises *the epistemic relation* (see L<sup>2</sup> for Maton’s concepts, in Table 10, Row 1). This is possible because Maton’s concepts integrate and subsume those of Bernstein; for example, ER+ is short-hand for ER(+C, +F). As a result of this analytical coding, the student sojourners’ heritage culture, host culture and their online experiences in the host culture were characterised using the four principal legitimisation codes: knowledge (ER+, SR-), knower (ER-, SR+), elite (ER+, SR+) and relativist (ER-, SR-) codes. This analysis is presented in the discussion sections of chapters 4, 5, and 6, respectively.

Table 10. An external language of description for epistemic and social relations

	EPISTEMIC RELATIONS (ER)			SOCIAL RELATIONS (SR)		
	Concept manifested – Emphasis on:	Indicators	Example quotes from empirical data	Concept manifested – Emphasis on:	Indicators	Example quotes from empirical data
<b>Curriculum</b>	content knowledge	ER+ Content knowledge is emphasised as determining form of legitimate educational knowledge.	The information in the textbook – decided by the teacher – was what a study unit was all about.	personal knowledge and experience	SR+ Personal experience and opinions are viewed as legitimate educational knowledge.	[Students] actually come with a whole range of background and experience ... what they need is a framework to download that.
		ER- Content knowledge is downplayed as less important in defining legitimate educational knowledge.	We ... show them ... digital repositories that they need to go to in order to access those readings that are relevant to their context.		SR- Personal experience and opinions are downplayed and distinguished from legitimate educational knowledge.	Online discussion is chaotic, and is like you conduct a survey and everyone tells you their opinions. That's all. It's different from a class.
<b>Pedagogy</b>	the teaching of content knowledge	ER+ Procedures for learning content knowledge are explicit to learners and emphasised as determining form of pedagogy.	[The teacher] extracts the best things from what he or she knows and gives this to you in class, and then offers you instructions on the tasks you need to complete.	personal dimension of the learning process	SR+ Individual learners' preferences are explicitly emphasised as determining form of pedagogy.	So negotiate to learn in a way that suits them ... it's constructing your own learning in a way that is helpful for you.
		ER- Procedures for learning content knowledge are implicit to learners and downplayed as not significantly shaping form of pedagogy	The teacher only points out the things you need to read.... But as to how to think, how to read and understand, it's your own business.		SR- Individual learners' preferences are downplayed as not significantly shaping form of pedagogy.	Even if your question is brilliant, the teacher still might not answer you because he or she wants to teach something else first.
<b>Assessment</b>	explicit criteria	ER+ Explicit evaluative criteria are emphasised in judging student performances.	When a Chinese child paints the moon blue, the teacher will correct the child, saying that the moon shouldn't be blue.	self-evaluation	SR+ Evaluation of legitimacy of student performances resides in beliefs of individual learners.	What's valid for you and what's valid for me are two different things, aren't they?
		ER- Explicit evaluative criteria are less significant in judging student performances.	It's not like learning medicine, you've got to get it right [otherwise] the patient will die. It's not like that. It's more open to interpretation.		SR- Student performances are judged against a shared criteria external to the learner.	I am a "test-taker." If the teacher doesn't give me a standard, I don't know what to do.

NOTE: +/- indicates 'stronger'/'weaker'

After exploring the underlying structuring principles of the two educational cultures and learners' experiences through analytical coding, the study then drew conclusions based on this analysis. In this conclusion-drawing process, explanations for the case study participants' online experiences were developed, with a view to theorising the phenomenon for wider application. In short, the analysis of the study aimed for rigor and a high degree of precision by thoroughly inspecting empirical relations, conceptual relations and their interactions. It was expected that trustworthy interpretations of the results could be achieved through the multi-layer analysis that integrated the three theories (see Figure 6, Section 3.6.3).

Table 11 provides a detailed summary of the analytical approach and procedures adopted by the study that was described in this section. As mentioned at the beginning of this section, it includes how NVivo was used to facilitate the analysis.

Table 11. Detailed summary of analysis approach and procedures employed in this study

Main activity	Strategies used	Associated procedures
<b>Pre-coding:</b> Data management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Documenting</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Created folders and sub-folders for different forms of data and documents, using the 'Documents' feature in NVivo</li> <li>Created a case memo linked to each case, using the 'Memos' feature in NVivo</li> <li>Created concept memos for theoretical concepts used, using the 'Memos' feature in NVivo</li> <li>Created a research journal using the 'Memos' feature in NVivo to document researcher's reflections on the analysis process</li> <li>Formulated focus group and interview transcripts, and research instruments, and imported them into appropriate folders</li> </ul>
<b>Stage 1:</b> Empirical thematic analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Summarising</li> <li>Memoing</li> <li>Annotating</li> <li>Classifying data using substantive categories</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Read focus group and interview transcripts in their entirety, summarised each of them and wrote reflections, using case memos</li> <li>Annotated each focus group and interview transcript, using the 'Annotation' feature in NVivo</li> <li>Read each transcript closely and assigned codes, using the 'Free Nodes' feature in NVivo, based on concepts derived from the data, using descriptive labels</li> <li>Sorted data into appropriate categories</li> <li>Compared data and modified codes</li> <li>Organised free nodes into hierarchical structures, using the 'Tree Nodes' feature in NVivo</li> <li>Created a coding scheme</li> <li>Maintained the research journal, and case and concept memos in NVivo (throughout the whole analysis process)</li> </ul>

Main activity	Strategies used	Associated procedures
<b>Stage 2:</b> Organisational coding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Classifying data using theoretical categories</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Level 1 organisation:</b> Created three tree nodes, using Berry's concepts of Culture A, Culture B, and Contact as the 'parent nodes' (i.e. general categories at the top of hierarchical structures)</li> <li>Sorted the coding categories developed in Stage 1 into the three coding trees</li> <li><b>Level 2 organisation:</b> Under each of these coding trees (i.e. Culture A, Culture B, and Contact), created three tree nodes, using Bernstein's concepts of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment as the 'parent nodes'</li> <li>Sorted the Level 1 coding categories into the three Level 2 coding trees</li> <li>Conducted cross-analysis of the coded categories in each message system by aggregating the nodes into a small number of broad themes</li> </ul>
<b>Stage 3:</b> Analytical coding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Developing an external language of description</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Developed descriptions of how Bernstein's classification and framing concepts acted out in the study by moving back and forth between data and the concepts</li> <li>Created indicators of how the descriptions of the enacted theoretical concepts, particular to this study, could be identified in the data.</li> <li>Constantly modified this translation device.</li> <li>Repeat the same process with Maton's concepts of the epistemic and social relations</li> <li>Identified relationships among the coded data</li> </ul>
<b>Post-coding:</b> Conclusion drawing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Explaining</li> <li>Theorising</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Evolved a general explanation of the phenomenon under study based on the results of coding</li> </ul>

### 3. 7 Quality of research

As is typical of qualitative research, the present study was potentially faced with such problems as spurious inferences, misinterpretation of participants' meanings, biases due to single research methods, researcher's biases, researcher's influence on participants, and a lack of generality of findings (Maxwell, 2005). Drawing on insights from the qualitative literature (e.g. Creswell, 2007, pp.207-209; Lincoln & Guba, 1985, pp.228-251; Maxwell, 2005, 110-114; Merriam, 2002, pp.25-27; Miles & Huberman, 1994, pp.262-277), this study applied a number of strategies to mitigate these potential problems. The procedures adopted included: intensive engagement in the field by the researcher; member-checking; the researcher's position as a cultural insider; the use of the participants' native language; triangulation through multiple sources of evidence; rigorous coding; and peer review of findings. The remainder of this section explains how these strategies minimised the problems raised (see also a summary in Table 12).

In this study, the potential problems of spurious inferences and misinterpretation of participants' meanings were dealt with mainly by the researcher's intensive engagement in the research setting and member checking. The researcher's intensive engagement was enhanced by the multi-session interviewing procedure. The succession of interviews allowed the researcher to check with the participants specific themes derived from the previous interviews, and to test her tentative interpretations and assertions. In terms of member checking, a summary of the broad themes that emerged from the data was sent to all student participants for feedback in order to ensure the correctness of the researcher's interpretations of their meanings. In addition to these two strategies, as previous noted in Section 3.5.5.1, the researcher's position as a cultural insider and the use of participants' native language in the focus groups and interviews also reduced the possibility of her misunderstanding the participants' meanings.

Potential biases due to single research methods were counteracted by the triangulation technique. The data collected from different methods (focus groups, interviews and document review) and sources (students and teachers) provided corroborating evidence, thereby enabling triangulation of the findings.

In relation to the researcher's biases and potential influence on participants, the researcher in this study kept a research journal to reflect on these two issues. The researcher also documented her educational background and relationships with the participants in this thesis (Section 3.5.5.2 of this chapter) to help readers make their own judgment regarding these two issues. In terms of potential influence on participants, as suggested earlier (Section 3.5.5.1), the fact that the researcher was also a student and thus considered the student participants' peer diminished the possibility of them being selective in reporting their experiences because they perceived the researcher had little power over them (in contrast to the situation in teacher-led research).

To enhance the generalisability (or transferability) of findings, participant selection in this study was based on the principle of maximising the diversity of experiences by including student and teacher participants from different specialisations and online units. The variation led to more compelling researcher interpretations as it was

necessary for these interpretations to account for a variety of participant experiences. More important is that the study conducted rigorous, multi-layer coding by drawing on three theoretical perspectives and developing an external language of description. This procedure deterred the researcher from selectively choosing data to fit existing theories. Transferability of the research is also assisted by thick descriptions of the research context, accompanied by abundant uncontested data, to assist the readers in examining the conclusions made by the researcher. Finally, to confirm these conclusions, the researcher made continual efforts to seek critical reviews of the conclusions from expert referees and general audiences by virtue of conference presentations and journal publications (e.g. Chen, 2008; Chen, Bennett & Maton, 2007; 2008; Chen, Maton & Bennett, 2008).

Table 12. Summary of strategies used to enhance the quality of the research

Potential problems	Strategies used	Procedures
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Spurious associations or inferences</li> <li>Misinterpretation of participants' meanings</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Researcher's Intensive engagement</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The researcher tested her tentative interpretations of the students' meanings in the multi-session interviews</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Member checking</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A summary of the researcher's description of emerging themes were sent to the students for feedback</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Researcher's insider's position</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The researcher made use of her shared frame of reference with the students to understand their accounts</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Use of the participant's native language</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Student interviews were conducted in Mandarin, and teacher interviews were conducted in English</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Biases due to single research methods</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Triangulation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Data was collected from different sources and methods to provide corroborating evidence</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Researcher's biases</li> <li>Researcher's influence on participants</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Researcher's reflexivity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The researcher kept a research journal to reflect on her possible biases and influence on the participants, and their reasons</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Documentation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Sections of the methodology chapter were allocated to note the researcher's past experience and initial assumptions, and her relationships with participants</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Lack of generalisability/transferability of findings</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Participant selection strategy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The selection of participants aimed to maximise the variety of experiences</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Collective cases</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The researcher conducted cross-case analysis</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Rigorous coding</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The data was first coded line by line, with theories aside</li> <li>The study drew on three theoretical perspectives</li> <li>The researcher developed an external language of description by moving between data and theory</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Thick description</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>This thesis offers detailed descriptions of the context of the research and the participants' backgrounds and experiences</li> <li>The report of findings in this thesis is supported by abundant uncontested data</li> </ul>

Potential problems	Strategies used	Procedures
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Peer review</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Continual discussions about emerging themes were carried out with a fellow PhD student to obtain feedback on methods, interpretations and theories</li> <li>Work-in-progress papers were presented in different stages of analysis to invite critical reviews from expert referees and the general audience</li> </ul>

### 3. 8 Summary of the chapter

This chapter has explained the theoretical and methodological approaches employed in the research. Guided by three theoretical frameworks, the study adopted a qualitative, case study approach as the research strategy. The study gathered data from focus groups, individual interviews and document review. The use of Berry's acculturation theory as the organising framework ensured a broad coverage of issues relating to the intercultural contact in data collection and the initial data analysis stage. Bernstein's three message systems were then used to examine the issues that emerged in educational terms. From there, the analytic process moved gradually to more abstract levels by developing a translation device for Bernstein's classification and framing concepts and Maton's Legitimation Code Theory. These two sets of theoretical concepts enabled the researcher to characterise and compare the underlying structuring principles of the student sojourners' heritage and host educational cultures, and the outcomes of the meeting of these two cultures. This, in turn, facilitated the researcher in identifying relations among these three aspects and developing an overall interpretation of the students' online learning experiences. Finally, the chapter outlined various measures that were undertaken to enhance the quality of the research.

This investigation sought to ultimately theorise the phenomenon being studied (student online experiences) by offering an integrated explanation accounting for multiple cases. Therefore, presentation of the results from the study is organised by themes cutting across the cases, rather than following a case-by-case (each student participant) format. The remaining chapters of the thesis are structured as follows:

- Chapter 4 characterises the students' heritage culture by reporting the general conceptions of and beliefs about learning that the students brought into the

learning context. The data sources are mainly focus groups, supplemented by individual interviews.

- Chapter 5 characterises the host culture by describing the Australian teachers' conceptions and design of their online units. This chapter draws data from teacher interviews and unit outlines.
- Chapter 6 describes the meeting of the two cultures by presenting the multiple case study participants' learning experiences in their respective online units. The data presented is based on the multi-session student interviews;
- Chapter 7 aims to make sense of the data in light of the theories that inform the research. This final chapter discusses the findings and implications of the study.



## Chapter 4

### Heritage Educational Culture: Students' conceptions of and beliefs about learning

#### 4. 1 Introduction

This chapter is the first of three chapters presenting the results of the research. These three chapters address each of the three research questions posed in Chapter 1. Chapter 4 is concerned with the first question: 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? Specifically, the chapter aims to describe and characterise educational practices in China as represented by the student sojourners in this study. The chapter reports themes which were identified in the data drawn mainly from the three focus groups, supplemented by individual interviews with the seven online students. The results are organised into three sections, corresponding to Bernstein's (1977) three message systems: curriculum (what is considered to be valid knowledge in an educational context); pedagogy (how this knowledge is taught); and assessment (what is considered to be a legitimate realisation of this knowledge by the learner). Each section concludes with a discussion that analyses the underlying principles structuring the message system by drawing on the conceptual frameworks of Bernstein and Maton.

#### 4. 2 Curriculum

##### 4.2.1 Relation to everyday knowledge

Many of the students said their university education in China had not equipped them with practical knowledge and skills that practitioners in real life needed to do their jobs; for example:

**Jane:** In China, there is no connection between what you're studying and what you'll be doing in the future. The specialisations were not designed for what you do in the future...

**Rachael:** They aren't practical enough.

**Interviewer:** How does this affect student learning?

**Jane:** You can't plan for your future.

**Rachael:** You don't know what you can do with what you've learned. [Health science students, Focus group 2 (hereafter Group 2)]

The students felt that while the curriculum covered a broad range of knowledge in a specific field, practical knowledge was not deemed to be as important as theoretical knowledge. For example, science students in the third focus group found their undergraduate programs in China had already covered most of the content presented in the study units in their Australian postgraduate programs but felt Chinese education did not provide them with sufficient hands-on experience:

**Peter:** In China, I had learned all the content knowledge I'm learning now. The major difference between Chinese and Australian education is that Chinese students' ability to use what they have learned to perform a task is not as good as Australian students. In China, there were not so many opportunities for practical training, and here you have more chances to do this. But the subject content here is easier.

**Interviewer:** What do you mean by content knowledge?

**Peter:** Theory. [Engineering student, Focus group 3 (hereafter Group 3)]

These feelings were shared by students in the second focus group, who reported experiencing a shift in focus from having to gain a large amount of content knowledge in China to having to demonstrate how to apply knowledge in Australia:

**Rachael:** In terms of knowledge, you don't have to memorise many things. In Australia, you only need to know basic concepts, principles ...

**Eva:** And be able to apply them.

**Rachael:** Both in exams and assignments. [Health science students, Group 2]

The interviews are replete with descriptions by participants of the majority of teachers they experienced in China treating the table of contents of the textbook as their syllabus, teaching the textbook chapter by chapter, and not requiring students to read anything other than the textbook. As such, participants reflected that the scope of knowledge they learned was limited to the content of the textbook:

When I studied in China, my feeling was that the information in the textbook—decided by the teacher—was what the study unit was all about. This might be because that is the way university education in China is. You gain a wide range of knowledge. Every study unit will touch a little on different issues in that area, and maybe the teacher will highlight a couple of things that are more important. The textbook usually covers everything. [Chris, Interview 4]

As a result of learning a wide range of knowledge but not in depth in China, several students had concerns about being unable to claim expertise in any specialised field:

In fact, I think specialising in one thing is enough. Take programming for example. You only need to be specialised in one language, but in China, they want you to learn different kinds of languages, but you end up not specializing in any. So knowing so much is actually useless. [Peter, Engineering student, Group 3]

The participants generally believed that the Chinese curriculum was “too full” and had too many hours of classes. Consequently, to quote an accounting student, students were left with little time to “review and to do research” and were thus turned into passive learners (Lynn, Group 2). Vincent, a doctoral student who intended to be a university principal when he returned to China, regarded this overloading of information as the greatest weakness of Chinese education. When he became a principal, he planned to reduce the number of study units students had to take and the number of hours they spent in lectures. He wanted to use the class hours saved to help students develop skills such as “reading, thinking, writing and doing” through tutorials, where discussions and student presentations could be conducted (Vincent, Interview 1).

#### **4.2.2 Relation to other forms of educational knowledge**

One of the main reasons some of these students had chosen to study overseas is that this was the only way they felt able to change disciplines. About one third of the students involved in this research were studying in a different discipline in Australia to the discipline of their bachelor degrees in China. By their own accounts, they would have had very little chance to do this in the Chinese educational system, where entrance to a discipline was generally through exams that were strictly based on knowledge taught in that discipline. Students outside that discipline, as was highlighted by the second focus group, were at a great disadvantage:

**Jane:** [I came to Australia] also because I could change a discipline.

**Interviewer:** Why didn't you do this in China?

**Rachael:** Because Chinese education system is inflexible. You don't have much chance to do this.

**Interviewer:** Do you mean in Australia there are more disciplines for you to choose from, or it's easier to change disciplines?

**Jane:** Here, you don't need to go through an exam. In China, it's very difficult to pass the entrance exam if you're not from that discipline. Here they let you in if your English is all right and your marks in the bachelor's degree are good enough.

**Eva:** Right. I was able to change from engineering to health science too.  
[Health science students, Group 2]

## 4.2.3 Types of knowledge to pursue

### 4.2.3.1 *'Deep' knowledge*

The students in the second and third focus groups argued that Chinese education assigned greater importance to the breadth and depth of one's knowledge than how one presents his or her thinking process. For instance, when writing an exam or an assignment, the students said they would make effort to ensure they had covered enough "depth and scope" of the issue being tackled rather than thinking about how to present their ideas logically and coherently. What counts, a Health Science student explained, was the amount of information you know, not how your ideas were developed (Rachael, Group 2). Another student said, "In China, when you answer a question, as long as you cover all the points, it's all right. It doesn't matter which one you write first. The teacher gives you marks according to the number of points you have covered" (Lisa, Accounting, Group 3).

Some students suggested that one's ability to present a great quantity of knowledge demonstrated deep thinking, a characteristic that indicated a good learner in Chinese education: "We Chinese people, whether you are from Taiwan, China, Japan or Korea, I know we all want to think more deeply, think more than others. This is what we pursue" (Michael, Accounting, Group 2). This equating of quantity and depth of knowledge by the students was shown in the following dialogue:

**Michael:** ... The reason why the teacher gives you so much information is that they want you to have a deeper understanding of the things they teach you. In our education system, we want to understand more things. This is to increase the depth of your understanding.

**Interviewer:** Do you mean to increase depth, you need to have the quantity of knowledge first?

**Rachael:** Yes, you need a huge amount of information.

**Lynn:** Change of quantity leads to change of quality.

**Interviewer:** Can you explain that?

**Lynn:** You need to reach a certain level of knowledge, so you can move on to the next step.

**Eva:** Take the explosive TNT for example. If you only have a small amount of each ingredient, you can only make a fire cracker. But if you have more, you have a bomb. (Group 2)

The above dialogue indicates the students' belief that deep understanding comes from being exposed to sufficient information. It also suggests that students were constantly provided with new information by the teacher in Chinese education. This idea of

obtaining a large amount of information in order to reach the ‘explosive’ moment of understanding was reiterated by the third focus group: “I feel that learning is a process of ‘accumulation’. After a while, you will realise you’ve understood something, but not when you’re learning it” (Lisa, Accounting, Group 3). As for what to accumulate, one noted that “whatever is in the book is knowledge” (Vivian, Interview 3), while another specified, “a kind of information ... the results of experiments or practices, ‘theory’. Students gain this knowledge from the teacher” (Jennifer, Interview 4).

#### **4.2.3.2 ‘Solid’ knowledge**

A typical comment by the students about the strength of Chinese education was that it helped students establish a “solid foundation” of knowledge. The students in the first focus group explained that Chinese students, those in primary and secondary schools in particular, were expected to review what they had learned after class to cope with the repeated and rigorous tests the teacher gave them. The purpose for these repeated tests, according to Megan and Diana (email correspondence), was to ensure that every student had learned the knowledge as specified in the curriculum. Despite the pressure of exams, the students in this study attributed the “solid foundation” of their knowledge to these rigorous tests. As Rita put it, “The bottom line is, with more practice, your knowledge is more solid” (Rita, Interview 1).

Megan, who had taught science in a middle school for five years in China prior to her sojourn in Australia, described the type of exercises her students were required to do:

We will design very difficult questions for students to answer...So our students need to spend a lot of time doing exercises. They have to rack their brains trying to work out the answers, which I think definitely has gone to the extreme. [Megan, Interview 2]

By ‘difficult questions’, she meant that an overview of the knowledge did not suffice; instead, students had to pay scrupulous attention to every detail in their textbooks to be able to get a good mark on the various tests. This may be why it was common for students in the study to express feelings of insecurity when they did not have time to read an article thoroughly:

**Jennifer:** I prefer thorough reading. When I’m not pressed for time, I won’t skip anything when I read. I feel I can’t grasp it if I don’t read it thoroughly.

**Interviewer:** Did you feel insecure when this happened?

**Jennifer:** Definitely. Although I knew scanning is useful, I still felt a little uneasy about this. I felt I didn't really explore the reading deeply enough... I still felt I didn't digest that article completely. [Jennifer, Interview 2]

#### **4.2.3.3 'Practical' knowledge**

Chris and Jennifer divided knowledge into two types: one was “operationalisable” knowledge and the other was “abstract” knowledge (Interview 4). They stated that operationalisable knowledge was learned when one was able to perform a technical task. This type of knowledge was referred to by Megan as technical skills, “something that you were not capable of doing before you took the class” (Interview 3). On the other hand, one was said to have obtained abstract knowledge when one understood something and, usually, was able to remember and reproduce it in one's own words:

There are two kinds of knowledge. One is the type I can use, and I know I've learned it if I can use it. The other type you can't use ... No, I shouldn't say you can't use it ... I mean, it's abstract knowledge. When I understand it, it means I've learned it. But with this latter type of knowledge, I can also say I've learned it if I'm able to retell it to others. This is also a kind of application. The first type is the practical type. For instance, in a typing class, if I can type, it means I've learned the knowledge. [Jennifer, Interview 4]

If it's abstract knowledge, like the knowledge written in books or in any fixed place, as long as I remember it, and I don't have to look for it each time I need it, that is, I can totally rely on myself, or if I can express it in my own words, then I can say I've learned the knowledge. [Chris, Interview 4]

Jennifer noted that in China “abstract” knowledge was deemed to be a higher form of knowledge than technical knowledge. She illustrated this observation with an example of a professor's knowledge being valued more highly than a chef's technical skills:

I think the classification of knowledge is different in China than in Australia. In China, we divide knowledge into many levels. At the highest level is abstract knowledge, and we say it is the most profound knowledge. Those who want to secure the highest government positions need to have this level of knowledge. And technical knowledge is the lower level of knowledge. It is not thought of as knowledge actually. It is treated as skills, and people look down on these skills. I don't like this classification. I don't think it is a correct classification. [Jennifer, Interview 4]

These two types of knowledge were further differentiated by Rita in the context of university education: “The lower level a study is, the more practical application there is. The higher level of study deals more with theory” (Interview 3).

Irrespective of their categorisation of technical knowledge as a lower form of knowledge than abstract or theoretical knowledge, half of the study participants thought it was important to gain technical, or practical, knowledge because this knowledge would be very useful in their future jobs:

I'm more concerned about whether a certain thing is needed when I'm looking for a job after I graduate. I decide what I need to learn based on what I need at my jobs.  
[Diana, Interview 3]

I'd like the teacher to teach me something practical and operationalisable, something other than theories, something that has currently been developed. Otherwise, look, we've learned, say, 'behaviorism', or other -isms, this is very old stuff. So I'd like to know things that are more current, more reliable, and have more practical value.  
[Megan, Interview 3]

Despite this consensus among the participants that the ultimate goal of learning was to apply knowledge to real-life situations, almost without exception, they suggested that application of knowledge could not be achieved until they completed their education:

**Vivian:** When I encounter something ... a similar case... I immediately know how to solve the problem with the knowledge I have... That means I have learned the knowledge I've learned.

**Interviewer:** Is there any way to know you've learned the knowledge before such a case comes up?

**Vivian:** I can only say I understand the knowledge and principles that the teacher teaches me, but whether I can use them in my future workplace, I don't know. In this case, it's hard to say whether I own the knowledge. I understand it, but understanding and application are totally different things. At this stage, I can only make sure I understand the knowledge and principles, and leave it for the future to see if I can apply them. [Vivian, Interview 3]

Not only did Megan agree with this view, but she saw using prior experiences and knowledge she had already learned as two of the least important elements of university learning:

If I'm still learning, it's more important for me to learn what I don't know... 'Using your experiences in life' and 'being able to use the information you have learned' are things you do after you learn. While learning, if I have to use my experiences in life, it's like I'm using something I've already known to learn. Learning is to explore an unknown world, to understand new things. [Megan, Interview 3]

Surprisingly, while application of knowledge at the workplace was a pervading theme, no mention was made by the students with regard to the application process, although Diana's association of one's ability to apply knowledge with one's ability to understand may shed some light on Chinese students' perspective on this issue:

Some people spend a lot of time studying but they can't use it... Everyone's ability to apply the knowledge they have learned is different. It's actually your understanding of knowledge. Do you understand better than others? Do you understand more than others? [Diana, Interview 3]

As is suggested in the above quote, Diana believed that as long as one was able to understand something deeply, one had the capability to apply the knowledge.

Some, although relatively few, of the students claimed that as well as learning knowledge and skills, changes in perspectives were also a purpose of learning:

After I learn something, when I look back, or when I encounter a similar situation, if I realise that I've never considered it that way before, or I'm able to look at it from a new perspective ... [Rachael, Health Science, Group 2]

For doctoral student Diana, what was important was not simply a fresh perspective on a certain topic contained in the syllabus, as Rachael pointed out, but the capability to examine any issue from an educated perspective. In the citation below, she shared her view that although some knowledge did not have practical values for society, it “elevated” a person's perspectives:

My view of learning has always been ‘the purpose of learning is to use it’. By using it, I don't just mean using it at your work. You might not generate actual products out of it, but it elevates you. Take a doctoral program for instance. We all know doctoral degrees in some fields are not very useful in real life, but they enhance your abilities and quality in many aspects. The perspectives and the level from which you look at a problem will be different. [Diana, Interview 3]

In a similar vein, Jennifer concluded that ultimately the goal of learning was not to have knowledge but to become a wise person. A wise person, in her opinion, was one who was insightful and well-informed, which indeed depicted a scholar in Chinese culture:

In the end, you don't pursue knowledge for the sake of pursuing it. Your purpose is to become a wise person, who can offer a penetrating perspective on different issues. .... Of course knowledge is necessary, but this is the ultimate goal. For instance, I might decide to learn something that is not relevant to my profession, and it is to make myself well-informed. [Jennifer, Interview 4]

#### **4.2.3.4 'New' knowledge**

In a strong and recurring theme, all students said the main purpose of their sojourn in Australia was to gain current and advanced knowledge. They held the view that this



form of knowledge came from Western education (Megan, Interview 2). Chris reflected on the obsolete knowledge he learned in China:

In China ... teachers use the same textbook for decades... I had an old physics teacher, who used a book containing all his teaching materials from the past. It was dog-eared, having been used for more than 20 years. And he never updated it. [Chris, Education student, Focus group 1 (hereafter Group 1)]

Chris then commented that the teacher had taken pride in his age-old teaching materials, which he utilised to demonstrate his teaching experience, and despite Chris' scepticism, Chris said a teacher's teaching experience was highly regarded in China.

In addition to the currency of knowledge, learning knowledge that was new to them was important for the students. One student described learning as "a feeling that you're learning a new thing from scratch" (Lisa, Accounting student, Group 3), and another explained, "if the knowledge you are learning is all new to you, you feel you have learned new things" (Rita, Interview 3). The strength of desire for new knowledge could not be made more explicit than in Jennifer's case. She expected to work on new content for every assignment; otherwise, as she revealed, she did not feel she was learning:

I feel that the old things are already my knowledge. If I use old knowledge to complete a new task, I feel a little guilty. [Jennifer, Interview 5]

#### **4.2.4 Discussion**

Overall, in this section, two themes emerged from the students' remarks about the curriculum they had experienced in China. Firstly, students described a high degree of insulation between subject knowledge and other categories of knowledge. Secondly, according to the students, the curriculum contains a large amount of content knowledge.

The notion that the subject content in Chinese educational practices was viewed by the students as well insulated is demonstrated by their unanimous comment that what is taught and learned in a study unit is confined to the content of the textbook. It is also illustrated by the perceived strong boundaries between this subject knowledge and both other educational knowledge and everyday knowledge. In terms of the

distinct boundaries with other educational knowledge, as seen above, the students noted that transfer between specialisations is difficult. The sharp boundary between the subject knowledge and everyday knowledge is indicated by the fact that very few references to personal experience outside academic settings were made by the students when describing their educational experiences in China. The boundary is also shown by the students' remark that Chinese curriculum prioritises educational knowledge while largely excluding its application to everyday life, such as the workplace. The clear-cut boundaries between different subject contents and between scholarly and everyday knowledge show that the students' perceptions of the curriculum they had experienced can be described as involving relatively strong classification of knowledge, i.e. stronger classification of the epistemic relation (+C of ER).

The second theme relates to the students' perception that the curriculum focuses on enabling learners to accumulate as much content knowledge as they can. This theme is exemplified by the students' opinion that Chinese education considers the amount one knows to be more important than how one develops an idea. Putting it another way, states of knowledge are valued over ways of knowing. The epistemic relation is emphasised. Moreover, as indicated in the metaphor of the making of explosives (i.e. a small amount of gunpowder makes a firecracker, whereas a large amount makes a bomb), the students noted that this educational system believes that the larger the quantity of information that learners collect, the deeper their understanding of the object being studied. This deep understanding, in turn, is held to result in the ability to apply knowledge learned in educational contexts to life beyond such contexts. In other words, it was suggested that accumulation of segments of the subject knowledge leads to mastery of the area of study. This view was supported by the fact that in speaking of the process of accruing content knowledge, none of the students made mention of the connections or relationships between different segments of the subject content of a study unit. In fact, one example shows that such relationships are downplayed in the Chinese context: Some students insisted on learning knowledge that is 'new' to them, regarding knowledge that had been previously learned as not worth including in the curriculum. What is being emphasised here is the epistemic relation to *atomised knowledge* (+C of ER).

Noticeably, another perspective on knowledge accumulation was put forward by several students who argued that the ultimate goal of accumulating knowledge is to attain educated perspectives or wisdom. Whilst this suggests an emphasis on the development of an educated person, upon closer scrutiny of the data it was found that the only characteristic of an educated person addressed by the students was his or her informed perspective. The students' comments gave the impression that this informed perspective is a result of a person's attainment of sufficient scholarly knowledge. In other words, it is knowledge that shapes the knower: the epistemic relation is dominant. The basis of knowledge claims therefore resides in what the person knows by virtue of his or her education rather than on his or her personal attitudes or attributes.

In short, students' accounts of a strong emphasis placed by the Chinese curriculum on accumulating subject knowledge, well insulated from other kinds of knowledge, can be conceptualised as an emphasis on the epistemic relation that characterises the curriculum (+C of ER), specifically an atomised conception of its content. In contrast, the lack of mention by the students of their personal knowledge and experiences beyond the educational context suggests that, in their experiences, these were not regarded as the basis of insight – that is, the curriculum did not differentiate between learners. The social relation to the knower is therefore relatively downplayed (-C of SR). In terms of legitimation codes, this curriculum is thereby specialised by a *knowledge code* (ER+, SR-), and one that is based on atomised knowledge rather than ways of knowing or procedures.

## **4. 3 Pedagogy**

### **4.3.1 The sequencing of learning**

It was generally agreed that teachers in China conducted structured and focused classes, which was why they were able to keep students attentive in class (Group 1). Diana appraised positively Chinese teachers' organisation of their classes in terms of the content to be covered and the sequence of their presentation of the knowledge:

When Chinese teachers prepare their classes, they make it very clear what the purpose of this class is, what they should focus on, what might be difficult for students and

how they are going to present their lesson, step by step and layer by layer. [Diana, Interview 1]

She then contrasted this structured approach with the unstructured approach adopted by Western teachers whose classes she had experienced in China: “They say whatever is on their mind. ... It’s all over the place. In the end you don’t know what they want to teach you. I think they themselves don’t know what they want to teach you” (Interview 1).

This preference for a ‘step by step and layer by layer’ teaching approach was supported by all students in the study. Megan, for example, described a well-designed study unit as one that helped students to move “from the bottom to the top of the ladder”. The top of the ladder, according to her, was when one had to, and had the ability to, learn on his or her own:

If a study unit teaches you what you didn’t know before and helps you to learn things from the bottom to the top of the ladder, then it’s a well-designed unit. And after you learn all these things, if you want to learn anything more, it depends on what you can learn at your workplace, right? You learn on your own. No one is teaching you when you’re practicing your profession. [Megan, Interview 3]

Jennifer, on the other hand, specified the type of knowledge students should gain at the bottom of the ladder. She insisted that learning start with the “core things”, that is, instructions or essential knowledge that students needed to know to be able to perform a specific task:

Even if the students are all doing different projects, there are general things that need to be taken care of in class first. These are the things that everybody needs to know to do the project, the core things that students can apply to their projects. They can be the ‘procedure’ or other things. These are the things that the teacher should teach first. [Jennifer, Interview 5]

With respect to learning activities, the students insisted that class discussion be always preceded by the teaching of content knowledge. Both Megan and Vivian stressed that discussion activities were futile unless students had received sufficient knowledge from the teacher beforehand or understood the issue to be discussed well enough: “If you discuss and think about an issue before you receive the knowledge you should receive first, you might miss the whole picture” (Megan, Interview 3). She then suggested that discussion activities not exceed one quarter of the class hours.

### 4.3.2 The pacing of learning

The interaction between teacher and student in China was best illustrated in the following analogy Megan used to compare the relationships of her Australian and Chinese classmates with the teacher. The two types of interactions were said to resemble ping pong and bowling, respectively. As is suggested in this analogy, the former game involves two players while the latter involves only one:

Chinese students were more passive. They didn't have many questions, and they never interrupted the teacher. Let me give you an example. Australian students' learning is like playing ping pong with their teacher; when a ball comes, you hit it back. But Chinese students' learning is like bowling; the teacher bowls the ball, and that's it... There is not much interaction between teacher and Chinese students. Perhaps the idea of the teacher being the authority still exists in China... [Megan, Interview 3]

There could be a myriad of reasons behind this one-way communication between the teacher and Chinese students, not the least of which was the students had learned to be cautious about their classroom behaviours. A common theme emerging from the data was that in China, the teacher had total control over what was to happen in the classroom. Teacher control was thought by many students to be an effective means for the teacher to keep pace with the tight curriculum. The second focus group pointed out that Chinese students had become accustomed in their educational system to be observant of the teacher's cues regarding what they were or were not supposed to do in class. This characteristic was subsequently singled out by the participants to define a 'smart' student in China:

Being smart in China means ... knowing when to do what, like not doing certain things in class, etc. This makes a typical good student in Asia. Some people may be smart but they like to express their different opinions or do different things. These people are not considered good students. [Michael, Accounting, Group 2]

Accordingly, while the students in this study on the whole agreed that many Chinese teachers now encouraged interactions in class, most stated it was important to know when was the right moment to do this:

Don't disturb the class. Even if your question is brilliant, the teacher still might not answer you because he/she wants to teach something else first. Only ask questions if the teacher wants you to. If the teacher wants to carry on with the lesson, listen. [Rachael, Health Science, Group 3]

Another concern of the students, also due to the quick pacing of the class, was whether they were making a valuable contribution when they spoke in class: “I might feel the question I want to ask is stupid, and I am worried that other people might think I am taking up too much of their time by asking such a stupid question” (Doug, Commerce, Group 1). One student offered an explanation for Chinese students’ fear of losing face for asking a ‘stupid’ question. He expressed the belief that the fear stemmed from the experience of being scolded by the teachers in pre-tertiary education for not studying hard enough:

If today you are studying, say, Lesson Five, the teacher will expect you to know everything in the previous four lessons before you come to class. And they will give you a tongue-lashing if you ask a question about Lessons 1-4. Therefore you gradually lose confidence in asking simple questions. [Wayne, Commerce, Group 1]

As previously mentioned, Chinese teachers provided students with numerous exercises to ensure that they gained the knowledge taught at every step of the way. Therefore, as can be seen in the quotation above, if a student still had questions about what he or she was supposed to know after this rigorous process, the teacher was likely to criticise the student as lazy for not making enough effort to catch up.

### **4.3.3 Favourable learning strategies**

All the students reported memories of sitting quietly in the classroom listening to lectures, which they believed was the predominant form of teaching due to the large-sized classes in China. It was broadly agreed that Chinese students felt most comfortable learning this way, through which they received all the information they needed from the teacher (Group 1). Although some recognised the disadvantages of this pedagogical approach, they admitted having being indoctrinated to learn by listening:

I feel interaction is important, but I still prefer to listen to other people interacting with each other. I can hear their opinions. I don’t need to participate in the discussion myself. What they say sometimes inspires me. [Rita, Interview 3]

Like Rita, quite a few of the participants stressed that listening to lectures was not passive learning:

You’re not completely passive when you listen to a lecture. It’s both active and passive. The teacher will stimulate you to think... Many Chinese students ...

including me, are used to listening. We don't 'argue' with teachers. [Chris, Interview 6]

The implication here is that students were expected to be undertaking active thinking while listening to lectures. Apart from lectures, the students also recollected being required to listen quietly when other classroom activities were being conducted. In the following quote, for example, Chris described how Chinese students learned by listening quietly in a situation where two students were called by the teacher to demonstrate a dialogue in a language class:

In China, when two students are called to practice an English dialogue in front of the class, the teacher requires the rest of the class to listen carefully. This is because there is limited time in a class and not everyone can get a chance to speak. So you can only listen to others, and while listening, you simulate and create your own stuff in your mind. Say, only half of the class get to practice speaking in class, but since the other half have repeatedly listened to the dialogue, they remember it in their heart. The more you listen to something, the more deeply you remember it. [Chris, Interview 1]

It appeared that while sitting quietly, some students learned by simulating the process of participating in the activity in their head. Vivian confirmed that she employed a similar simulation strategy in class. She said as soon as the teacher raised a question, she started thinking about the answer she would give if called upon to respond: "this forces me to think. And after I formulate my thinking, I listen to other students' and the teacher's opinions" (Interview 2).

#### **4.3.4 Relationships between teacher and students**

This section outlines the relationship between teacher and students in China by describing the roles the students in this study expected their teachers to play. As will be revealed shortly, the relationship was generally perceived as unequal one with the teacher taking the expert role in professional knowledge and experience. The principal responsibilities of the teacher are to teach this knowledge and share his or her experience through carefully prepared lectures and to clear a learning path for the students.

##### ***4.3.4.1 Teacher owns and disseminates expert knowledge***

A consistently recurring theme running through the interviews was the students' perception of the teacher as an expert in their professional field. To them, the teacher

was considered “higher” or “above” the students, a person with the authority to “give explanations and corrections” (Megan, Interview 1). During the course of the semester, Jennifer struggled between traditional and modern views of teaching and eventually reached the conclusion that the expert status of a teacher was irreplaceable:

**Jennifer:** I think the teacher should still stand above and elevate you. I really need to think of a good term for this .... this is still a more traditional role of a teacher ... ‘instructor’ ... I shouldn’t say a traditional role, I mean it has been part of traditional teaching for centuries. But it’s still the core, the essential part of teaching that shouldn’t be missing. I think current theories have de-emphasised this role, which I think is not good.

**Interviewer:** Do you mean it’s like the master in the past, who has their insightful opinions, which they teach to their disciples?

**Jennifer:** Exactly! [Jennifer, Interview 5]

Distinguishing “good” from “bad” knowledge, Jennifer asserted that it was through the teacher that students gained a quick access to good knowledge:

I feel knowledge is a kind of information. It’s not just any kind. How do I put this ... it’s ... the useful information. The positive kind... Students gain this knowledge from the teacher. It’s a short cut ... there’s so much knowledge, some good and some bad, and if you want to find good knowledge yourself, there is too much ... you can’t tell the good from the bad knowledge, you can’t find it. ... The teacher has more knowledge, and they have the responsibility to deliver this to us, and we obtain it this way. Gradually, we move to higher levels. We may have as much knowledge as the teacher does one day and we can pass it on. So in summary, I think this process is dynamic. [Jennifer, Interview 4]

Although the rest of the students did not label knowledge as ‘good’ or ‘bad’, as did Jennifer, they expressed similar concerns over the differences in quality between knowledge received from the teacher and knowledge obtained themselves. For them, the teacher not only disseminated good, or ‘useful’, knowledge, but he or she integrated into it personal and informed perspectives and beliefs, which Jennifer then called “subjective” knowledge. In contrast to this subjective knowledge was the “objective” knowledge students learned by reading on their own:

Everyone can read objective knowledge, right? I’m thinking about the difference between reading on your own and coming to school to learn. Why do we need to look for good teachers? Why do we want to choose the study units taught by good teachers? The content is the same, whoever is teaching it. That’s because good teachers have their own styles, their own theories and knowledge. [Jennifer, Interview 5]

This view of the teacher as the source of expert knowledge seemed to dominate these students’ conceptions of Chinese education. Chris’ application for a teaching position in China served as a good example. During the summer holidays after his first year in



Australia, Chris went back to China and while he was there, he applied for a teaching position at a Chinese university. The job interview required that he demonstrate teaching some material given to him on the spot with only 20 minutes of preparation. In his interpretation, the main purpose of this procedure was to ensure the candidate had the expert knowledge in the field and was able to retrieve it instantaneously:

They want to see whether you can understand the material yourself without referring to any book. If you can understand it, they will hire you, but they don't care whether you can explain this clearly to the students in the future. [Chris, Interview 1]

For all participants, the major responsibility of a teacher was to disseminate knowledge through lectures, something viewed by Vivian and Jennifer as the “essence of education” (Vivian, Interview 3; Jennifer, Interview 5). Many of the participants believed that the quality of the lecture determined the quality of student learning:

Students' learning quality depends on the quality of lectures. It depends on the teacher, not learning materials. With the same learning material, different teachers teach it differently, and students get different things. The same textbook can be used in different universities by different teachers and the effects are different. The key is the teacher. [Vincent, Interview 1]

With respect to the content of the lecture, for Megan, what she gained from a good lecture was the most precious “distillations” of the teacher's knowledge:

The teacher ... extracts and refines the best things from what he or she knows and gives this to you in class, and then offers you instructions on the tasks you need to complete. Through this process, the things left in your head will definitely be more comprehensive than those you get by reading on your own. I feel that in class, I will learn a lot from the best part of the teacher's knowledge. If what the teacher provides for the students in class does not go through the process of extracting and refining, then their classes definitely are not good. [Megan, Interview 2]

To this ‘distilled’ knowledge, Jennifer added the teacher's informed perspective: “The teacher lectures from his or her perspective... which contains his or her beliefs and values. This is very important because it is what we can't get when studying on our own” (Interview 5).

Another benefit of the teacher delivering knowledge directly to students, according to some, was that it helped to “remove barriers for students”, one of the barriers being “searching in the big ocean of information” (Megan, Interview 3). Jennifer saw a learning path without these barriers as “a short cut” (Interview 4), and Diana

compared the extra effort a student had to take to explore an issue without the teacher's guidance "detours":

There's a difference between our level and the teacher's level. If you can hear the teacher's perspectives and opinions, it will save you a lot of time trying different ways to understand an issue yourself. It saves the time you waste on the detours.  
[Diana, Interview 3]

In terms of the lecturing style, a good lecture was described by the students as "systematic", "concise", "to-the-point", "attractive" (Diana, Interview 3; Group 1) and "compelling" (Jennifer, Interview 4; Megan, Interview 3). Megan believed the key lay in the procedure a teacher followed when presenting his or her lecture:

A teacher should also have their way of presenting the knowledge, like the procedure ... this is how we distinguish a teacher who's cramming, imparting knowledge on students, from a teacher who's guiding students. If a teacher uses good strategies, they will make the class more interesting, and what he or she teaches will attract our attention more. [Megan, Interview 3]

Lastly, all students highlighted the motivational factor of a good lecture. For example. Jennifer explained: "If a lecture is boring, we might lose interest in the subject matter. On the contrary, if the subject matter is boring but a teacher delivers a good lecture, chances are that we will become interested in the content" (Interview 4).

#### **4.3.4.2 Teacher helps to rectify mistakes**

The participants were in unanimous agreement that, in addition to delivering lectures, the teacher's second most important responsibility was to assist students in rectifying their mistakes. To be specific, the participants felt the teacher should draw the students' attention to their weaknesses and advise them on how to make improvements. Chris warned that the teacher's failure to do so would cause an adverse effect on student learning, especially when students were learning new content: "When I'm at the starting point, I need to know my weaknesses, what I did wrong; otherwise, as I keep learning, if I'm not aware of my problems, they will become more and more serious" (Interview 3). For Lisa, learning also meant realising her initial viewpoint was wrong: "Some of my viewpoints are right, and some are wrong. I feel I am learning when the teacher corrects my viewpoints" (Group 3). And Sophie spoke of the need to be told by the teacher whether she was on the right track:

“I would be running around without a direction if the teacher doesn’t tell me what I do is right or not. I wouldn’t be sure” (Interview 1).

#### **4.3.4.3 Teacher acts as role model**

Apart from learning the professional knowledge from the teacher, several students stated they learned from the teacher’s conduct as well. In the second focus group, the students referred to this as “teacher virtues” or “the way a teacher conducted himself or herself”; however, most students in this study stressed that the way a teacher “pursued scholarship” had a greater impact on them than his or her personal conduct. Jennifer and Vincent, for instance, recounted how a teacher’s rigorous attitude towards his or her own studies influenced them. Jennifer related this attitude to a teacher’s charisma:

If the teacher is a master [in both content and method], I’ll be influenced by him or her and like the subject matter. I’m sure I’ll keep learning after I complete the study unit. Other classmates of mine think the same too. It’s the teacher’s personal charisma, the culture. They guide you to learn through this. [Jennifer, Interview 5]

This concept of classroom culture was taken up by doctoral students, Vincent and Diana, both expressing the deep belief that students benefited no less from the subtle but profound influence of the learning environment than from the content of lectures:

I feel that learning shouldn’t be limited to books, to concrete words. ... in the end, it’s not just words that form your knowledge and ability. There are so many other things. Environment has a great impact on a person. [Diana, Interview 3]

You’ll be affected by the whole environment, its culture, it may come from the teacher, you’re not aware of it. But when you look back, you will find you are a totally different person to when you first got into the university. It’s invisible. You get this influence through the teacher. [Vincent, Interview 1]

As was indicated in Vincent’s statement, he appeared to believe that the teacher was the key constituent of the culture of the learning environment. For him, this influence extended beyond academic learning and affected his “quality as a person”:

**Interviewer:** If you had to explain what you mean by ‘quality as a person’ in English, what would you say?

**Vincent:** ‘Identity’, one’s qualities, characters, characteristics, ‘qualities’. It’s difficult to pin down a few things. My feeling is that it’s a temperament, a disposition one demonstrates, including one’s knowledge, manners, everything.

**Interviewer:** What do you mean by ‘manners’?

**Vincent:** How people feel about you. Similar to temperament and disposition.

[Vincent, Interview 1]

Accordingly, all participants considered class attendance vital for their learning. Take Jennifer for example. Part of her undergraduate study involved participation in a program called Self-taught Higher Education Examinations in China, in which she studied the textbooks on her own and sat for exams at regular intervals. Because she did not attend any class, Jennifer felt she did not gain anything beyond academic abilities:

I didn't learn as much as students in traditional universities. The major difference was that I didn't have chances to attend good teachers' classes. So my understanding was limited. I know there were bad students from good universities, but still, they had opportunities to interact with teachers. I don't know how to describe this, but I'm not referring to academic abilities in a narrow sense, like taking tests, which I can obtain through self-study, but I mean abilities in a broad sense [Jennifer, Interview 5]

Classifying self-study as an inferior form of learning to the traditional face-to-face education, she explained that a class should be composed of a group of people and their interactions, with the teacher being the driving force of these interactions.

#### **4.3.5 Relationship with fellow students**

Compared with the abundant citations of teacher-student relationships, there were few references to peer interactions in the interview transcripts. In general, group activities were negatively evaluated by most students. Many complained about not benefiting from these activities. Chris said this was because “people will get distracted by other irrelevant topics. In the end, you will just be chatting” (Interview 1). This view was endorsed by all the other students in this study. Two typical reasons for this were that the discussion topic was unchallenging for them and that the discussion usually did not lead to any definite conclusion (Group 2).

On the other hand, several students related experiences of working in self-organised study groups after class. The main purpose of these groups, according to the students, was to prepare for exams together by combining notes to make sure they had covered everything. Once the information they needed from the group was collected, the students said they would then separate and work on their own, usually trying to memorise the notes (Group 2).

One student found a study group with Chinese students was least useful for intellectual discussion partly because the students lacked intention to do so and partly because they had not been trained to express themselves:

Chinese students ... only ask other people when they encounter things they don't understand. We won't get together to discuss or share with people our ideas. ... This might be because Chinese people are reserved. We don't like talking about our ideas. It can also be because we don't know how to. It's a problem with our ability to express ourselves. [Lynn, Accounting, Group 2]

The majority of the students tended to agree with the first reason Lynn suggested. As Rita believed, "if you can learn well on your own, you don't need to interact with others" (Interview 2).

#### **4.3.6 Discussion**

The above results revealed three overarching themes in terms of the pedagogy these students described as having experienced in China. First, pedagogy was described as emphasising strong sequencing. Secondly, participants emphasised the importance of similarities in learners' development while downplaying individual aspects of their learning. Thirdly, based on the students' accounts, the pedagogical relationship is characterised by a strong hierarchy between teacher and student, with a distinct focus placed on the teaching of content knowledge.

Teachers in China were said to follow an explicit sequence in teaching subject content, and the students in this study expressed a very high degree of acceptance of this pedagogical approach. For example, the students stated that knowledge is learned most effectively and efficiently if delivered 'step by step and layer by layer' or 'from the bottom to the top of the ladder'. The common use of the metaphor of a ladder by the students is indicative of a view that the subject content should be taught in a pre-determined order. Moreover, it is evident that this metaphor was employed to refer to the linearity of the teacher's presentation of subject content and learning activities rather than the structure of the subject knowledge itself. For example, in the students' explanation, Chinese teachers carefully plan the order of the content of their lectures, and classroom activities are conducted in sequence – lecture, discussion, project, etc. This linear approach to teaching and learning exhibits relatively strong framing of

knowledge (+F of ER), in that the teacher has control over the sequencing of what students learn.

The second theme, the emphasis on learners' similarities and the downplaying of the personal dimension of learning, is illustrated in three respects: the teacher's explicit control over the pace of learning, the learning strategies supported by this pedagogic practice, and peer relationships. A typical Chinese classroom, described by the students, is characterised by collective and fast pacing. All learners in a group are viewed and treated as possessing similar prior knowledge and characteristics. That learners are not differentiated shows that the social relation to knowers is less significant. For example, in the students' accounts of how a Chinese teacher structures a class, the teacher appears to be well aware of what the students as a group do not know or may find difficult. Every learner is also considered to be capable of catching up with the group if he or she makes enough effort to follow the teacher's instructions. This is reflected by the students' comment that a student will be thought of as lazy if he or she asks a question relating to previously taught content. Moreover, fast pacing leaves relatively little room for learners to express their personal perspectives, needs and preferences, as these behaviours are seen as interruptions that slow down the class. In short, the teacher's control over the pace of learning indicates that the pedagogy, as the students experienced it, involves strong framing of knowledge that emphasises the epistemic relation (+F of ER). The limited space this form of pedagogy allows for personal predilections and approaches to learning shows relatively weak framing of the social relation (-F of SR).

With regard to the preferred learning strategies in the Chinese learning context, both strategies mentioned by the students – quiet listening and simulation – suggest self-effacement, i.e. a de-emphasis on learners as knowers (SR-). In terms of peer relationships, the only type of relationship considered by the students to be valuable is the relationship formed in the study groups convened by themselves after class. A study group is utilised as a cue-seeking mechanism, through which learners help one another by combining collected information about the subject content. As the students pointed out, rarely are personal perspectives contributed or exchanged in these groups. Again, the social relation to knowers is downplayed. Clearly, this use of a study group is associated with the previously mentioned beliefs underpinning the educational

practices in China that knowledge is accumulated and that personal opinions are generally irrelevant in one's pursuit of knowledge. In sum, for these students, study groups are useful because they are knowledge-oriented.

Thirdly, a strong hierarchy in the pedagogical relationship is illustrated in the students' definition of a good class in China. Simply put, a good class is synonymous with a good lecture, which contains pedagogised subject content and the teacher's informed perspective on the content. For example, according to the students, the content of a good lecture is extracted, refined, or distilled from the teacher's knowledge. In other words, it has been selected, recontextualised and evaluated by the teacher, who these students see as having an authoritative position in the subject field. In terms of the informed perspective, the students meant the teacher's understanding and interpretation of the content knowledge. This reliance on the teacher's knowledge and perspective indicates the students' belief that only the teacher has the power to make legitimate knowledge claims. The teacher has this power because of his or her membership in the subject field, which, judging by the students' remarks, is granted based on expert knowledge and experience in the field. So, the strong framing of the teacher, their authority, is based on emphasising the epistemic relation.

The students' belief in the legitimacy of the knowledge claims made by the teacher is also reflected by their expectation of the teacher to help them rectify their mistakes. For example, many deemed it to be a vital part of their learning that the teacher informs them of 'what they did wrong' and directs them to 'the right track'. On the one hand, this refers to an expectation of explicit criteria of knowledge. On the other hand, it indicates that correct understanding or interpretation of the content knowledge is held to exist external to the learner: the social relation is downplayed.

It can be seen that this hierarchical relationship is primarily built on the premise of teachers teaching knowledge to students. Admittedly, there was some mention of a particular element in this relationship that did not directly relate to knowledge transmission, namely, the impact of the teacher's scholarly manner on the students. However, except for one doctoral student, who studied his Masters degree in the U.S., all the other students addressing this issue focused on the influence of a teacher's rigorous attitude *towards the pursuit of knowledge* that is demonstrated in his or her

teaching. Specifically, it was teacher modelling of the *procedures* for gaining knowledge that the students were referring to in discussing this form of impact by the teacher. What is highlighted by the talk about this impact, again, is the epistemic relation.

Summing up, these three overarching themes indicate that Chinese pedagogy, as the students experienced it, involves strong framing, since the control over what, when and how the learner receives knowledge resides with the teacher. The teacher arranges and delivers the subject content in a highly structured order, regulated by time, and he or she also makes explicit what are valued or undesirable behaviours in this context. In other words, learners are made aware of the rules of the game. This form of pedagogy exemplifies Bernstein's concept of 'visible pedagogy' (1977, 1990). Furthermore, given the emphasis of this pedagogy on the epistemic relation and its downplaying of the social relation, as have been shown by all three themes, the pedagogy is specialised by a knowledge code (ER+, SR-). The image of a successful learner in this learning context has also emerged: it is one who follows a pre-determined sequence of learning, keeps pace with the whole group, pursues the correct understanding of the content knowledge, and is ready to withhold one's personal perspectives and beliefs when needed.

## **4. 4 Assessment**

### **4.4.1 Rules of achievement for exam-based assessment**

In the students' experiences, examinations were the predominant assessment method in Chinese education. As the students stated, to succeed in this system, the most essential ability one had to develop was the ability to "test well" (All three groups). "Work hard", "have a good memory", "write down the information the teacher gives you" and "be able to guess what will be on the test" were the typical responses when the students were asked what one could do to test well (All three groups). Another tip from many of the students was to refrain from giving personal opinions. Chris, for example, said:

When I was in China, I never thought the teacher was right all the time, but I couldn't argue with them. Neither could I argue against things written in the textbook. If I had



done so, they would have told me to follow what the textbook said anyway. And if I had written my answers on exams according to what I thought, not the book, they wouldn't have been standard, right answers. That meant I wouldn't have got the marks. I couldn't do anything about it. [Interview 1].

One participant in the second focus group explained that having been expected to provide textbook answers throughout their educational experience in China, Chinese students confined themselves to searching for answers within the scope of knowledge they had received: "Say, here is a frame, and Chinese students may tend to fill it with the information they receive from classes or from their reading ... [not] their own solutions" (Eva, Health Science, Group 2). This was by no means an isolated comment. The word "frame" was used repeatedly by the students to describe the restrictions Chinese education placed on students' thought processes.

Admittedly, most participants were critical of this feature of Chinese education, which they called "the inflexible style of education", the type of education that was guided by standardised examinations. Many blamed these examinations for rendering students nothing but test-takers. Taking a test and learning were seen by the students as two different matters. As the following quote demonstrates, although the student considered test-taking skills important, she separated a test-taker from a learner:

To be honest, I don't want to be a test-taker, but I am, I think. But I'm proud of this because this is a skill I need to have. It's an essential skill in China. It'll be helpful in my future I think. But I'm also proud that I'm not only a test-taker. I'm still a learner" (Jennifer, Interview 1).

Of note, however, is that several students spoke favorably of examinations. Benefits mentioned include motivation to learn and retention of knowledge. Rita, for example, said that exams created pressure, and "with pressure, there comes momentum, and with momentum, you force yourself to learn" (Interview 2). Vivian insisted that students benefited more from taking exams than from writing essays because while preparing for exams, they committed the knowledge to memory:

When writing an essay at home, I can refer to books when I am not sure about something. I can also ask other people. I don't know if I will really remember those things ... But to prepare for exams, I have to study and try to memorise things I read. Even if these things do not end up being in the exams, I have put them in my head when preparing for the exams. [Vivian, Interview 2]

#### **4.4.2 Rules of achievement for non exam-based assessment**

In addition to exams and quizzes, Chinese students are also evaluated by their performances in class. Items to be assessed may include class attendance and minor written assignments (Group 2). The percentage of marks allocated to this particular assessment method varies, depending on the teacher, but it usually accounts for less than 30% of the final mark. One student described how her teacher evaluated students' performances by assessing their answers to the assigned questions in class:

One teacher asked 4-6 students to answer questions in each class. She would give you an A or B or C for your answer, and she said: If you get low marks on your exams, a good performance in class would definitely help your pass the class. [Diana, email correspondence]

The students generally believed that as long as they show they take the class seriously by never missing a class and fulfilling what the teacher instructs them to do, they can get a good mark for their class performances. However, while some students considered giving these marks was a fair way to reward students who work hard, others noted that these marks are sometimes based on the teacher's subjective impression of a student's behaviours in class. These students were of the opinion that in China, the teacher's impression of a student had a great bearing on the student's marks. In their explanation, the teacher could increase or reduce a student's final grade of the subject based his or her observation of the student's behaviours in class. They therefore called these marks 'impression marks'. One even spoke of earning these marks by establishing a good relationship with the teacher: "You can take the roles of class leaders. This way you'll have a good relationship with the teacher, so you can also get a good mark" (Peter, Engineering, Group 3).

As for written essays, the students were split in their opinion about what it takes to do well. Some thought this was the only assessment activity in which personal opinions played a part. In fact, these students recalled having to purposely adopt a perspective that was different to other students' so that their writing could stand out (Groups 2 and 3; Jennifer, Interview 3; Chris, Interview 6):

In China, when you write a composition, the key to getting a good mark is to be unique. If your viewpoints are the same as others', even if your language is good, it will still be an ordinary article. [Michael, Commerce, Group 2]

Whilst good overall writing structure was still considered essential, the students said, less emphasis was placed on logic, coherence and clarity than on the uniqueness of the ideas (Groups 2 and 3). In at least one case, however, the claim that students in China were expected to express personal opinions in their writing was not supported. As Fiona argued, it was not one's unique or original ideas that made them stand out from the rest but "the rhetoric, writing skills, those insubstantial things" (Interview 1).

Whether it was the ideas or the rhetoric, the students suggested that the key to getting a good mark for writing assignments was to "come up with something that no one can" (Group 2). The need to compete with their peers seemed implicit.

Lastly, all the students agreed that creativity is generally not rewarded in Chinese education. They said that those who were born creative had to learn to suppress it (Group 2). Diana traced this suppression of creativity back to childhood learning, linking it to the emphasis on imitation in Chinese education:

People say that when a Chinese child draws, they always ask if their drawing resembles the real object, while a Western child tends to ask if their drawing ... I don't remember the exact words, but in a nutshell, Chinese children think good drawing has to resemble the real thing, while Western children want to be more creative. Let me give you another example. When a Chinese child paints the moon blue, the teacher will correct the child, saying that the moon shouldn't be blue. [Diana, Interview 1]

Having said that, Diana acknowledged the increasing emphasis Chinese teachers were placing on creativity, but at the same time, she shared her observation that it was not until one had met the basic requirement of being a good student that his or her creativity would be valued by the teacher: "If the disobedient type of students do not have good grades, then the teacher still won't like them" (Diana, Interview 2). Although the word 'disobedient' was used by Diana here, on further probing, it was clear that she actually meant 'creative'. The importance of imitation was reiterated by other students, who mentioned that it is important to imitate exemplary work in the initial stages of learning (e.g. Chris, Interview 4). All of the students in the focus groups said their teachers in China made use of example or exemplary work in class, and they considered this to be a good teaching strategy. Some insisted that they did not imitate exemplary work, but it gave them an idea of what was viewed by the teacher as excellent work and what other students were capable of achieving, so that

they could try to surpass it (Group 2). These comments echoed the previous mention about the implicit competition among students in the Chinese educational context.

#### **4.4.3 Discussion**

The results concerning assessment can be summarised in two major themes: states of knowledge as the object of assessment and the evaluation of learners' performances against one another.

First, the predominant form of assessment, standardised exams, evaluates learners' states of knowledge. As the students noted, the exams require reproduction of correct, textbook-based answers and personal opinions are not rewarded. Secondly, in terms of open-ended tasks such as written assignments, every learner's performance is graded in relation to his or her peers' work. This evaluative approach has a particular effect on students' strategies for earning high mark in this type of assignment. According to some, the key is to create a product containing a perspective that is different to those of other students. The emphasis here is on comparison with the majority rather than on expressing personal perspectives or beliefs for their own sake.

Despite this strategy to win a high mark, imitation is considered by some students to be essential in the early stages of learning, which echoes the earlier mention of the simulation learning strategy in the pedagogy section (Sections 4.3.3 and 4.3.6). Moreover, Chinese teachers, as previously discussed, tend to correct students directly and instruct them how to improve their performances. The evaluative criteria therefore are made explicit to students, which is another example of strong framing of knowledge that emphasises the epistemic relation.

To recap, the standardised answers students are expected to provide for exams and the stress on imitating or learning from exemplary work manifest an emphasis on distribution of explicit criteria of knowledge and the correspondence of students' performances to the criteria. By contrast, presentation of personal thinking by students is downplayed. Therefore, according to the students' description, the assessment approach emphasises the epistemic relation and de-emphasises the social relation: a knowledge code (ER+, SR-). The open-ended tasks, which account for a relatively

small percentage of the assessment, allow a space for expression of personal views. However, as was made clear above, it is not the personal dimension itself that is being appreciated and rewarded but the fact that it is different to the norm.

On a final note, the students' remarks about assessment show that in this learning context, recognition and realisation rules are explicit to students. Learners not only know clearly what distinguishes a good from a bad performance, but they also know what to do to earn good marks. The rules of the game are overt to learners, and the implication is that *everyone* is able to succeed if he or she is willing to play the game accordingly.

#### **4. 5 Summary of the chapter**

In this chapter, the findings pertaining to the first research question of the study were reported. To sum up, in the student participants' accounts, the Chinese curriculum revolves around content knowledge, demonstrating relatively strong boundaries between different subject contents and between scholarly and everyday knowledge. Learning is viewed as building up one's knowledge base, which comprises accumulated segments of subject content. The teaching approach was described as based on visible pedagogy, with the learners perceived by the system as part of a group sharing similar characteristics. In terms of assessment, explicit evaluative criteria are implemented in the educational practice, and there is little allowance for variations in learners' performances. In short, the personal dimension of learning is downplayed in all three message systems. Based on the results presented, it has been concluded that the legitimation code represented by the student sojourners' heritage educational culture, as represented by the students' experiences, is a knowledge code. It is, though, a particular kind of knowledge code, one that emphasises atomised content knowledge. The next chapter, Chapter 5, reports the second part of the research findings, focusing on the characterisation of the online learning context in the host culture.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Host Educational Culture: Teachers' conceptions and designs of the online units**

#### **5. 1 Introduction**

The previous chapter characterised the student sojourners' educational experiences in their heritage culture as embodying a 'knowledge code' of legitimation. This chapter proceeds to present the findings relating to the second research question: what are the characteristics of the teaching practices in the online environment at the Australian university, including the pedagogical beliefs underpinning them? This research question is directed at the data set comprising eight Australian teachers' accounts of their pedagogical beliefs and practices and their designs of online environments, supplemented by representative unit outlines provided by the teachers. The purpose of the chapter is twofold. First, the chapter aims to conceptualise the online learning context in a way that will enable a comparison between the teaching practices in the student sojourners' heritage and host cultures. The second purpose of the chapter is to contextualise the case study students' online educational experiences, which are presented in Chapter 6. This chapter follows the same structure as the previous chapter: teaching practices are explored in terms of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment.

#### **5. 2 Curriculum**

##### **5.2.1 Relation to everyday knowledge**

One overwhelming theme throughout the interviews was the teachers' insistence on students making connections between the knowledge they learned in university and their own work contexts. One teacher noted that students could only "derive maximum benefit" from his classes if they were able to apply the theoretical knowledge to real life situations (Teacher D). Most teachers, however, seemed to imply it was not simply one-way application as was indicated by Teacher D. Rather, they claimed it was essential that learning be situated in each student's respective context. In other words, students were expected to bring their past experience and

knowledge into their university learning. Some of these teachers referred to this characteristic as the “authenticity” of learning. For example, Teacher E explained:

The assignments try to be authentic. Now what I mean by that is we try to situate the assignment in the context in which these people work and live. So if they are a TAFE teacher teaching cabinet making, then they have to think about how their students are learning that task. If they’re a university teacher teaching science, then they have to think about their students learning science... and they have to think about their own learning as well. So it has to be situated in their context.

Examples of “authentic” tasks given by the teachers included writing a newsletter article for the institutions the students were currently working in (Teacher E), and imagining being employed by an educational consulting firm and conducting tasks that real employees would be required to do in this company (Teacher B). One teacher said this type of task gave students a purpose for learning the particular subject content because of its relevance to real life (Teacher B); another thought working on issues related to one’s own workplace enabled one to “excel and develop a sense of excellence” (Teacher F); and still another believed it led to students “creating” their own knowledge, and thus feeling “empowered” (Teacher D).

One teacher expressed the belief that the goal of postgraduate courses was to help students make sense of their abundant, existing knowledge rather than teaching them new knowledge. He believed that adult learners came with a wealth of prior knowledge and it was more important to help them “download” it:

What we don’t often do with our postgraduate students is recognise that they actually come with a whole range of background and experience and baggage and literature, and what they need is a framework to download that ... [and] what we can do is provide that framework for them to work on things that they’re interested in. [Teacher F]

Teacher F went on to suggest that the best way to achieve this was to promote students’ engagement with their communities and workplaces. He spoke unfavourably of the excessive use of online forums or activities that constantly “chained” students to the class Web site. According to this teacher, these online activities were “ritualised” and “artificial”, and hence the opposite to “authenticity”:

People tend to see the only way that you get collaborative engagement is to do online forums but I think the collaborative engagement is not simply between students but it’s the environment in which they work in when they do their online assessment. So what we ask them to do is engage in a more prolonged and extensive manner within

the community that they engage in. [Teacher F]

The above quote illustrates these teachers' shared intention to blur boundaries between formal university learning and students' everyday or professional lives. In fact, very few interviewees discussed the understanding of content knowledge without mentioning students' work experiences. For example, Teacher G said of her students "they have a wealth of experience in their past, in their work lives, in their professional roles which whilst it may not be directly related to the subject, you know they all draw on that."

### **5.2.2 Relation to other forms of educational knowledge**

When commenting on their teaching of online units, almost all the participants referred to their students' wide variety of disciplinary backgrounds (e.g. nurses, military personnel, people working with young offenders in prison, teachers of all levels of education). For this reason, in selecting course materials, some preferred to only offer students a small number of core readings, and "open it up to whatever field that [the students are] in" (Teacher E):

The readings that we give them might not be relevant for everybody. So there might be a reading on competency based education – now that is fine if you are in TAFE but it's not really relevant if you're in university teaching. So you have to be aware that you need to choose the right readings and be selective. So this is an important process, isn't it, in that online education is being selective in the things that you read and not relying on a reading list from the lecturer that is the be all and end all and that's all you have to do. [Teacher E]

Even though other teachers suggested supplementary readings, they said they left it to the students to decide whether these readings were relevant to their respective contexts. Consequently, to cater to the students' different needs derived from their myriad of backgrounds, the teachers considered it more important to provide them with access to knowledge rather than the knowledge content itself:

[The assignment] requires quite a bit of background reading but the reading again has to be related to their context so, because there are quite different philosophies in each of those sectors ... we give them a number of resources but we also show them how to search the Internet and what databases to go to and digital repositories that they need to go to in order to access those readings that are relevant to their context. [Teacher E]



However, in terms of learning the new knowledge content in the specific online unit, Teacher E also pointed out that students without prior qualifications in Education or who had not previously studied Education would probably be at a disadvantage in his classes because:

they haven't been in the situation where they've been *thinking about* education, like if you're a teacher or a TAFE teacher or a university teacher doing the subject then you're *thinking* education all the time, you know, but if you're coming from informatics where you're learning programming and basically now you just want to learn about programming in an educational context but you're faced with having to *think about* education at a deeper level, then, I guess that background puts them at a bit of a disadvantage. [Teacher E, emphasis added]

Although he blamed this disadvantage on the lack of the background content knowledge, he also implied it was due to the different patterns of thinking the students from other disciplines brought with them, as was indicated in his reference to “thinking” in the quote above. In a similar vein, some other teachers identified the failure of the students from other (non-Education) disciplines to see what they were supposed to learn in the online units. For example, one teacher whose online unit required students to create multimedia products said that the students with relatively little experience in the Education field tended to “rely too heavily on their technical skills” (Teacher A):

They stop thinking about the pedagogy involved in what the students are trying to learn. ... And they made it [their multimedia products] look very pretty, they make all the little things buzz and the windows open and the little thingies move around but the learning's often not there behind them. [Teacher A]

### **5.2.3 Learner development**

When asked what they would like their students to take with them after completing the online units, all interviewees emphasised that their classes did not prescribe content knowledge for students to learn. In the online units on educational technology, for example, although these units often involved the use of technical knowledge, most teachers held the opinion that learning technical skills was not the focus of postgraduate-level studies. “I think it's not the best use of our energies and time”, said one teacher, who argued that this approach reflected not only the changes in the nature of the discipline but also the restrictions of the delivery mode of the units:

There's much less emphasis on the technical now than there used to be anyway in

these kinds of jobs because that's something that a specialist does, a specialist technical person does that. ... it's reflected a change in time over what's required for the discipline, if you like; and it's reflected a change in what can be done online. So I now very much get my students, I basically tell them it's up to them to develop their technical skills, which I always thought anyway, but we used to do a bit more of it. But there are a host of reasons. So I don't think it's just that it's online, but it's then fortunate that it's congruent with moving online. [Teacher H]

The teacher suggested that students develop technical skills through other channels such as reading books or going to TAFE. A few teachers stated that they would run a workshop if a particular cohort of students expressed the need for a training session to learn specific skills.

One teacher was cognisant of the frustration of those students who did not possess technical skills, but she said the students could in fact take advantage of their inability to perform the technical side of the task by examining the implications of their experience in the assignment:

It's what they would experience in their professional lives anyway. .... And sure they might have difficulty in accessing and using [the tools], but you know, their difficulty and their experience of having difficulty is something that they could write about in their assignments anyway ... if you can't use the tools then how effective is it going to be. So you know it's not necessarily a disadvantage, you can turn it around as an issue of importance. ... So it's a case of how you look at it isn't it? [Teacher G]

In contrast to their downplaying of content knowledge, the teachers expected students to cultivate a number of abilities or attitudes. To summarise: (1) the ability to make, and articulate, the connections between theory and practice; (2) the ability to make decisions and justify them within a given context; (3) the patterns of thinking in the specific discipline (Education); (4) generic skills, such as ways to progress their knowledge and skills, communication skills, and critical thinking skills; (5) changed attitudes towards learning; and (6) conceptual change (i.e. changes in one's professional practice or worldview).

The first two of these expectations concern application of the knowledge gained, which will be discussed in the next section. The other expectations address students' overall learning skills and attitudes, as well as their personal development. Many teachers deemed the metacognitive aspect of learning to be of paramount importance. Teacher B, for instance, considered her students' appreciation of the whole learning process to be her greatest sense of achievement in teaching:

By the end of the subject often – I mean a lot of students have written to me about this and said, “I didn’t know what I was doing, I thought it was really bad, it was hopeless, but by the end, it all kind of made sense to me and it was really enjoyable in the end”. And to me that is a huge success for me as a teacher if I’ve helped somebody to learn something a little differently than they might prefer, or be used to. [Teacher B]

This transformation from initial disorientation to ultimate appreciation was reiterated by other teachers. One of them stated that learning was an iterative process, during which students experienced confrontations of ideas, approaches and knowledge, and eventually changed their views about learning:

**Teacher D:** So as I said, learning is an iterative process. Learning is also value adding for most people. That is, progressively you add value to your style and approach of learning.

**Interviewer:** Can you explain an iterative ...

**Teacher D:** Iterative means it goes in cycles ... and as the cycle proceeds, new ideas, new approaches, new learnings, new pieces of knowledge confronting, challenging, analysis, synthesis, all these things add value and therefore lift your approach to learning and extend your views about learning.

Another teacher also thought learning was a “transformative” process, in which one’s perceptions, preconceptions, attitudes and values were “disrupted” and “reshaped” (Teacher F). Whilst his notion of disruption echoed that of confrontation as raised by Teacher D, in Teacher F’s definition, the changes in perceptions or values were not about personal learning approaches but about one’s professional knowledge, practice and worldviews – in other words, conceptual change:

It’s about reshaping people’s perceptions, their actions and practice. I mean there’s no point, I think, in a postgraduate environment just simply providing material and just having a passive involvement. I think it has to be active and it’s got to be disruptive in a sense, so that people come with certain perceptions and preconceptions and then they’re disrupted and in a sense, their views are changed and reshaped. So in that way it’s transformative, you’ve reshaped people’s values, you’ve reshaped their attitudes and their understanding, and then that you hope will transfer to the practice in the workplace. [Teacher F]

Along the same lines, some teachers mentioned their goal of teaching was to encourage the “growth” or “development” of the students.

#### **5.2.4 Construction of personal knowledge**

All of the teachers assigned great importance to the application of theoretical knowledge in real life. The teachers spoke of application in terms of the link the

students made between theoretical knowledge and their real-life work contexts. The key lay not so much in making something work as in being able to justify the decisions one made for his or her own practice based on the theoretical knowledge. As one teacher said: “It’s not like learning medicine, you’ve got to get it right [otherwise] the patient will die. It’s not like that. It’s more open to interpretation” (Teacher G). Another described learning as “personal” (Teacher C). The statement below was typical of the teachers’ accounts regarding this topic:

What I want to know is how much *you*, the student, can make the connections between *your* beliefs and *your* theory, *your* beliefs and *your* practices and can *you* share that with me and justify it. [Teacher C, emphasis added]

This emphasis on personal interpretation seemed to stem from the teachers’ belief that knowledge was not simply passed on by authority figures, but was “created” by individual students after a process of critically analysing the information received. This proposition was also borne out by Teacher D’s comparison of the non-Western with Western views of knowledge:

In non-Western cultures, as you know, the mode of learning is regurgitation. The regurgitation is based on the veneration of authoritative figures. The guru, the Lao Shi [i.e. Teacher] or the Shi Fu [i.e. Master] can do no wrong. And the block of knowledge and the skills that they transfer is the be all and end all, it’s all triple A. See what I mean? ... In the Western culture all knowledge is subject to challenge, reflection, analysis, synthesis, even destruction and there’s an invitation to create your own. [Teacher D]

He then explained how he invited his students to create their own knowledge. As the following quote illustrates, he considered students’ critical analysis of the information received to be strongly based on their personal contexts:

I say “Here’s six or seven points which are important and these are the reasons, these are consistent with some of your readings ...” Then I say “Now, I invite you to add a couple more” and I will ask them why they want to add those things. And then I say “[Jane], this is now [Jane’s] model”. So again you feel empowered. See what I mean, this is [Jane’s] model, appropriate for [Jane’s country]. [Teacher D]

Meanwhile, the quote also indicates that students were viewed as entitled to claim expert knowledge in their own contexts. To recap, the process of making connections between theory and one’s practice, or of interpreting theoretical knowledge according one’s context, resulted in the creation of individual knowledge. While two of the

teachers did use the expression “create one’s own knowledge”, other teachers interviewed preferred to say “construct one’s knowledge”.

### **5.2.5 Discussion**

This section revealed three overarching themes in terms of the curriculum of the online units in the Faculty of Education, as embodied by the teaching staff: (1) an emphasis on knowledge developed beyond educational contexts; (2) a downplaying of content knowledge; and (3) a focus on personal interpretations of subject content, thereby constructing one’s own knowledge.

The first theme is illustrated by the weaker boundaries, espoused by the teachers, between subject knowledge and everyday knowledge. It is epitomised by the teachers’ belief in situated learning and authentic learning, both aiming for an integration of learners’ prior or current workplace knowledge into the subject knowledge. In contrast to students learning the subject content in insulated, academic settings, as in the ‘traditional’ curriculum, the teaching staff reported encouraging students to merge knowledge gained across everyday and university settings. The blurred boundaries between these two categories of knowledge indicate weaker classification of the subject content (-C of ER). In effect, several of the online units discussed by the teachers tended to dissolve the boundaries between university and everyday life by encouraging learners to engage in communities beyond educational contexts. In one case, the teacher insisted that students not be ‘trapped’ in online forum activities. What learners needed most from educational contexts, according to this teacher, was ‘frameworks’ to assist them in making sense of their real-life practices. This comment, again, shows that subject knowledge is downplayed, while everyday knowledge is considered to be significant in this type of curriculum.

Closely connected with the first theme, the second theme is that content knowledge is de-emphasised. For example, very few teachers made reference to the learning of content knowledge when discussing their expectations of learners, many also claiming that students do not benefit from being given content knowledge directly. The teachers’ rationale behind this claim is that the importance of different aspects of the subject knowledge is relative, depending on each learner’s disciplinary background,

personal interest and context. It is therefore generally up to the learner to select the part of the subject content relevant to his or her own situation. Put differently, it is the learner, rather than the curriculum, that has greater power to determine what knowledge is valid and is to be learned. Together, the first two themes emerging from this section point to weaker classification that downplays content knowledge as less important in defining legitimate knowledge in the online units (-C of ER). The epistemic relation characterising the curriculum can thus be said to be relatively weaker.

The third and most recurrent theme is the teachers' shared view that knowledge is subject to personal interpretations, which, the teachers believed, leads to personal construction of knowledge. This conception of knowledge is reflected by the emphasis on everyday knowledge. For example, the teachers stated repeatedly that every learner has expert knowledge with regard to his or her lived experience, and that the opportunities to create knowledge based on one's own context 'empowers' the learner. By saying this, the teachers constructed students as already legitimate knowers by virtue of their past and ongoing experiences beyond the educational context, in their everyday and professional lives. These experiences form the basis of the legitimacy of the knowledge students construct. Therefore, this teaching practice exhibits a stronger social relation: the students as knowers by virtue of who they are (+C of SR).

This emphasis on personal construction of knowledge is further shown by the teachers' notion that learning is a transformative process of personal views, values and attitudes, and is concerned with personal growth and development. What is accentuated here are the processes (i.e. ways of knowledge) rather than the products (i.e. states of knowledge) of knowledge construction. For instance, integration skills (e.g. making connections between theory and practice, making decisions), patterns of thinking (e.g. ways to think about a certain discipline), generic skills, and learning attitudes were spoken of as the expected learning outcomes. Except for integration skills, all these outcomes relate directly to learners' dispositions rather than their possession of the subject knowledge. The focus is more on the learner and learning than on knowledge. Upon closer scrutiny, however, even integration skills entail the individuality of the learner. In making connections or decisions, for instance, it is the

learner's subjectivity rather than the connections made that matters more, as was clearly suggested by the teachers when they stressed there is no right or wrong connection or decision, and that it all depends on personal justification.

Summing up, based on the three themes outlined in this discussion, the curriculum of the online units discussed involves relatively weaker classification of subject knowledge (-C of ER) and emphasises the social relation to the knower. The individual is the basis of all knowledge claims (+C of SR). As a legitimate knower, the learner plays a significant role in determining what legitimate knowledge is and in creating new knowledge. The epistemic relation, on the other hand, is less important, in that content knowledge is viewed as secondary to ways of knowing, and that knowledge cannot be generated independently of the social profile of the knower. Therefore, the curriculum is specialised by a form of knower code (ER-, SR+).

## **5. 3 Pedagogy**

### **5.3.1 The sequencing of learning**

All the online units that were commented on by the teachers in this study were described as “less formally structured, less predetermined” than traditional face-to-face study units (Teacher B). Teacher B cautioned against using learning management systems such as WebCT and Janison to conduct “sequential” online classes, in which all students progressed in the study units by accomplishing the learning activities in the same sequence. A highly structured format as such, according to this teacher, represented instructivist pedagogy and was thus antithetical to the authentic and constructivist design enacted by the learning environment she intended to create:

There was very much a temptation to say, “Okay week one, read these and we’ll have a discussion. Week two, read these papers and we’ll have a quiz. Week three, read these papers and then your assignment is due.” So yeah, ... some of them [other teachers’ online units] even had that. They’d have a template of 13 weeks or 14 weeks or whatever, and the expectation was there’d be some context, some resources and then there’d be a quiz or something. And that would happen every week. And the kinds of learning environments that I create, which are based on authentic principles, that’s a total anathema, because if you do that you’re moving back into an instructivist kind of mode. So you’re saying this is what I want you to do this week, and this is what I want you to do the next week. So it becomes sequential and it’s directed by the teacher rather than from the student. [Teacher B]

The majority of the teachers adopted a similar approach to Teacher B's. For example, Teacher E differentiated the philosophy behind his online units from that behind the traditional classes. The former was learning the content knowledge *by* doing the assignments, whereas the latter was learning the content *and then* doing the assignment (Teacher E). The learning tasks, or the assignments, in these online units were typically open-ended especially in the sense that learners were not provided with a set order of steps to follow:

So the assignments then are very open ended. Now for some [learners] that poses a bit of a problem because they're not used to being given open-ended assignments. They are used to being told do A, B, C, D, E, F, G, right. And this is more open ended.  
[Teacher E]

Students were generally given the freedom to take any route in their exploration of the course materials as long as they reached the three, or in some cases four, milestones of the online unit, that is, as long as they were able to complete the assessment tasks. Teacher A's driving analogy below best summarises the control the teachers relinquished to the learners. In this analogy, the learner is the one behind the wheel who must decide where to go and how to get there:

When you're driving a car ... okay I have to get to the chemist, I have to get to the grocery store, right? You make that list and then how do you get there? You pick your route, you get there. Nobody just randomly drives and just magically ends up where they're going. [Teacher A]

Despite the fact that the teachers exercised relatively weaker control over the sequencing of the learning tasks compared with the teachers in traditional classes, within different online units, different degrees of control by the teacher were revealed. At one extreme, one teacher advocated individualised, project-based learning, in which each student investigated projects relevant to his or her work context and was not required to perform any common task (Teacher F). At the other extreme, Teacher C required that students do a number of small tasks prior to each major assignment. However, unlike a highly-structured class, it was not compulsory for the students in Teacher C's class to complete these tasks weekly. That is, students were allowed to do these small tasks in any order they wanted as long as they finished the tasks before each major assignment. The following quote shows that Teacher C encouraged her students to move between topics:



They have an opportunity as they move through ... when they get to say topic six or seven, many of them start, go back and read what they wrote in topic one and think, “Oh okay I’ve learnt more since then”. So they can go back and change what they wrote and revisit if they wish. [Teacher C]

Another theme emerging from the teachers’ remarks on their online units was the different ways they sequenced the learning tasks. Some said they arranged the order of the tasks based on the complexity level. Upon closer scrutiny, however, it seems what they meant was the assignments were connected in the sense that each task was a component of the major project across the whole semester. Teacher G described this design in her class:

We do that deliberately to build on in complexity and so that all the knowledge that the students have gained in the subject culminates in that last activity. ... in my experience it really adds purpose to the assessment tasks if you build them on and you add and you start off with something not too difficult. Get them to explore a range of issues and then you build on and get them to construct something. I find that it’s quite an effective way of getting students to build their knowledge. [Teacher G]

In contrast, Teacher F described this type of design, in which the teacher helps to build and scaffold student learning, as “hierarchical”, and was opposed to using it in postgraduate courses. All online units in Teacher F’s specialisation adopted a modularised, parallel design, in which the assignments were relatively independent of each other. In such a design, he said, learners:

work within a predictable pattern, they work on a three week cycle so they know what they have to do so there’s no surprises. See, the worst thing that you can do is actually provide surprises all the time and have people, you know, having to guess what the management of the knowledge in the course is. [Teacher F]

Another teacher shared this opinion and commented that, despite the simple structure, the task in each module was complex (Teacher E).

Although the degree of control exerted by the teachers over the sequencing of learning tasks varied, it should be noted that all of the teachers remained supportive of the idea that students should be able to move along in the online units relatively freely. As one teacher summed up: “I think you need to guide in some way, provide some form of pathway [but] if students don’t want to use your pathway let them go their own path, but at least you’ve provided them with some assistance” (Teacher G).

### 5.3.2 The pacing of learning

The teachers also demonstrated relatively weak control over the pacing of learning in teaching their online units. In the majority of cases, the online units were centred around three or four assignments and students worked at their own pace while doing each assignment. In fact, all these teachers considered weak pacing to be the greatest advantage of online learning. They repeatedly used this as a reason in arguing for the suitability of online learning for adult learners, who they believed usually had other life responsibilities and so needed greater flexibility. One teacher expressed her belief in the value of online learning in transcending the rigid pacing embedded in a face-to-face study unit that offered regular class meetings: “The way that you can set a task for a third of a subject and just say here’s your task and then we’ll work towards doing this task became much more difficult in the face to face [context]” (Teacher B). Another teacher considered it to be a great benefit that “the class doesn’t go away” (Teacher C), because this allowed students to accelerate or slow down their pace of learning:

It’s not like they have to all keep up and do each one each week, because they can’t. Online learning has to be more flexible than that. So if you’ve got a week off work because of a week’s holiday – in America you have holidays differently to when we have them here. And so you’ve got a week at home or a week off school, then you might sit down and do two or three topics in the one week because you can really intensely look at each day, work each day on them. And so they can’t ... I find they can’t really stay together, they sort of stay around but some people move more quickly than others and so on. [Teacher C]

Nevertheless, about one third of the teachers observed that the students who preferred structured learning activities tended to fall behind in this type of class because these students expected there to be “certain times to do certain things, because those things give you deadlines. They force you to think and interact and engage with what you’re doing” (Teacher H).

In teaching online units, the teachers utilised different strategies to assist students with self-paced learning, including one-on-one email correspondence, asynchronous forum discussions, real-time online chat, face-to-face workshops, weekly announcements and structured assessment. It should be emphasised that except for the last strategy, these activities were regarded by most teachers as support mechanisms rather than learning activities in themselves. This was why participation in these activities was

generally voluntary. The remainder of this section discusses each of these strategies, beginning with the strategy representing the least teacher control over the pacing of student learning towards that signifying the strongest teacher control.

All teachers made themselves available through emails. At least two teachers said they treated emails and forums as simply different means for the students to ask questions. One stated: “There wasn’t a whole lot of theoretical interplay between me and the students. It was if the students had questions I would answer but there was very little coming from me going straight to them” (Teacher A). As a firm supporter of self-directive learning, Teacher A continued, “now me saying do this, do that, do the other thing, I have much more difficulty with that now. ... Because it just feels wrong”. In this type of online unit, communication between the teacher and students was individually based and few collective instructions were given by the teacher, so students worked completely at their own pace. About half of the teachers who were teaching online units said they implemented this teaching approach in their classes.

The use of forums for controlling the pace of learning was relatively common. In the following quote, one teacher described how she used the forum to organise a timely discussion about each task the students were supposed to be doing. The commencement and the end of each discussion, as was implied in the quote, marked the beginning and the end of a particular task:

I’ll also use the discussion board to launch discussions, or the forum, to discuss Task One. Because the subject is task driven you complete the tasks and you complete the subject. So we start on task one, let’s talk about what task one involves. People will send in questions, comments and so forth, and then I can use the forum to start off task two once we get to that point. [Teacher B]

While most teachers thought the purpose of the online chat sessions was mainly to cultivate a sense of community, one said she usually scheduled a chat session to happen one week before each assignment was due, so that it served as a “a prompt to the ones who really haven’t started thinking about [the assignment]” (Teacher H). Only one teacher said she ran weekly online chats and, as the following statement illustrates, these chats were intended to be unstructured, the content and pace of the discussion being controlled by students themselves:

We just get on and we just talk about whatever. In fact it’s interesting, occasionally

sometime students will – and this has come from students not from me – one of the students might write to the discussion board and say, I found an article which talked about ... and they will say, oh, this is a good paper. And then they might say, well, this actually happened, how about we talk about that in the next chat? When I'm on, I can't always be there. It's an hour every week, I've missed about two, and sometimes I've been late or whatever, but they just meet and talk. [Teacher B]

According to the teachers who provided face-to-face workshops, these workshops primarily dealt with students' inquiries about assignments. The majority of them did not contain lectures. As in the chat sessions, students' queries determined the content and pace of these meetings.

One teacher mentioned using the announcement feature in the learning management system to update students on what they were expected to do each week (Teacher G). In her explanation, weekly updates prevented students from getting lost in an online environment due to the absence of physical meetings:

We were very directed in the sense of ... not directed in learning but directed in helping them manage themselves. Every week we would post up an announcement to say, "This is what you should be doing this week. Here are some resources to help you. You know we'll be online at this time if you need to". And very direct, very weekly structured things to keep them on task and to help them. [Teacher G]

Stressing the effectiveness of this strategy with students who needed more structure, the teacher also said those who were self-organised could just ignore these updates.

All the strategies outlined above, to recapitulate, were different forms of support that could be disregarded by individual students who did not need them. The last strategy to be discussed, structured assessment, however, was not this type of support. Structured assessment can be thought of as a form of 'scaffold'. Two teachers said that instead of organising whole-class activities, they incorporated some structure into the individual assessment. For example, one noted that she helped to pace out the learning process by having students do a number of projects, with reflection tasks between these projects, which she believed contributed substantially to the students' development (Teacher H).

Among these teachers, Teacher C probably had the most control over the pacing of student learning. Like Teacher H, she supported student learning by scaffolding the individual assessment. Not only did her design of the assignments follow a

hierarchical format, but each assignment consisted of a series of smaller tasks, and students were required to complete them before they were able to start the assignment. Furthermore, Teacher C offered detailed, step-by-step, instructions to assist students in conducting the smaller tasks. For example, apart from giving instructions like “now turn to such and such article” and “set your timer now for 5 minutes”, in guiding students to write their reflections on the readings, she asked students to:

answer three questions. One is, “What were the key points for me?”, “What confused me in the topic or puzzled me or I found really interesting?”, and finally, “What do these things mean for my practice?”... and as they move from topic to topic, I also say to them ... “in the next reading you read, think back over some of the other readings and see what you can link”. And so they compare and contrast or they talk about the particular reading, the author of this reading, and say, “Well that’s like Smith said before”, and so on. [Teacher C]

### **5.3.3 Relationships between teacher and students**

Although the teachers enunciated their preferences for certain learning theories and pedagogies, they shared the opinion that they could not force students to learn in a particular way. For example, despite her own belief in authentic and constructivist learning, Teacher B was convinced that students with a different perspective on learning could still learn just as well in their own ways:

If you come in with an attitude that expects there to be weekly readings so that you can learn that way, and many people do learn quite well that way. But it still, you know, like if you have a constructivist philosophy, I do believe that you still construct that knowledge, even if it’s given to you in weekly doses, if you know what I mean. [Teacher B]

This section outlines the roles the teacher and students played in their pedagogical relationship based on the teachers’ teaching philosophies.

#### **5.3.3.1 Teacher as facilitator**

Many teachers did not regard themselves as having expert knowledge in their subject areas. Quotations like the following one were ubiquitous in the interview transcripts:

I tell them [students], “Number one, we are not gurus, number two, we are not infallible, number three, we expect you to challenge each other including the facilitators”. So we are trying to demolish the idea that someone knows everything and there is a party line. There is no party line in our courses. We may have a strong perspective but all these perspectives are open to challenge and validation. And that’s

part of the learning. [Teacher D]

Apart from their fundamental belief that knowledge was subject to personal interpretation, some teachers explained they were in no position to claim expert knowledge because in most cases, their postgraduate students brought in areas of expertise that belonged to them in their own contexts, not the teachers' (Teacher C). By the same token, a number of teachers defined their role as "fellow learners" of their students (e.g. Teachers B, D, F). This was best exemplified in Teacher F's strong denial of the existence of a mentor-mentee relationship between him and his students, arguing instead, that it was an equal "partnership":

**Interviewer:** How do you describe this relationship, is it like mentor and mentee?

**Teacher F:** No, well I think it's a joint partnership. I mean in a sense, you know, the people that I work with are professional adult educators so I learn from them, they learn from me, you know. I mean I've got two students from the Philippines this year. Now I'm learning a lot about what the issues are in the Philippines and, you know, they learn a lot from me, so it's a two-way thing.

In accord with the opinion that they were not experts, the teachers spoke unfavourably of the traditional teaching role of the "sage on the stage" (Teacher A) or "the giver of knowledge" (Teacher B), and advocated the role of a "facilitator" in its place:

We are not encouraging creative learning if we go overboard and take control of teaching and learning processes such that we dominate the teaching, learning process. So we are very mindful of how much initial input we will have as teachers. Thereafter, very quickly we transform ourselves as facilitators, as you might say, fellow learners encouraging reflective practice and dialogue between those of us who are facilitators and our students. [Teacher D]

According to the teachers, as facilitators they helped students in their "learning journey" by offering them "a starting point" (Teacher B) and encouraging them to "think more broadly" (Teacher F) to ensure they "learn whatever it is they need to learn" (Teacher A). Some also described themselves as playing a stimulus role, like "a critical friend" (Teacher F) or "the devil's advocate" (Teacher D). By this, the teachers meant that they challenged students to examine issues from different perspectives. The same principle applies to the teaching of technical knowledge. For instance, in teaching an online unit that involved producing multimedia products, Teacher H said she encouraged her students to step out of their comfort zone to take on a higher-level task:

I try to encourage them to do something new, not things that they're already familiar

with. And they do actually try new things and sometimes they don't work out so well. And sometimes they're really hard and I think it's really challenging for the students to do that. It's also really challenging to think that they're not reproducing the same thing. [Teacher H]

The interviews revealed that there was no equivalent of the lecture component in any of the study units that were completely online. While not dismissing the value of lectures, one teacher considered lecturing to be an inappropriate teaching strategy for a small size class on the grounds that it deprived students of opportunities to actively engage with the learning activities:

I mean I enjoy listening to a good lecture. I mean I don't think it's necessarily a bad thing but I think it needs to be used wisely. I mean you don't simply lecture to students at every opportunity. What you try to do is get them more active in their learning so you get them collaborating, working in groups, solving problems. Now you can't do this lecturing. So, if you are faced with 500 people in a lecture theatre, of course it is difficult to do that but there are some strategies where you can get interactivity happening. But if you are in a group where you have got 15 students it would be silly for me to stand at the front and lecture. ... there are far better strategies for learning than lecturing to a group that size. [Teacher E]

As previously stated, the face-to-face workshops provided by some teachers were primarily intended to help students with their assignments; therefore, rather than lecturing, the teachers said they explained what the assignment was about, gave examples and guided students to investigate the issues in their own contexts.

Only one teacher, while refusing to use the word 'lecture', said he "made presentations" of the content knowledge in his face-to-face workshops (Teacher D). As there were only three or four workshops throughout a semester, he explained that he had to be selective in deciding what to cover in these presentations:

I make a choice, what are the kinds of things that are best done in a face to face. Because it's quality times, you don't want to waste time talking frivolous things or unimportant things. So for example, let's take the case of a domain theory or let's take the case of the learning organisation, or the case of organisation says open systems. Once these things are clearly explained, then students go armed with this particular information on new learning to apply these things to their readings. Or reapply themselves to the same reading that they were confounded by. [Teacher D]

Another teacher candidly admitted that the only difference between his face-to-face and online teaching was that he "would deliver less content" in the latter because the content, including his own writing, was all on the website (Teacher F).

In terms of facilitating students in conducting the tasks, many emphasised that they did not teach didactically. They expressed the belief that learners will develop the essential abilities for conducting the tasks gradually if they are “put in the situation of being able to do it” (Teacher E). Take the ability to reflect on one’s practice for example; rather than offer explicit instructions, many teachers said they taught this through their feedback of students’ work. This is illustrated through Teacher E’s comment:

We don’t have a section on the website that says this is how you reflect, or this is how you critically analyse. But ... when we mark the assignments, we do comment on how they might be able to improve critical analysis, or what they have done is describe the theories of learning but they haven’t synthesised them in any way and they haven’t thought about them in their context. So we would comment on that. So that is a learning situation isn’t it?

One teacher said she used past students’ work as examples, arguing “that’s genuine learning. That’s learning from the way that other people do it” (Teacher B). However, another teacher found that examples stifled students’ creativity, claiming that students learned more deeply by experiencing the process of trying to figure out what to do:

When you show somebody an example, they think okay I’ll do that because I know that one is okay. ... With classes that I’ve never shown samples to ... when they’re on the discussion boards ... they’re sending emails back and forth to themselves ... and they have to use their words to describe what they’re doing and then they’re grappling with the language of describing what’s going on. And if I give them an example, then they start getting on the discussion boards like, “Oh yeah I’m just going to do what Sample 2 did”. [Teacher A]

### **5.3.3.2 *Learner autonomy***

In the interviews, the teachers regularly suggested that learner autonomy was a desirable, and in many cases, assumed trait of adult online learners. Associated with learner autonomy were the various terms used by the teachers to describe their teaching, such as ‘constructivist principles’, ‘learner-centred approach’, ‘active engagement’, ‘creative learning’, ‘self-directive learning’ and ‘student empowerment’. These underpinning teaching philosophies, as were pointed out by many teachers, placed a lot of responsibility on the learner, in that every learner had to make decisions on what and how he or she wanted to learn. The interview transcripts revealed that the decisions students were expected to make about what to learn ranged from which paper to read to which topics to tackle in their assignments. In fact, only



two teachers asked, or said they preferred, students to complete the required readings. The rest of the teachers, however, encouraged students to be selective, with one even saying students did not have to use the course materials at all if they did not find them relevant to the projects they were doing “as long as in the assessment they actually meet the criteria” (Teacher F).

Knowing what one wanted to learn was considered by one teacher to be the greatest challenge for some of her students. The teacher recounted how one student came to realise that learning was about what she, not the teacher, wanted:

It was like, “Am I doing the right thing, is this what you want?” and she kept saying to me, “Is this what you want?” And I used to say things back to her like, “Well what is it that you think I want?” And so she would share what she thought I was doing and I said, “Well is that what you’re doing?” and she’d say, “Yes”. I said, “Well it must be what you want.”... I think by about topic four or so she realised that’s what I was wanting, that she was doing okay but also realising that it wasn’t just what I wanted, but what was in her head that was important. [Teacher C]

Likewise, Teacher A found some students constantly demanded reassurance and anticipated criticism from him:

They need to know that what they are doing is okay and I find there are students that are doing great work but they don’t feel like it’s great. And I have to keep reassuring them saying, “Yeah it’s good, keep going, you’re doing alright, you’re doing alright.” And they’re like, “Tell me what I’m doing wrong”. It’s like, “You’re not doing anything wrong, it’s good, keep going”. And they just don’t want to accept the compliment, “Oh of course it’s wrong, of course it has to be better”. Sometimes it is just good. They don’t have to do that. [Teacher A]

For Teacher A, this feeling of insecurity stemmed from a lack of confidence and it took great confidence on the student’s part to get the most out of this type of learning environment.

With regard to how to learn, as has been reiterated throughout this chapter, all the teachers expressed their willingness to accommodate students with different predilections for learning. At the same time, however, they expected the students to take the initiative to negotiate with them about their preferred way of learning:

Often I think the lecturers will be open to other ways of doing things, like I am. If somebody came to me and said, “Look I’m really having trouble with this”. For instance the group work thing. Sometimes people don’t want to work in groups. So I say, “If you want to do it on your own that’s fine with me, too”. So negotiate to learn in a way that suits them, because really that’s what constructivism is about, it’s

constructing your own learning in a way that is helpful for you. [Teacher B]

This is not to say that the learners were completely left on their own. Without exception, every teacher highlighted his or her role in providing support. This included: support “at the metacognitive level”, for example, making explicit their expectations of the students in the first few weeks (Teachers B, G); making themselves available for face-to-face consultations with students on a one-on-one basis (Teachers D, F); offering more face-to-face classes or “extra stuff” upon students’ request (Teachers G, H); and helping to build a learning community (Teachers B, C, G, D). Of note, however, is that one teacher differentiated support from structure, warning against the temptation to return to more structure:

Say somebody tries a more authentic approach and in the first instance they get queries, they can get complaints. It’s quite interesting the kinds of feedback you get in the first few weeks. So often, they’ll often lose their nerve and say, “Here read this article and do this, do this activity.” And then they might change the assignment. Or the next time they offer it they might go back to a more structured approach. But what I would suggest instead of – you don’t want structure, the word is not structure, you want support. And I think the two are very different. So my suggestion to anybody who was thinking about going back, because they didn’t feel it was going very well, I’d say wait until the end because things can turn around amazingly by the end of the subject. So don’t lose your nerve half way through. [Teacher B]

Some, although relatively few, teachers spoke of responding to forum discussions. One said she posted a group response now and then:

There might be three or four people who responded to Topic Two’s reading this week, I read all those and I respond to them all. I put a date in August whatever and I just say, “I really enjoyed reading the responses blah, blah, blah”. And I try to draw the connections between what they’re saying and what they’re not saying and identify an important point in somebody’s work that the others might then go and look at. So I try to bring those connections, it’s my way of trying to build a community I suppose. [Teacher C]

Another teacher opted to use the forums more strategically in facilitating peer interaction, that is, if a question was not directed to her, she would wait for the other students to respond to it before she replied (Teacher B).

### **5.3.4 Relationships with fellow students**

#### **5.3.4.1 Collaborative environment**

In explaining how they taught online, the teachers emphasised that as well as helping students to create their own knowledge, they encouraged the students to co-construct knowledge with their peers. Most teachers stated that a collaborative environment was favourable for learning, two insisting that students learned better collaboratively than individually:

If that was a collaborative assignment then they'd be forced to talk about it, they'd be forced to socially construct some knowledge. ... It is through sharing and bouncing their ideas off other people and seeing what bounces back. [Teacher A]

Even though you may just want to complete the subject and do your individual work, the nature of the subject requires that you understand it is collaborative ... and where the web is going to today is really pushing that collaborative community environment. So we try to encourage that in the actual design of the subject. [Teacher G]

The only exception was Teacher H, who held a reserved attitude towards collaborative learning. While recognising its potential benefits, she argued it was not a truly student-centred approach, a teaching principle that she adhered to:

Collaboration in itself is not learner centred unless it actually meets the needs of the students. So you know, I just think that we have to go with what's appropriate. And sometimes we have to exercise our judgment about a particular group of students too, and I would say the vibe of the group. Every group is different each year the way they interact. So I think that we have to adapt to that. And that's true learner-centred teaching, not just using collaboration or communication for the sake of it. [Teacher H]

To support her stance on this issue especially in relation to online learning, Teacher H referred to the “flexibility and adaptability to the individual” as the key value of online learning. In her opinion, if the students preferred individual learning to collaborative learning, the teacher should adjust their teaching accordingly. As she contended, “fundamentally online learning is about the individual, otherwise we'd be having classes and they'd all have to drive here and it would be not about them, it'd be about us”.

Although group work was seen by the teachers as the most common way to create a collaborative environment, the makeup of the online student population was highlighted as the greatest barrier to implementing group activities. That is, online units attracted mostly adult learners who were “on different timelines” because of

their other life responsibilities (Teacher E). Therefore, many teachers resorted to non-assessable whole-class discussion activities in facilitating student collaboration. One believed that group interaction occurred when students responded to issues raised in a forum (Teacher E), and another anticipated that this process would lead to students peer-facilitating their own learning:

We post certain questions, sometimes we test out some of our own ideas, sometimes we play the devil's advocate and say, "This is what I feel, what do you feel?". We encourage people who otherwise would be more reflective and less contributive to share their ideas and so on. It's not only the facilitator who promotes learning, often, and this is my wish, that the postgraduate students themselves facilitate their own learning through mutual interaction. [Teacher D]

Whilst participation in these activities was voluntary in most cases, two exceptions were identified. One activity in Teacher E's class required students to post a small part of their work online and for others in the class to give feedback. The teacher described how this activity contributed to group involvement and hence collaborative learning:

So there is that sort of way of building interactivity even though they're not submitting the assignment as a group assignment, there is still group involvement in developing it and when you have got everybody submitting a plan and at least two people commenting on a plan then you have got lots of resources for other people to look at if they're not sure of what to do and how to do it because you have got quite a database there of information. [Teacher E]

Similarly, students in Teacher G's class were asked to participate in the online activities designed by other students, and their exposure to these ideas was designed to help them learn from their peers' ideas:

They built a small activity but then they engaged themselves in others' as a student. So they saw, even though they didn't implement other activities, they saw how those other activities ran which then gives them ideas and saying "Oh well I could...". You know you build up your own repository of ideas for activities, online activities. [Teacher G]

#### **5.3.4.2 Learner participation**

Particularly pertinent to collaborative learning is the issue of learner participation. Learner participation is defined here as students taking part in online dialogues by contributing posts. Interestingly, despite their endorsement of collaborative learning,

the majority of the teachers encouraged but did not insist on student participation in their online units. For example, Teacher B said she believed:

people can learn an awful lot by lurking, as it were. I think it's crazy to try and force people to be involved in that. All the chats that we've had, there are some people who have never attended a chat, and I'm not going to say you've got to come to the chat. But then they can read the chat transcripts and then they can be involved that way.

In agreeing with Teacher B's support of voluntary participation, Teacher F further claimed that online forums were "completely overblown in their importance. In the same way [that] tutorials are in face to face teaching, they become ritualised ... and students in a sense become passive in them". Another reason for supporting voluntary participation was raised by other teachers who sensed some students' reluctance to share certain information or their work online. As one teacher concluded, "I don't want to expose them to something uncomfortable, I don't think that's good pedagogy" (Teacher H).

Among all the teachers, only one, Teacher C, was insistent on students making regular postings. Students in this teacher's class were required to post their reflections about the readings online. The teacher said she employed this strategy to ensure students had done the work (the readings) that was vital for their success:

I've set up the situation so they have to reflect, and it's saying they can't succeed in achieving what they have to do unless they do the reflection. It's like in some situations with assessment students can wing it, we say, they can do it without really reading a lot or they can do it without really thinking a lot. They just... they're very good at picking up bits out of other people's papers and weaving it together. They can't do that in this course. [Teacher C]

Unlike most teachers in this study, Teacher C argued that learner 'participation' did not necessarily have to entail students responding to others' opinions. She considered that it was sufficient for students to "interact with" others' postings by referencing them in their own assignments. What mattered to Teacher C was the opportunity for her students to read others' reflections, which she said helped the students to learn "more deeply". She said students "can go through almost individually and not talk to anybody, but still come out the other end having learnt a lot" (Teacher C).

#### **5.3.4.3 The social aspect of a learning community**

In addition to the advantage of intellectual development, some teachers also discussed the motivating effect of a collaborative environment in terms of its role in building a 'learning community'. For instance, those who ran online chats in their classes all said that the most important purpose of these chats was for people to "meet and greet". As Teacher B elaborated, students socialised with one another during the chats:

**Teacher B:** It [weekly online chat] allows people to build up a bit of a sense of humour to reveal more of their personality I think, and some of the stuff has been really useful as well. Like, for instance, people will say I found a great book on such and such. But I think really it's about people interacting and revealing a bit about their sense of humour and their personality and that sort of thing.

**Interviewer:** Oh you mean other than the formal learning, it's more social?

**Teacher B:** Yes exactly.

Two teachers brought up the issue of students' online social presence. One of these teachers seemed to think the synchronicity of the presence was extremely valuable:

Just a presence whereas you wouldn't get that asynchronously. I could've easily organised online discussion board and just put postings of questions there but I felt that you know, trying to bring the presence of the class together. [Teacher G].

The other teacher, nevertheless, believed that asynchronous forums could also achieve the same purpose. He said students' "active involvement" in the discussions helped to create a social presence:

I mean what you are trying to do also is to get a social presence and that is very important. I think that's recognised in the literature with online subjects, getting a social presence is important. So getting people to talk about what they do in their jobs and so on, and getting people to comment back on to other people about what they do. [Teacher E]

Unlike these two teachers, Teacher C did not organise online chats or encourage interaction among students on online forums, but still considered a learning community to be significant to learning. Her strategy for creating a sense of community was to "personalise" her teaching by writing her announcements and teaching materials in the same tone that she would use if she were to teach the class face-to-face. This included talking casually online about something that had recently happened in her personal life or posting instructions in a conversational style. It was her belief that the students would follow suit and be more personalised with each other as they would in face-to-face learning.

On the other hand, some teachers saw social interaction as a personal choice and claimed it did not necessarily affect learning (e.g. Teachers F, H). It should also be noted that the social aspect being discussed here referred exclusively to the social interaction *in* class. In fact, one teacher mentioned that postgraduate students did not need this social aspect *outside* class as much as undergraduate students, and that this was why online learning was particularly appropriate for postgraduates:

If you are an undergraduate student, I think you get a lot more by coming to University. There is the social aspect that postgraduate students don't need, I mean there is some social aspect but they don't need another social group of friends, do they? They've got their own social network whereas undergraduate students come into University, they are making friends, they are playing sport together, they are down the pub together. It's a different situation. [Teacher E]

### **5.3.5 Teachers' overall view of online learning**

The teachers' comments on the online delivery mode of their classes have been discussed under relevant themes throughout this chapter. This section deals with their overall view of online learning. Generally, although all agreed that the online mode had its advantages over the face-to-face mode for economic and practical reasons, nearly all teachers expressed a strong belief that online learning did not lend itself to any particular type of pedagogy. The interviews were replete with statements such as the following:

It depends on the teacher and the philosophical view of teaching and learning, it has nothing to do with the technology. Technology has certain affordances that can help in ways and it can not help in other ways, so you as a good teacher, you should become aware of what those, you know ... it's not the technology that controls the pedagogy and we have seen that all through the history of education and technology. [Teacher E]

Well what I say is that it's like this, this is an online technology, a book is technology so it doesn't actually matter what the technology is, the technology is the medium for things to happen in other environments. [Teacher F]

In contrast to this dominant view, one teacher insisted that online learning went hand in hand with the constructivist philosophy and authentic learning in that the factors that facilitated these types of pedagogy "can be readily done online" (Teacher B). Another was also convinced that online learning had intrinsic pedagogical benefits. Both these two teachers referred to the strength of online learning in facilitating

articulation and reflection, two central elements of the type of pedagogy they employed in their online units. Teacher B said:

Articulation and reflection, they're two really important things that happen that really facilitate learning. And online learning does them so well, both of them so well. ... You know, you have to reflect, you have to make decisions, you have to talk to other students online. You have to really and just quietly reflect and socially reflect. So you can do all of those online really, really well. [Teacher B]

In Teacher C's elaboration, articulation and reflection done online in written form were usually much deeper than when they were done orally in face-to-face classes:

You can't talk your answers. So writing is I think a more complex process in a sense you've got to organise your thoughts more, you can't stop and start, you can't say "Oh no I don't mean that bit, I want to do this" ... [Teacher C].

That sort of connection they're forced to do in writing is a lot more, I think, requires them to think a lot more deeply and make connections a lot more deeply than if it was just oral in class [Teacher C].

One other advantage of using a written medium identified by Teacher C was that she felt she knew her online students better than her students in a face-to-face environment because the medium rendered the thinking processes of the online learners transparent:

I really get to know them very well, I know how their brains work, I know how their thinking works because I know their context and I read their thinking. I really get to know each one of them extremely well, in fact more than I would a face to face student, but I've never met them. [Teacher C]

On the other hand, some teachers expressed the belief that the text-based communication online demanded greater courage and more confidence than did face-to-face verbal communication, particularly in expressing personal opinions. This was due to the online medium's record-keeping feature:

Writing something down is more permanent than saying something. So when you have to write it down, and in my case write your own personal reflections, that takes a lot of confidence to put that information down for others to read, and it stays there. So I think people who have confidence in themselves as learners I think is important. [Teacher C]



### 5.3.6 Discussion

As shown above, the teachers generally agreed upon the neutrality of technology, insisting that it is pedagogy rather than technology that has impact on student learning. Therefore, their discussions about the online units focused on their general pedagogy. Two main themes have emerged. The first is the teachers' emphasis on learning over teaching in the pedagogical relationship. Secondly, while the teachers expressed beliefs in collaborative learning, their teaching approaches show that individualised learning is prioritised.

That learning is emphasised over teaching in the pedagogical relationship can be discerned in two respects: the design and management of learning activities, and the way content knowledge is delivered. In both respects, in brief, the teacher's visibility is reduced. The study results indicate that the learning activities in the teachers' online units were regulated by weak sequencing and pacing rules; the teachers exerted little explicit control over the ordering and speed of student learning. This was because, as one teacher pointed out, they were convinced that teaching based on a pre-established order of activities and a collective pace exemplifies an instructivist approach, one contrary to the constructivist principles underpinning their pedagogy. In their view, learning occurs when students actively engage in a context espousing flexibility. To implement this flexibility, the teachers considered their responsibilities were to create an environment favourable to this form of learning and to provide personalised support for each learner. They thus defined their roles as 'facilitators' rather than 'instructors' in teaching the online units, which stresses their renunciation of control and indicates a weak hierarchy in the pedagogical relationship. This form of relationship was described as a 'partnership', in which a teacher plays the part of a 'co-learner' or 'critical friend' to students. Overall, the pedagogy shows relatively weaker framing of knowledge (-F of ER).

The teachers also stated that they taught it by facilitating students in completing the tasks, rather than through lectures. Lecturing was, in fact, interpreted as directly imparting knowledge to students without regard to their individuality, and was thus associated with a traditional, didactic approach of teaching. In dismissing lecturing as an undesirable teaching strategy, the teachers also insisted that they were not 'gurus'

in relation to content knowledge and that all their perspectives were ‘open to challenge and validation’ by students. Meanwhile, it was also revealed that few teachers thought it good pedagogy to offer students explicit instructions about how to conduct the tasks. They expressed reluctance to teach skills or techniques in a direct manner, and none of them mentioned modelling for students on how to conduct the tasks. In short, both expert content knowledge and procedures for learning this knowledge are implicit, being downplayed as not significant in shaping the form of pedagogy (-F of ER). The epistemic relation characterising this pedagogy is thus relatively weaker.

The second overarching theme, a focus on individualised learning, is illustrated by the various forms of support provided for students. The most common form of support was advice given to students individually in response to their inquiries. This support was intended to be personalised, based on the teachers’ notion that there is no single approach to learning. The second form of support was learning activities organised for the whole class. The teachers stressed that these activities were optional and were to be treated as only for those who needed them, which reiterates weak teacher control, (i.e. weak framing of the pedagogic context). This form of support can be further divided into two types of activities: one that assisted learners in organising their own learning, and the other that aimed to facilitate the building of a learning community. The first type of activity aimed to help students develop a desirable attribute of the ideal learner in this context: self-regulation. The second type was a teaching strategy to promote collaborative learning. Nevertheless, while many teachers noted the benefits of learners co-constructing, or ‘socially constructing’, knowledge with their peers by means of working in groups or interacting with others’ work or ideas posted online, participation in these activities remained voluntary in most units. Therefore, although this type of support ostensibly stresses a community of learners, the emphasis is still on individuality, as the learner individually chooses to be a member of the community. In short, all forms of support provided by the teachers explicitly stress that *each* learner’s preferences for learning determines the form of pedagogy. This pedagogic approach, hence, exhibits relatively strong framing of the social relation to the knower’s individuality (+F of SR).

Moreover, despite the teachers' statements about learners co-constructing knowledge, many insisted that the main purpose of whole class activities was for students to build and maintain their 'online social presence', through which a sense of community could be cultivated. Put another way, the communication occurring in this type of community is intended to be focused on learners sharing personal experiences and perspectives rather than on them learning the content knowledge. The form of learning community promoted by this pedagogic practice is a community of knowers rather than a knowledge-based community. What is being emphasised is a particular kind of social relation: the knower's attitude of wanting to engage in the learning context. This social attribute differs from an innate (e.g. genius) or cultivated (e.g. artistic sensitivity) disposition; nor does it belong to other socially-based categories such as gender or ethnicity that also defines a social relation (Maton, 2007).

Overall, the two major themes regarding the teaching practices in the online units discussed have led to two conclusions. First, this form of instructional practice can be described as based on 'invisible pedagogy'. In contrast to visible pedagogy, invisible pedagogy is defined as the teacher exerting implicit control over the hierarchical, sequencing and pacing, and criterial rules (Bernstein, 1977, 1990). This description aptly summarises the teaching methods discussed above. Secondly, these two themes suggest that this form of pedagogy is specialised by a knower code (ER-, SR+). It is a particular kind of knower code that emphasises learners' individuality in choosing how to learn and their willingness to engage. The teachers' accounts characterising a successful learner in their online units best supports this conclusion: a successful learner is one who is autonomous and self-directed, but sees value in sharing his or her perspective in exchange for others'. This means that the learner recognises his or her position as simultaneously an *individualised* and a *socialising* knower. As an individualised knower, the learner has the capability to determine the legitimacy of pedagogy on the basis of his or her individuality (i.e. personal preferences and choices). As a socialising knower, the learner considers socialising with the learning community to be a legitimate form of learning.

## 5. 4 Assessment

### 5.4.1 Assessment methods

Data collected from the teacher interviews indicates that the predominant form of assessment in their online units was individual written assignments. In the educational technology specialisation, Web-based or multimedia products were also a relatively common assessment method. Forum contributions, however, were only assessable in a very small number of online units. Authentic tasks, projects, and reflections were the three terms used most frequently by the teachers to refer to the assignments while emphasising their intention to make the assignments meaningful to every individual learner. Teacher F asserted that only the knowledge developed by doing this type of assignment could guarantee its transfer to the workplace:

I think in a way all assignments should have some level of project base in them, some engagement with their communities or their workplaces. Now, I mean otherwise all you do is simply get into a pattern of reproducing literature that's not engaged with policy and it's not engaged with practice. So I favour very much a project based orientation where there is some level of problem solving rather than just simply regurgitating text of literature. I think that's a futile, passive and uninvolved approach.  
[Teacher F]

The analysis of the example unit outlines confirmed the teachers' classification of the three forms of assessment tasks they employed (see Table 13). In this analysis, a reflective essay is defined as a written assignment that requires students to discuss a content topic in relation to their own real-life contexts. An authentic task refers to any form of assignment that asks students to solve a real-world problem. A project comprises more than one task and, in this study, usually cuts across at least two-thirds of the semester. Judging by the weighting of the assignments, out of the eight unit outlines collected, approximately 32% of the task marks came from reflective essays, 37% from authentic tasks and 31% from projects. It should be noted that half of the authentic tasks and at least one project contained a reflective component, which required students to reflect on their personal process of conducting the tasks. Moreover, all the projects consisted of authentic tasks.

The unit outlines contained no traditional form of critical essay, which would require learners to produce content or discuss issues purely based on academic arguments. A number of tasks, however, comprised a small component that required students to

refer to the content taught. For example, one of the requirements of Task 1 in Online Units 1, 3 and 6 asked students to briefly explain concepts or summarise important points in the readings. Another five tasks (Tasks 2 and 3 in Online Units 3 and 6, and Task 3 in Online Unit 8) required that students cite readings or the literature, or draw on ‘insights’ from the unit. The majority of the tasks (70%) did not make mention of the use of course materials in the task description.

Table 13. Summary of the assessment tasks included in the online units

Online Unit	Task 1	Task 2	Task 3	Task 4
1	<u>Reflective essay (20%)</u> : Briefly describe two concepts, and analyse their use in an educational context <i>you are familiar with</i> .	<u>Project (40%)</u> : Develop a learning environment based on first concept.	<u>Project (40%)</u> : Develop a learning environment based on second concept.	
2	<u>Authentic task &amp; reflection (20%)</u> : Evaluate a learning environment using a given instrument and record <i>your reflection</i> on using the instrument.	<u>Authentic group (or individual) task (30%)</u> : Create a resource that can be used by an evaluation company's employees and clients.	<u>Authentic task (50%)</u> : Produce an evaluation proposal to evaluate this online unit.	
3	<u>Reflective essay (35%)</u> : Reflect on weekly readings. (“identify the key points in the article <i>for you</i> ; summarising each of these points and indicating why they are important <i>for you and your teaching context</i> ”, p.17)	<u>Authentic task &amp; reflection (30%)</u> : Trial some classroom activities and reflect on the experiences. (“Reflect on what this means in relation to what you are reading and learning”. p.18)	<u>Authentic task &amp; reflection (35%)</u> : Design a programme for <i>your students</i> , citing readings and your reflections in your previous assignments. (The rationale for this programme “should reflect <i>your philosophy for teaching ... in your context</i> .” p.19)	
4	<u>Authentic task (30%)</u> : Write a report of a learning system in a formal educational setting.	<u>Project (35%)</u> : Write a design statement of a learning system for a real syllabus and/or client brief.	<u>Project (35%)</u> : Produce a prototype of the learning system.	
5	<u>Project (30%)</u> : Develop three learning objects based on three different concepts of <i>your choice</i> . (“There is no preferred format—the design is <i>up to you!</i> ” “Choose something <i>you</i> would like to focus on”;	<u>Project (30%)</u> : Write a supporting statement for each learning object.	<u>Project (40%)</u> : Reflect on <i>your design process</i> . (“The purpose ... is to raise <i>your awareness</i> of how <i>you</i> are approaching and working through <i>your design tasks</i> ... link what you are learning in the	

Online Unit	Task 1	Task 2	Task 3	Task 4
	"appropriate to <i>your skill level and background knowledge</i> "; "This is the time to move out of your comfort zone, so pick something that is going to <i>challenge you!</i> ", p.4)		subject to <i>the work you do ... in your professional life now or in the future</i> ". p.5)	
6	<u>Reflective essay (30%)</u> : Briefly explain a theory and discuss its relevance to <i>your workplace</i> .	<u>Reflective essay (30%)</u> : Examine the use of a theoretical framework at <i>your workplace</i> based on insights from this study unit and the literature.	<u>Reflective essay (40%)</u> : Examine an issue based on insights from this study unit and the situation at your workplace. Discuss the challenges <i>your workplace</i> may encounter and <i>your solutions</i> .	
7	<u>Authentic task &amp; reflection (25%)</u> : Write an article for <i>your institutional newsletter</i> , reflecting on " <i>the way you learn</i> , the way your colleagues learn and the way they could demonstrate quality learning."	<u>Authentic task (25%)</u> : Develop a power point presentation with an accompanying paper to orient a group of newcomers <i>at your institution</i> .	<u>Authentic task &amp; reflection (25%)</u> : Provide advice for <i>your department's</i> assessment approach based on your reflection " <i>on your own assessment approach</i> " and the literature.	<u>Authentic task (25%)</u> : Develop a learning plan for a group of learners in <i>your institutions</i> or the community in general.
8	<u>Reflective essay (25%)</u> : Respond to a question and explain why the issue is important " <i>to you and your organisation</i> ." (p.3).	<u>Reflective essay (25%)</u> : Identify an activity that " <i>you will undertake as a participant</i> " and explain why it will meet <i>your goals</i> . (p.4)	<u>Reflective essay (25%)</u> : Respond to a statement citing " <i>your own experience</i> " and the course materials. (p.4).	<u>Reflective essay (25%)</u> : Report on the activity in Task 2 and discuss its relevance to broader interests.

Note. Italics added throughout the table.

The three forms of assessment exemplify the strong focus the teachers claimed to place on learners' real-life contexts, personal experiences and interpretations of the content knowledge. As indicated in the added emphases in Table 13, the type of knowledge that the students were expected to demonstrate in their assignments was what mattered to them personally ("what is important for *you*", "what is appropriate for *your* skill level and background knowledge", "what challenges *you*", "*your* philosophy of teaching", "*your* students", "*your* workplace", "*your* goals", etc.). On the other hand, the relatively smaller percentage of marks allocated to the requirement of producing content based on the readings and the literature also confirmed the teachers' downplaying of content knowledge.

### 5.4.2 Assessment criteria

Seven out of the eight unit outlines offered assessment criteria for each task. An overview of these criteria is presented in Table 14, with the criteria organised according to the main task type for which they were used. It should be noted that the criterial items under each task type were not mutually exclusive.

Table 14. Assessment criteria for different types of tasks

Task type	Criteria
Reflection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Quality of discussion</li> <li>• Quality of reflection</li> <li>• Ability to draw conclusions</li> <li>• Demonstrate understanding of how the readings relate to the teaching in this field</li> <li>• Logical connection between theory, research and your practice</li> <li>• Engagement with course objectives and materials</li> <li>• Identification and clarity of argument</li> <li>• Extent of reading and depth of analysis</li> <li>• Explanation of the criteria you use to guide your analysis</li> <li>• Your judgment of the media use against your criteria with justification of your comments</li> <li>• Critical analysis of the readings</li> <li>• Provide evidence of wider library search</li> </ul>
Authentic task	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Quality of each aspect specified in the template</li> <li>• Depth and detail in the information offered</li> <li>• Clarity and conciseness of learning outcomes in the learning plan</li> <li>• Relevance and quality of resources offered in the learning plan</li> <li>• Assessment rubrics containing categories of: (1) Knowledge; (2) Discrimination, research and processing; (3) Creativity, initiative, individuality of approach; (4) Written presentation, control of genre</li> </ul>
Written component of a project	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clear description of the context</li> <li>• Reasoning and justification behind your design</li> <li>• Description of production process, technical issues encountered and your solutions</li> <li>• Description of objectives and intended use of the resource</li> <li>• Description of the use of media</li> <li>• Assessment rubrics containing categories of: (1) Understanding the problem; (2) Underpinnings of the solution; (3) Creativity of the approach; (4) Written presentation</li> </ul>
Hands-on component of an authentic task or a project	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Depth and completeness of information</li> <li>• Clarity and conciseness of presentation</li> <li>• Appropriate use of the concept, interface, learning activities</li> <li>• Basic design skills</li> <li>• Appropriate use of multimedia elements</li> <li>• Appropriate to the content and context</li> <li>• Demonstrate re-development of existing material</li> <li>• Maintain a consistent design throughout</li> <li>• Assessment rubrics containing categories of: (1) Understanding &amp; exploitation of the system; (2) Context and content; (3) Teaching &amp; learning process; (4) Overall aesthetics</li> </ul>

Overall, these criteria contained general characteristics of a good assignment, such as “quality of discussion”, “appropriate use of concepts”, “clarity and conciseness of presentation”, “engagement with course objective and materials”, and “logical connection between theory, research and your practice” (Table 14). More specific indicators for ‘quality’ discussion and learner ‘engagement’, for example, were often not provided. These loosely defined assessment criteria reflected the teaching staff’s emphasis on the open-endedness of the learning tasks and learners’ individuality. For example, in speaking of his adoption of a criterion-referenced approach in marking student assignments, Teacher F demonstrated his emphasis on open-ended assessment:

[There are] four or five criteria, so in a way what I argue is there is no right answer, there is a series of explorations that we’re looking for and I want to look that they’ve systematically engaged with the literature and research. You know, that they’ve engaged with the materials, that they’ve, you know, made a case. [Teacher F]

In relation to the emphasis on learners’ individuality, Teacher C stressed that she judged each student’s performance against his or her own individual development rather than against each other:

I look where they’ve come from and look where they go to. And so if you’ve got a really rich background in [this content area] you’re still expected to grow in your thinking ... for instance I have one person come in who’s not a teacher and she’s doing a ... graduate diploma. And I mean her thinking from where she started and where she finished was amazing, so I judge them against their own personal growth.

### **5.4.3 Measures of achievement**

The interview question that inquired about the characteristics of a successful learner in the online units revealed the teachers’ perspectives on the measures of achievement in these units. It yielded a variety of responses, which fall into four thematic categories: abilities, attitudes, personal traits, and other attributes. Table 15 lists these categories and their example items.



Table 15. Teachers' descriptions of a successful learner in their online units

Category	Examples
Abilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The ability to connect theory to one's practice ("to interpret information and put it into context")</li> <li>• The ability to develop a sustained argument and to articulate one's opinion (e.g. "to defend one's perspective", "to validate one's knowledge")</li> <li>• The ability to critically analyse and synthesise information</li> </ul>
Attitudes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Willing and ready to learn and engage (e.g. "want to be there"; "want to take the journey"; "motivated"; "passion")</li> <li>• Willing to participate, interact and learn from one another (e.g. "happy to share how they have learnt and how that might help other people")</li> <li>• Willing to take risk (or challenges) and challenge authoritative ideas</li> <li>• Willing to discover and explore</li> <li>• Willing to be challenged</li> <li>• Willing to seek help (e.g. "honest about their confusions and uncertainties")</li> <li>• Appreciates the language of the particular study unit (e.g. "get into the spirit of what the course is about")</li> </ul>
Personal traits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Independent.</li> <li>• Self-directed or autonomous.</li> <li>• Confident (about one's own learning and ability).</li> <li>• Open-minded (about making changes in the way one learns).</li> <li>• Inquisitive or enquiring.</li> <li>• Reflective (about one's own learning).</li> </ul>
Others	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is self-disciplined, committed, effort.</li> <li>• Feels comfortable communicating in text.</li> <li>• Has organizational skills.</li> <li>• Has work experience.</li> </ul>

In terms of abilities, the items suggest a strong focus on the learner demonstrating personal understanding and interpretations of the content knowledge by reflecting on his or her own distinct practice or experience. As Teacher G stated: "We were looking for initiative, individuality. So ... coming up with your own ideas and then using literature to support their ideas rather than just following somebody's [ideas]". In other words, those who were able to "think outside the square" were more likely to excel (Teacher G). This emphasis on evaluating learners' individuality can be interpreted as assessing student *thinking* behind their knowledge construction.

As for attitudes and personal traits, according to the teachers interviewed, the items relating to these two categories developed over time and could not be easily taught. As Teacher D observed, some students were "natural" learners "from day one":

They are confident. They've had prior experience of synthesis, analysis application and so on. Number three they are not frightened of putting forward their ideas or challenging models, frameworks or theories or metaphors that we are canvassing, including mine. So they are natural. [Teacher D]

To help the students who did not come with these characteristics and predispositions, what a teacher could do, some interviewees said, was to “help them deal with their own beliefs about learning and what they’re being required to do” (Teacher B). The strategy adopted by most teachers was to encourage students to approach them for assistance and to negotiate with them about the requirements of the tasks. Two teachers also noted that students could cultivate these desirable characteristics by seeing how other people did it in the online units and recognising it was the way to success.

Of the miscellaneous items in the last category of the preferable learner attributes, ‘having work experience’ merits particular attention. Two teachers acknowledged that students who did not have any work experience or a current work context might be disadvantaged in their classes. One had found that these students struggled in his class because all the assignments were supposed to be based on their experiences (Teacher A). Another stated that not having current experience to draw on also put students in an unfavourable situation, explaining that she had to get the students “to think back to what they’ve done before, whereas other people just can think about what they’re doing day to day” (Teacher H).

The rest of the interviewees, however, did not see the emphasis on work experience in their classes as a big problem for their students. Some argued that only a very small number of students in their classes did not have any prior work experience, and that since the topics being tackled were all educational issues, students who did not have work experience could always utilise their experiences as learners. That is, they could “reflect back on the way that they were taught in maybe university courses” (Teacher E) or “engage themselves in community practices or work with other students” (Teacher F). In fact, Teacher F’s unequivocal belief in students’ engagement in communities led him to interpret ‘workplace’ in a particular way:

Everybody belongs to the community and in fact in a way, everybody is in a workplace, every student that we have is in the workplace of higher education. So I mean I have asked people to start to analyse more clearly their own experience of being a student. So for example, when I’ve got people to do projects, I’ve asked them to look at what international students do in things, you know, that are happening here. [Teacher F]

#### 5.4.4 Discussion

This section generated two themes concerning the assessment approach adopted by the teachers in conducting their online units. First, the evaluative criteria are implicit in that the teachers do not judge students' assignments on their attainment of predetermined and specified performance requirements. Second, the assessment approach focuses on helping students develop individualised knowledge, and considers it less important for students to demonstrate the content knowledge they have gained. The above results also elaborated on the previous depiction of an ideal knower in this pedagogic context by outlining the measures of achievement in the online units.

The first theme relates to implicit evaluative criteria. This theme is illustrated by the nature of the assessment methods used in the online units. The three major types of assignment – projects, authentic tasks and personal reflections – are all characterised by their open-endedness, which leads to multiple measures of student performances. In other words, a variety of potentially legitimate performances are recognised by these evaluative methods. Moreover, the prominence given to each learner reflecting on his or her own learning process highlights the central focus of the assessment on self-evaluation. As indicated by the study results, rather than relying on predetermined, specific standards, the assessment criteria for the tasks in the online units were generalised so that learners' respective contexts could be accommodated. It appears that this assessment approach evaluates what *is* there, rather than what *is not* there. As Bernstein noted, it is “*as if* the acquirer is the source of the criteria” (1977, p.119). In this form of assessment, explicit evaluative criteria are less significant in judging student performances, so the epistemic relation characterising the assessment is relatively weaker (ER-).

Secondly, the assessment approach values students developing their individualised knowledge, while downplaying the importance of them showing the content knowledge they have gained. For example, despite the mention of using the literature in assignments, the teachers viewed it as secondary to the learner's own ideas. One teacher explained that the purpose of drawing on the literature was to support ideas that demonstrated one's 'initiative' and 'individuality'. In addition, correct usages or

interpretations of the subject knowledge and the amount of knowledge accumulated are de-emphasised. This is reflected by teachers' repeated statements that there was no correct answer to the problem being explored, and that the quality of an assignment depended on the student's justification of his or her own interpretation. In short, the social aspects of the knower rather than specific procedures for ascertaining the right answers are the basis of legitimate insight (SR+).

By sorting the measures of achievement raised by the teachers into categories of abilities, attitudes, and personal traits, it became evident that the basis of success in the online units relates to learners' dispositions rather than skills or knowledge. Specifically, as displayed in Table 15, most of the characteristics of a successful learner can be categorised as either attitude or a personal trait. A closer examination of the items within the category of abilities indicates that even this category has an emphasis on the social aspects of the knower. While knowledge and skills are addressed by these items, they are referred to in the context of 'one's practice', 'one's context', 'one's opinion', 'one's perspectives' and 'one's knowledge'. That is, it is the location of the knower in time and place, his or her own subjectivity and personal attributes that are given primacy. This all suggests a relatively stronger social relation to the knower. Again, it is a particular kind of social relation – one that refers to the knower's individuality in creating knowledge and in evaluating the legitimacy of his or her own performance rather than gender, race or other social groups.

In sum, the principles of assessment outlined here indicate that, according to the teaching staff, the individual is the basis of legitimate insights in this educational practice. It is learners' demonstration of the desirable attitudes and their self-evaluation of their own learning, rather than an exhibition of their states of knowledge, that are given the priority. Put another way, the assessment methods evaluate the development of a knower rather than the knowledge gained or constructed. Therefore, in terms of assessment, the social relation to the knower's individuality in creating and evaluating his or her own knowledge is emphasised; on the other hand, the epistemic relation to subject knowledge and procedures for evaluating the learning of this knowledge is downplayed. The legitimation code of specialisation represented by this educational practice is thus a knower code (ER-, SR+). It can be said to be an

*individualised* knower code, as the boundary is around each individual knower rather than around social groups of knowers.

## **5. 5 Summary of the chapter**

This chapter reported the findings related to the second research question of the study. By presenting the findings following a parallel structure to that of Chapter 4 and analysing the findings using the same theoretical concepts, this chapter revealed the different structuring principles underpinning the two pedagogic cultures involved in the research. In marked contrast to the knowledge code characterising student participants' perceptions of their heritage educational culture, the educational environment of the online units (i.e. their host educational culture) as characterised by the teachers, is a knower code. The Australian teachers' narratives of their beliefs and practices highlight their recognition of each learner as a legitimate knower who already possesses knowledge based on his or her lived experience. The teaching approaches demonstrated an invisible pedagogy, and the assessment methods were characterised by implicit evaluative criteria, multiple legitimate performances and the learner's self-evaluation. On the other hand, according to student participants, what was valued in their prior educational experiences in China, such as content knowledge, explicit procedures for teaching and learning, and criteria to separate learner performances, are de-emphasised by the teaching practices in the online units. There is thus a potential for Chinese international students entering this form of online learning context to experience dissonance between these contrasting pedagogic practices. The next chapter examines their experiences.

## **Chapter 6**

### **Sojourners' experiences in the host culture: Student experiences of online learning**

#### **6. 1 Introduction**

Chapters 4 and 5 have characterised the pedagogic practices in the Chinese student sojourners' heritage and host educational cultures, as characterised by the students and the teaching staff at the university respectively. The findings presented have highlighted a potential for dissonance in the students' cross-cultural educational experiences. The purpose of this chapter is to analyse the data collected from the multi-session interviews with the seven case study students, which informed the research question: how do the student sojourners experience the teaching practices in the online environment at the university? To help contextualise students' perceptions of, and reactions to the learning environment, the organisation of the chapter continues the structure used in the two preceding chapters: curriculum, pedagogy and assessment.

#### **6. 2 Curriculum**

##### **6.2.1 Relation to everyday knowledge**

As noted in Chapter 5, knowledge in the online learning environment at the university was weakly classified, in that the boundaries between subject and everyday knowledge were blurred. The student interviews yielded results indicating that the students experienced this proclaimed weaker classification either as not beneficial to their learning or as placing them at a disadvantage. For example, all the teacher participants highlighted connections between the students' real-life contexts and what they were expected to learn in the online units (e.g. Sections 5.2.1, 5.4.1). Some students, however, did not perceive this pedagogical emphasis to be essential in their success in the particular online units or consider it important for their learning in general. Those who did, unfortunately, found themselves in a difficult situation because they did not possess sufficient work experience or current work contexts.

Diana and Megan, for instance, belonged to the first category of students. Diana did not think she needed to relate the assignments to her work experiences. Comparing all her assignments to “literature reviews”, she said they were “all about your understanding of abstract knowledge. They don’t involve your practical ability in doing things in the larger society” (Interview 3). It was her perception that to do well in the online unit, what she had to do was to “look at the topics from a more academic point of view”, which she described as simply an activity of “playing with words” (Interview 3). With this belief in mind, she noted that the connections she made in her assignments were among the different theoretical concepts she was studying rather than between those concepts and her real-life experiences.

Moreover, Diana insisted that one major purpose that drove most Chinese students, including her, to come to Australia to study was to learn about the Australian context. She explained, “Say, if I were an elementary school teacher, I’d like to know how elementary schools are run here. This way, I can compare” (Interview 3). Using the Chinese context in her assignment defeated this purpose. More importantly, in her opinion, it was not necessary for students to learn how to apply theories by applying them to a particular context in the assignments. She believed that the ability to transfer the knowledge one has learned to one’s future context “depends on one’s understanding of the knowledge, one’s ability to operate the knowledge ... in the end, what you learned becomes abstract principles ... your future context might be different anyway” (Interview 3). Put another way, she thought as long as she acquired a deep understanding of the knowledge she was learning, she would be capable of using it in the Chinese context when she went back to China.

Like Diana, Megan did not view her past work experiences as paramount in her current learning. She thought learning was to “explore an unknown world” and hence saw little value in bringing in ‘old’ experiences (Interview 3). Megan also commented that although she could sense some teachers’ intent to link the assessment tasks to real-life situations by making the tasks “authentic”, she found these authentic contexts “just the stuff on the surface”, implying that they had no substantial impact on her learning:

I still treated it as an assignment, rather than a real-life task. So although the teacher had made great effort to create such a context, when I was doing my assignment, it

was irrelevant. Although she put me in this context, it didn't have any elevating effect on me when I was doing my assignment. [Megan, Interview 3]

For those who recognised that making connections between the content knowledge and real-life contexts was an important assessment criterion in their online units, some reported major difficulties in meeting it. First, they felt their real-life experiences were insufficient compared with those of their classmates. To illustrate, interviews with Vivian, who only had one year of teaching experience, were replete with her comments on how she worried that the connections she made were far-fetched:

The other students might have used their backgrounds and done a better job, but none of my assignments was based on my background. To meet the requirement, I had no choice but to try to force some connection. But none of my essays was inspired by my background. My background didn't help me with my assignments. It took a lot of effort to be able to think of one or two examples that were useful for my assignments. [Vivian, Interview 6]

When she could not think of any example, Vivian said, she coped by using one sentence in her assignment to note whether the theoretical concepts she was discussing in the assignment could be applied to the Chinese context (Interview 6). It seemed that for her, "making connections" simply meant drawing examples from her own context to support the theories, a view shared by most students in the study.

Secondly, the students complained that there were not enough reading materials about the Chinese context that they could draw on to help them make the links. This indicates that they felt it was necessary to provide evidence to support the connections they made. As Chris explained:

First of all, there is not much relevant information [about the Chinese context]. Then, if you say this can apply to your situation, you need at least a couple of references to support it, which is difficult to find. I only found one. This is the only reference I can draw on, so I can only try to force a connection between these two things. [Chris, Interview 4]

This feeling of having to force connections between the content knowledge and their experiences caused Jennifer to say that "even if the teacher might think my writing is good and give me a good mark, I still feel it's not a good mark in its own right" (Interview 5).

Summing up, these students treated assignments as a form of argumentative writing practice without the intention to situate their learning in their real-life contexts or



practices, a learning approach that would likely disappoint most teachers of online units in the faculty.

The students also expressed the concern that they were further disadvantaged because of their lack of a current work context, since some assignments required them to explore issues at their present workplaces. Initially, Chris did not think this would be a problem for him, claiming that he could “imagine” an environment that he would be working in the future (Interview 3). This confidence had dwindled by the time of a later interview, by which time he had realised the arguments he had formed based on an imaginary work context might not be as convincing as those made by his classmates according to their real contexts (Interview 5). Vivian, on the other hand, anticipated difficulties in this respect. She said although her teachers reminded those who were not currently working to use a context they were familiar with, she did not think it would work. This was because, she thought, unless one had personally experienced something, he or she would not be able to comprehend the issues related to it (Interview 3).

It is worth noting here that the strong focus on one’s work-related knowledge in all of Vivian’s online units had led Vivian to believe that there was nothing she could do to remedy her inferior situation no matter how hard she tried. She was convinced that her inability to fully comprehend the knowledge she was learning was mainly due to her lack of work experience in the professional field. This belief is eloquently illustrated by the following quote, in which Vivian was referring to an online unit that dealt with changes in this professional field:

I feel that this might have happened in the past 20 years. ... I think it might have started since the 80s. ... How old was I at that time, right? But a 40-something person who has been working in the educational field for 20 years will know clearly what education was like when he or she first started her work, and what it is like 20 years later. What policies have changed, how differently teachers teach now, how different students’ thinking and their environment have changed. I don’t know any of these. So I feel I can’t understand what this person can understand. [Vivian, Interview 5]

One overwhelming theme related to the emphasis on the real-life context was that it resulted in many students’ reluctance to interact with their classmates. Some noted that differences in the students’ work contexts rendered interaction difficult or unnecessary:

I like to be able to discuss my study with them, but the problem is, our studies are individual studies and everybody is studying different things relevant to their background. So we can't discuss it. I can discuss some computer issues with one classmate, but with others, there's nothing we can discuss. This is the limitation of the condition, and you can't do anything about it. [Fiona, Interview 1]

Chris also said he rarely read his classmates' postings for the simple reason that "they might be talking about their experiences teaching in primary schools or kindergartens, which is ... irrelevant to the field of my work" (Interview 4). He did not respond to any of the postings. Whilst Vivian agreed with Fiona and Chris on this issue, she was more concerned about not being able to relate to what her classmates said, which reduced her desire to communicate with them. More importantly, since she was unable to base her opinions on rich experiences, she refrained from sharing them with her classmates for fear that she might be laughed at:

I'm worried that people might think my opinions are ... childish because I feel I have less background knowledge than they do. About the same issue, I can probably only see the surface, while they are all thinking beyond the surface. [Vivian, Interview 6]

## **6.2.2 Relation to other forms of educational knowledge**

The students' comments relating to the weaker boundaries between subject knowledge and other kinds of educational knowledge revealed that they did not benefit from this teaching practice. Three of the students were taking an online unit in a different specialisation to their own when this study was being conducted. All of them said they appreciated the freedom their teachers gave them to work on issues related to their own specialisations. However, none of them made any mention of feelings of "empowerment", one purpose of this teaching strategy as suggested by the teachers in this study (see Chapter 5, Section 5.2.1). The benefit of this flexibility in choosing the content for their assignments, according to all three students, was that they were able to use the materials they were familiar with, which saved them a lot of time in completing the assignments. In fact, two of them felt "guilty" (Jennifer, Interview 5) or "like an opportunist" (Vivian, Interview 4) for not exploring the new subject content:

I'm feeling that since I chose all my topics relating to [my specialisation], and all I read was about [my specialisation], I was not learning new things in [this new area]. This might be one of the reasons that I don't think I've learned a lot in this online unit. ... Ideally, I'd like to work on something new in this online unit, but in reality, I

was too busy to work on a totally new topic. That was the best I could do at that moment. [Jennifer, Interview 5]

### **6.2.3 Types of knowledge gained**

The interview data consistently showed that the majority of the students felt they learned relatively little in their online units. They also attributed what they learned exclusively to their own reading, not to the teaching or the learning environment. Megan's summary of her online learning experience was representative of the students in this study: "This type of learning is self-study, study completely on your own ... you read the readings provided for you. Then you think on your own, and then write essays" (Interview 2). This section examines the types of knowledge the students claimed were made available to them, namely: unauthorised, limited, theoretical, and in some cases, dated knowledge.

#### ***6.2.3.1 Unauthorised and unpedagogised knowledge***

Without exception, the students viewed a charismatic teacher as one who possessed expert knowledge and knew how to deliver it to his or her students. By this definition, it was agreed among them that the teachers in their online units lacked charisma. Megan, for example, said she did not "see the teacher's knowledge" (Interview 3), and Diana felt unable to comment on the expertise of her teachers because "you can't tell ... All you get is the things on the Website" (Interview 3). By "the things on the Website", she meant the suggested readings and forum discussions. Accordingly, the students identified two main learning activities in their online units: reading on one's own and making postings on the forums. Another potential avenue to gain knowledge, though not available in all the online units discussed, was synchronous communication. As will be illustrated below, most students reached the conclusion that none of these activities provided them with 'authorised' knowledge, that is, knowledge from an authority.

##### **6.2.3.1.1 Knowledge gained by solitary reading**

One major drawback to reading on one's own was, as repeatedly pointed out, the concerns of students that they did not fully understand the abstract concepts contained

in the readings. They stated that during face-to-face lectures, the teacher usually elaborated on these concepts with examples to help students understand them, whereas when reading alone, they had to rely entirely on their own interpretations. Another disadvantage was that the students felt they were denied the teacher's assistance in finding out what issues were more important than others, which prevented them from learning effectively. In their opinion, it was the teacher's responsibility to highlight "the important points" for them (Fiona, Interview 1), and they all found this element of teaching missing in their online units.

Although all of them acknowledged their teachers' emphasis that there was no wrong or right answer to the issues being studied, many expressed strong feelings of discomfort from being uncertain whether their understanding of an issue was "in the right direction". Vivian, for example, appeared to be anxious about not having the "authority" to the knowledge she had learned (Interview 6):

**Vivian:** I feel that even though I've finished two semesters, in my mind, there are still so many things that I'm not sure about. From my understanding, they may mean this. Much of the knowledge I've gained stopped at this level. It's not like you ask me something, I can tell you exactly what it is. If you ask me something now, I can only tell you what it is according to ... my understanding. This is the best I can do, and I don't think this means I've learned well.

**Interviewer:** Is this feeling of not being sure about things stronger or weaker in this semester with online learning?

**Vivian:** Stronger. Most of the things I've learned is based on my own comprehension and understanding. I don't know if my direction is correct. [Vivian, Interview 6]

As is clearly demonstrated in the above dialogue, Vivian's feelings of uncertainty increased with online learning. She went on to explain that it was because in face-to-face classes she could assure herself that she had learned the knowledge contained in the lecture as long as she understood the teacher in class. In addition, she would also have the opportunity to find out whether her interpretations of the concepts she was learning were correct or not by observing the teacher's facial expressions when she talked. Being deprived of this input in her online units made Vivian believe she did not "own" the knowledge she was learning, a feeling that rarely occurred to her in her prior learning experiences in China:

In China, the teacher taught me something in class, and I learned it. I used the knowledge I had obtained to take the test they gave me afterwards. Now, the teacher has given me things, but I don't feel these things have become mine. I still feel it's the teacher's knowledge because I don't understand it completely. [Vivian, Interview 4]

By contrast, Jennifer remained positive about learning in this way for the first half of the semester. She deemed the online unit to be a good opportunity for her to learn to be independent of the teacher, and was confident of her ability to learn the subject content through channels other than face-to-face classes. Nevertheless, in reflecting on her experience at the end of the semester, her attitude had shifted dramatically. She came to see the process of reading on her own, one devoid of the exchanging of ideas with the teacher, as “passive” learning:

Online teachers ... don't play the role of disseminating knowledge. No disrespect to the teachers, ... but there is a great difference in me reading the text [online] and them saying it to me. When I read it, it's completely my learning, my understanding. There's no exchanging of ideas. ... To put it negatively, it's like cramming. I'm expected to read it because I know it's important. I need it for writing my essays. I'll definitely receive it “passively”. In itself, this is very ‘passive’. In face-to-face study units, teachers lecture from their perspectives. They organise what they want to say based on their knowledge, and then disseminate it. This contains their beliefs, which is very important because this is what we don't know. Why do we come here to study? We could have bought books and read them ourselves [in China]. [Jennifer, Interview 5]

This was not an isolated comment; other students shared similar concerns. For instance, Diana considered not being able to hear her teachers' opinions or interpretations of the issues she was studying to be a great loss in her experiences with the online units (Interview 3). Megan expressed her regret that for this reason, what she learned from most of her online units was only a “shallow overview” of the subject matter (Interview 2). While this issue troubled most of the students, it exasperated some more than others. In the worst cases, the students said they constantly felt “isolated”, “upset”, “anxious”, “frustrated” or “depressed” from having to read on their own, alone, all the time (Megan, Vivian, Diana, all interviews). In the following quote, Megan described how she felt about her study and how she tried to fix the situation, but in vain:

I first felt really depressed about my study in the online units about a month after I started. I felt that I couldn't take it any more. So I wrote a letter to [the person in charge of this matter in the faculty]. I told her that I couldn't adapt to this type of learning. ... I was reading all the time, from morning till night, but I still felt that I didn't have enough time. ... I felt sad. There was so much study to do, and no classes to interact with people. What could I do? I was very anxious. At the time, I remember I kept saying to people I was frustrated.

However, a different view was expressed by two participants. Being critical of Chinese students' over-reliance on the teacher's knowledge, Chris argued that reading on one's own was by no means passive learning. Instead, he described his relationship with the readings as "interactive":

When I read something that I don't think is right, I'll write this in the margin. I'll write it's not right because I've read something that's totally opposite. Or if I find something in my reading that is very true and that I might be able to use in my 'working context' in the future, I'll consider how I'll use it. I'll think about the good and bad things about the reading. But I find most of the Chinese students I know don't do this. [Chris, Interview 6]

Moreover, he asserted that one could obtain a variety of perspectives by reading different authors, accusing those who claimed this could not be done of not understanding the content of the readings. As he claimed, "perspectives ... can be manifested in speaking or writing. It's not limited to speaking," and that "you don't see that only because you don't understand it" (Chris, Interview 6).

The other student who spoke favourably of learning by reading on her own was Fiona. To her, quality learning materials were more beneficial to her learning than anything else, and she praised her teachers for creating and selecting appropriate materials for the students:

They write and choose the learning materials. They've done a good job. They choose the things that suit you. They're better than the lecturers. The lecturers lecture and leave, that's all. The lecturers might be in a bad mood, but the materials won't be. The materials are permanent, and I think this is very good. I have to admit that both my teachers put a lot of effort to creating the learning materials. There is a lot of "input." A lot. [Fiona, Interview]

In the following quote, she continued to stress that there was no difference between the written and spoken texts in terms of helping her to learn:

All the learning materials are online. It's in an electronic form, but the content is the same as what you learn in a face-to-face classroom. The only difference is that one stimulates you with text and the other with voice. I think the effect is the same. I can't convince other people of this, but I like it very much. I like the materials lying there, not moving, so I can use them when I need to. [Fiona, Interview 1]

In spite of their positive perspectives on this matter, neither Chris nor Fiona thought he or she could do without face-to-face lectures. Chris agreed with the other students' opinion that face-to-face lectures helped him to understand the content better, and Fiona emphasised her need to 'pick up' important issues through lectures.

#### 6.2.3.1.2 Knowledge gained through asynchronous communication

All of the online units discussed by the students made use of forums to conduct discussion activities. Some students reported that their teachers raised questions or issues for them to respond to, and others said they were expected to take the initiative to bring up questions derived from their studies to discuss with their peers. To all students, this was not ‘teaching’ by their definition:

I feel that teachers do not teach in online classes. They raise a lot of questions for us to discuss. What do they teach us? They teach us nothing. They ask us to think, but what if I can’t think of anything? I can sit there thinking all day, not sleeping at all, but I still can’t think of anything. So I don’t think they are teaching me. [Vivian, Interview 3]

Vivian insisted that she was unable to obtain “substantial” knowledge this way (Interview 2). Echoing Vivian, Megan stated that if the teacher did not offer expert opinions of the issues at the end of a discussion, the discussion would be pointless:

There were many questions [from students], but the teacher didn’t give definite answers in the end, so this type of discussions appeared to be a little chaotic and unfocused. Many students raised questions, but the teacher wasn’t able to provide authoritative explanations. [Megan, Interview 3]

As discussed in Chapter 5, the teacher participants in this study expressed the belief that students would co-construct knowledge with their peers through interactions on forums. Analysis of the student interviews did not lend any support to this belief. One potential reason is that most students doubted the authority of the information their classmates shared online. In the interviews students believed their teachers did not participate fully in the discussions. Without the teachers’ involvement, the students said, the content of student postings could not be verified, and so this content was not ‘knowledge’. To illustrate, Vivian dismissed the discussions as “like you conduct a survey and everyone tells you their opinion” (Interview 1), and she said she did not know “whom to listen to” (Interview 2). This view is best represented in the following quote:

Even if I got a reply from my classmate, it’s unlikely that the teacher would post a message afterwards to confirm whether what my classmate said was correct or not. So in this situation ... I still don’t know whether the answer is correct. I can only rely on my judgment to see if the reply makes sense, or to compare all the replies I get, which is still not definite. [Vivian, Interview 2]

The insistence on the teacher's participation in the discussions was an enduring theme throughout the interviews. Chris, even though he stressed he did not believe the teacher was always right, supported the view that the teacher was the only qualified person to validate whether the content of the student postings was correct:

If the messages and feedback are only posted by students, they will feel unsure about whether what they say in their messages is good or bad, and whether the feedback provided by their classmates is correct or not. After all, they are all students. If the teacher gives comments, the students will feel more secure. If the teacher says it's wrong, then it might be wrong, and vice versa. Even if what the teacher says may not always be true, there is a 60-70% chance that it is true. [Chris, Interview 2]

This unanimous view was further demonstrated in the students' behaviours in selecting messages to read. One thing all the student participants had in common was that they all paid close attention to the postings that attracted their teachers' comments, especially those receiving positive feedback. They said this helped them to decide what was worth learning in the postings. For example, Vivian observed that her teachers tended to reply to the messages discussing workplace matters, so she decided this was what her teachers considered valuable knowledge (Interview 4). In another example, one of the learning tasks in Jennifer's online unit required students to post their work on the forum and then provide feedback for two classmates' work. Prior to posting her own work, Jennifer said she did not read any of her classmates' work for reference because she thought it was not necessarily exemplary work (Interview 3). This was because, she said, unless a teacher had verified a certain posting was excellent work, it might be a waste of time reading it.

Of note is that the comments above were mostly made by the students who were involved in the learning activities that required compulsory online contributions. According to the students studying in the online units in which participation was voluntary, their forums were generally inactive. They said the postings were predominantly about technical problems regarding the assignments. In these voluntary situations then, it could be said that co-construction of knowledge among the students was even less likely to occur.

#### 6.2.3.1.3 Knowledge gained through synchronous communication



Synchronous communication took place in online chats and face-to-face workshops. Despite their teachers' physical presence in these activities, the students felt that they did not gain much from these sessions because the discussions were "unstructured" and "unfocused". As Megan recollected, "they were very casual. There were no clear topics that I could learn about. ... We thought we didn't learn much because the teacher did not exercise enough control of the classes (Interview 2). Many found that the communication easily "strayed far from the topic". As an illustration, Diana recounted an incident in which one of her classmates dominated the whole face-to-face meeting talking about her own experience that was totally irrelevant to the topic:

Each of our classes was supposed to be about one assignment. But when I went to the first one, I found it wasn't about the assignment. There was one student in my class who is a [...] teacher, And you know, teachers are all very eloquent, so this classmate went on and on about the situations in [her organization], totally unrelated to the topic. That was why I didn't go to many classes afterwards. [Diana, Interview 1]

In a later interview, Diana added that even though she was aware of the latest educational theories that encouraged teachers to relinquish control to students, she did not think this meant teachers should "totally let go" (Interview 3). These remarks indicate that the students in this study favoured a more structured learning environment where knowledge was presented to them systematically. However, what was more relevant to the theme being discussed here is that most students tended to see the teacher as the only source of knowledge whether it was in an online or face-to-face context. As Fiona summarised:

In class, people sit together and talk about their ideas, and I listen to them, but I only take what they say for my reference. But I listen to the teacher very carefully and take it seriously. I think the teacher's suggestions are most important, whether it's online or in class. I'm not affected by what the classmates say. [Fiona, Interview]

### **6.2.3.2 *Partial understanding of content knowledge***

Another theme running through the data was that the students thought the assignment-based learning approach supported by their online units prevented them from obtaining a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter. That is, almost all participants felt that what they learned was limited to the knowledge about the specific topics they chose for their assignments. For instance, upon reflection, Jennifer and Megan said they did nothing but write three assignments in each of their online units (Jennifer, Interview 5; Megan, Interview 2), and Rita struggled to recall what her

online units were about (Interview 1). Although Vivian explained that she put a lot of effort into the assignments and was satisfied with the marks she got, she did not think she had learned everything she was supposed to learn because:

There are only three essays to write in each online unit, and sometimes I don't need to use the articles I can't understand in my assignments. So in the assignments, I explored the issue in depth, and the teacher recognised this, but in other aspects, I still knew nothing at all. [Vivian, Interview 3]

I have so many questions about other topics that haven't been answered. I didn't have the chance or the time to find the answers. [Vivian, Interview 6]

As is shown in the two quotations above, Vivian felt she needed to understand all the learning materials provided by the teacher before she could claim she had learned the essential knowledge in a particular study unit. On the other hand, several students admitted to not reading the articles suggested by their teachers thoroughly because they were often working on topics in a different area and thus did not find the readings useful. However, in evaluating their learning outcomes, like Vivian, they realised they did not know much about the subject matter because they could not find the time to explore the issues contained in the readings in depth.

Some of the participants did see the value of the assignment-based approach. Chris, for instance, expressed the belief that all the assignment topics put together were what he needed to learn about in a study unit:

As long as the explanations of the assignments are complete in the unit outline, I can predict what I will be learning and working on. I think all the assignments combined should cover what the teacher wants students to learn. So I know the content of a class by checking its assignments. [Chris, Interview 2]

He also stressed that he learned through preparing to write his assignments, when he searched and read extensively about the topic (Interview 6). Chris also had a predilection for working on materials chosen by himself, which seemed to make assignment-based learning particularly suitable for him. Unlike most students in the study, Chris attached very little importance to the readings suggested by teachers. In fact, he stated that he usually purposely disregarded these readings for two reasons. The first was that going through these readings to select the useful ones for his topics took more time than looking for articles himself (Chris, Interview 6). Secondly, and apparently more importantly, not using the suggested readings was his main strategy to earn a good mark:

Ten students are working on the same topic, online, and if all of them just use the readings suggested by the teacher, they'll end up writing exactly the same thing. All the references they use will be the same, and their ideas are probably the same too. There'll be no difference in what they write. ... But if there is one person who goes beyond what the teacher gives him and finds something else, then his perspective will be different from others'. He will come up with something new. [Chris, Interview 6]

Searching for reading materials relevant to one's own interest was one thing that was agreeable to the teaching philosophy of the teachers in this study, in that it helped students to explore what was most relevant to their respective backgrounds (see Chapter 5). Nevertheless, as is revealed in the above quote, Chris' purpose for doing so was mainly to generate different ideas to his classmates' so that he could impress his teacher. Furthermore, the assignment-based design seemed to have allowed him to ignore the readings completely. Lastly, Chris admitted that he did not learn much about the subject matter of his online unit, but noted he had saved all the readings and might study them in the future (Interview 4).

#### **6.2.4 Discussion**

Two overarching themes emerged in this section. First, the students struggled to deal with the weaker classification of subject content in their online units. Second, they often did not consider what they were learning in this environment to be legitimate educational knowledge. Both themes are associated with the students' feelings of anxiety, frustration and guilt.

The first theme is illustrated by the students' experiences with the curricular emphasis on merging subject knowledge with other forms of knowledge. With regard to drawing on knowledge gained beyond educational contexts, the students encountered two principal problems: they either did not see the value of this knowledge or they felt incapable of using this knowledge. The first was reflected by those who insisted that the purpose of education is to gain new, subject knowledge and so working on prior, 'old', knowledge is not a good use of time during their current learning. In response, these students tended to ignore this curricular focus. They wrote their assignments by synthesising, and perhaps critiquing the literature but they did not bring in their experiences from beyond educational contexts. In theoretical terms, these students were unable to 'recognise' (Bernstein, 1990) this particular 'rule of the game'

(Bourdieu, 1990), so they responded to an environment where knowledge was weakly classified by using the approach they were familiar with, namely, stronger classification of knowledge. They maintained the strength of boundaries between forms of education by continuing to view non-educational knowledge as of little value in their studies. So, the first theme is that, in terms of the epistemic relation characterising the curriculum (knowledge), these students did not recognise the weaker classification of the epistemic relation they encountered in the learning environment as legitimate and so continued to maintain a stronger classification of the epistemic relation.

Continuing the first theme, the other problem encountered by the students relates to the social relation characterising the curriculum, or how they view themselves as legitimate knowers. This response was made by those who did recognise the learning environment as weakly classified in terms of knowledge but felt unable to respond appropriately. Such students reported they had limited capability to merge everyday and educational knowledge. This they accounted for in two main ways: they did not view their own prior experiences and knowledge as legitimate and they did not have sufficient resources to help them make links between what knowledge they did have and educational knowledge. The perceived invalidity of their previous experiences and knowledge is demonstrated by their self-effacing remarks about this issue. For example, some noted that their experiences were inadequate compared with those of their peers or were irrelevant to the subject content. In other words, the students downplayed knowledge they possessed by virtue of their own personal experiences, i.e. knowledge based on characteristics to do with themselves or the social relation. They recognised the stronger social relation characterising the learning context – its valorisation of the knowledge of particular actors by virtue of who they are – but felt they could not realise the right performance because they perceived the ideal knower as someone else, not them. According to one participant, a legitimate knower in her units was someone older, with more experience and was currently working. In short, they recognised the stronger social relation characterising the learning context but projected this onto a different knower; they viewed themselves as exhibiting a weaker social relation (SR-).

Students' statements that they were short of resources for manufacturing connections between the subject content and their experiences appear to be a misinterpretation of the intention of this curricular design. In requiring students to make such connections, the teachers in this study expected students to challenge existing theories and create their own knowledge that applies to their professional contexts. They expected students to use knowledge based on personal experience (SR+) to critique the validity of knowledge based not on their personal experiences (SR-) but rather specialised procedures and theories (ER+). Nevertheless, the students' comments revealed they considered making associations between content knowledge and one's context to mean drawing separate examples from their experiences as evidence to support the content knowledge (e.g. using examples to show the educational theories they were studying worked or would work in China). They then reported difficulties in working out the procedures for doing so. In other words, such students viewed the curriculum of the learning context through the lens of their knowledge code dispositions, focusing on procedures and content knowledge and viewing their personal experiences as potential exemplars of less personal knowledge. So, these students again did not recognise and/or realise the context's knower code.

This experience of a lack of clear procedures and techniques embodied a weaker epistemic relation (ER-). In short, whether it is not recognising their own experiences as valid knowledge or misunderstanding the teaching staff's intention (in other words, whether the students had the 'recognition rules'), the students apparently did not possess the 'realisation rules' that would enable them to enact a legitimate performance of weakening classification of curricular knowledge.

The second theme is that the students gave an unfavourable evaluation of the content they were learning in the online units. In brief, they thought what they obtained through solitary reading and learner-controlled discussions was not legitimate knowledge. According to them, it lacked authority and transferability because the teacher exerted little control over the content. This led to the students' feelings that they lacked a means or basis for selecting, recontextualising and evaluating knowledge. That is, they felt they were not being taught a means of judging the legitimacy of different knowledge claims. The examples in which the students said they only read peer postings that attracted the teacher's feedback are strong

indications that they were searching for criteria to help them determine what was legitimate knowledge in this learning context. It appeared that these criteria were implicit to them. In these terms, the students experienced weak boundaries around and control over knowledge, the weaker epistemic relation (ER-) characterising the curriculum of the learning context, but viewed it negatively, as a lack of legitimacy.

The students dismissed learner-controlled discussions as futile for gaining valid knowledge for another important reason: they found the content of these discussions was dominated by opinions based on the personal situations and experiences of their peers, and the students devalued these opinions because they could not see the relevance of their peers' situations to their own. In addition, the students did not mention undertaking any learning activities where they received explicit instructions on how to make association between their experiences and others' experiences. Clearly, the students experienced not being taught explicitly *how* to learn in this environment, which represents a weaker epistemic relation (ER-) to procedural knowledge.

Meanwhile, the second theme shows that the students not only did not see themselves as legitimate knowers, but by undervaluing their fellow learners' opinions they also indicated that, overall, they did not think their peers were legitimate knowers, either. At the heart of this perception is the belief that knowledge claims based on the social aspects of the knower (such as personal experience, personal context, and personal understanding or interpretation of the content knowledge) lack legitimacy. This downplaying of the social aspects of the knower points to an educational experience that embodies a relatively weak social relation (SR-).

Thus far, it can be seen that the students' problems in seeing the value of and adapting to this form of curriculum are connected with their perception that they did not see what they already knew by virtue of their experiences as legitimate educational knowledge (that is, they did not see themselves as already legitimate knowers) and the feeling that the learning context did not offer this knowledge to them. Their experiences of the curriculum was thus of both a relatively weak epistemic relation and a relatively weak social relation, that is, an experience specialised by a relativist code (ER-, SR-). The effects of this experience included the feelings that: they were

inferior to their classmates who had more work experience; their interpretations of the content knowledge were inferior; they were passive cramming in knowledge that was not fully understood; and that they had not gained sufficient new knowledge that could make their sojourn worthwhile. In short, it was a learning experience in which the students felt they experienced neither gaining knowledge nor being valorised as knowers.

## 6. 3 Pedagogy

### 6.3.1 The sequencing of learning

All the students in this study experienced weak sequencing and pacing rules in the teaching practices in their online units. In terms of the sequencing of learning, the students typically reported that their study was centred around completing three (or four) assignments. As Megan summarised:

In my view, online learning just means that the assignments were posted there, and a timetable was given to us. Following the timetable, I had to complete certain readings, but as for which level I should reach after the readings, I didn't know. I only knew that I should try to meet the requirements of the assignments to complete them.  
[Megan, Interview 2]

The timetable referred to in the above quote was, in most cases, the due dates of the assignments. The interviews also revealed that there were few compulsory activities between the assignments, and so as long as the students were able to meet these deadlines, they were given complete freedom in how they approached the tasks.

In terms of the content of the assignments, several students noted that there was little variability in the type and the difficulty level of the tasks. As Diana recollected in frustration, the learning process was “monotonous” and repetitious: “After you finish the first assignment, you might feel you’ve learned some things. But after you do more, you find you’re doing the same thing over and over again” (Interview 3). Moreover, she did not find any of the tasks more challenging than the others:

**Interviewer:** Which assignment was most difficult for you?

**Diana:** I feel all the assignments were all the same.

**Interviewer:** Say, if you did not understand the issues in one assignment, would it affect your performance in the next assignment?

**Diana:** No. Each assignment dealt with a different issue in the field.

**Interview:** Do you mean they were all separate issues?

**Diana:** I mean what you did in one assignment did not interfere with what you did in another. [Diana, Interview 3]

Also revealed in the dialogue above was that it seemed the assignments in Diana's online units followed a parallel structure, with generally weak connections between them. Vivian made similar remarks on the assignments in her classes. She said most of the assignments were like "a patch here and a patch there" (Interview 6). One exception was an assignment that required students to synthesise the arguments in the literature that they had studied over the semester and apply them to a case study. Vivian commented that this design was inspiring in that it encouraged her to draw on the knowledge she had accumulated over the semester (Interview 6).

While the other students did not directly address this issue, their opinions of their teachers' feedback of their assignments suggested that they supported this view. Specifically, many of the students said that the feedback about the content of their assignments would not help them with the subsequent assignments because the topics would be totally different. This, once again, indicates each assessment task is strongly bounded, with a lack of connectedness with other tasks.

The quote from Megan at the beginning of this section also illustrates another concern of the students. That is, they felt they were left uninformed about the level of ability they ought to achieve or the amount of knowledge they should learn at each step of the way (Diana, Interview 3; Megan, Interview 2):

The teachers did not tell us ... at certain points, you should have a general idea of what, or you should be able to understand what. They did not give us some ... how do I put this ... a kind of feedback on which level of knowledge we are supposed to have reached. [Megan, Interview 2]

Megan also raised the issue of the importance of the "procedure" a teacher takes to present knowledge to his or her students. In explaining why she did not think authentic learning works, she said:

A teacher should also have their way of presenting the knowledge, like the procedure ... this is how we tell a teacher who's cramming and forcing knowledge on students, from one who's guiding students, things like this. If a teacher uses good strategies, they will make the class more interesting. What the teacher teaches will attract our attention more. [Megan, Interview 3]



As shown in this statement, Megan thought that a good teaching strategy is manifested in its procedure, and she felt this was missing in the authentic learning she had experienced. Echoing Jennifer, she compared this type of teaching to “cramming” knowledge into students.

None of the students, except for Chris, made mention of the existence of a teaching procedure in his or her online unit. In Chris’ online unit, each assignment consisted of, or was built on, a number of smaller, non-assessable activities. Although Chris’ teacher did not implement a deadline for each activity, she offered instructions about the order in which students should complete these activities, as shown in the following quote that Chris read from the instructional materials posted online by his teacher:

In (Module one) part one “overview”, it first covers the teacher’s opinion of the topic, which is the introduction of the first class. Then, she said “now turn to ... in your subject reader,” asking students to read that article. It feels like she is speaking to us. After that, she said, “During the reading of this article you will be asked to stop and respond to Reflection Tasks. Please post your responses in the Forum below.”... And after this are some activities ... “you are asked to carry out the activities and then synthesise your findings into a brief summary which you post for all to read.” She makes it very clear what you have to include by raising a number of questions ... it helps you to know what issues to think about and to pay attention to. [Chris, Interview 2]

Initially, Chris evaluated this teaching technique positively, arguing that it reminded him of “the procedure” frequently adopted by teachers in a face-to-face learning environment (Interview 2):

This online unit makes me feel it’s similar to a face-to-face class. In face-to-face classes, teachers do the same thing. Before you read, the teachers use the Power Point presentation to introduce a few issues that you should think about while doing the reading. And after the readings, there will be a discussion. Here it is the same. Although there is no discussion after reading, everybody has to post something online. It’s a sort of discussion. [Chris, Interview 2]

As the semester proceeded, however, he found these small activities ended up being redundant. For example, one assignment asked students to make ten postings; each of the first nine was a reflection on a different article, and the last one a synthesis of all ten. The following description of this assignment indicates the reason why Chris found the small activities unnecessary was that they were weakly sequenced:

I looked at all the 10 activities. Each of them is the same. You read one article and

write your reflection. You do this nine times. And the last one asks you to write about your reflections on all these 9 activities. ... I feel that the last activity sums up the other 9 activities. I think that's a repetition. I feel you can just go straight to the last one. It makes no difference whether you do the other 9 or not. [Chris, Interview 3]

According to Chris, the other assignments in this online unit shared a similar design, though the small, build-up learning activities took different forms. Given his opinion of these activities, he attempted to submit two of his assignments without doing the activities. He said each time his teacher responded that he should have completed these activities, as is illustrated in his account of the teacher's feedback below:

The teacher said, "The main problem is you wrote this before completing [the learning activities]. .... I think you would have had better insights into the process and in particular the different decisions you made regarding ... had you done this." I didn't do the learning activities. ... They are all non-assessable activities. I read all the stuff ... but I didn't have time to do the activities. In my view, they were all similar. [Chris, Interview 5]

### **6.3.2 The pacing of learning**

As discussed above, the only timetable guiding the students' study in their online units was the due dates of the assignments. Accordingly, many students felt that their learning was divided into three (or four) segments, separated by the deadlines. Within each segment, students generally learned at their own pace. Two participants, Chris and Fiona, said they benefited substantially from this type of learning:

The readings are always there for you to read. I might read for 5 minutes and then think about it for half an hour. I can go back to the reading half an hour later if I want to. But listening to a lecture is different. I can't stop to think for half an hour after the teacher says something. I'll miss what they say in the meantime. [Chris, Interview 6]

On the whole, however, most students took the view that this weak pacing of learning in the online environment was ineffective and it was, in fact, experienced as a lack of structure in the teaching. Three major problems were identified.

Firstly, some said weak pacing tended to concentrate their learning at three (or four) points in time. They candidly admitted that they usually did nothing about an assignment until one or two weeks prior to the due date, when they commenced intensive reading about the topic:

When one assignment was due soon, I'd leave the other study units behind and do this one first. And after finishing the assignment, I rushed to do the readings I was

supposed to read in, say, three weeks, for another assignment. This definitely wasn't good for me; I couldn't digest what I read. [Vivian, Interview 6]

In comparison with a study unit that offered weekly meetings, through which she was able to take in a smaller amount of knowledge at a time, Vivian said doing concentrated work before each assignment in the self-paced online units was definitely not an effective way to learn.

Another problem that affected Jennifer, as well as a few other students, was that she found the nature of weak pacing of learning reduced interaction among students tremendously. At the beginning of the semester, Jennifer was keen on organising a study group with her classmates but she quickly realised there were many obstacles to forming such a group, with one obstacle being the different pace at which everyone was working:

I don't want to spend time on this myself because I'm so busy with my assignments. I feel when I need help, I can write individual emails to them. There are always ways to contact them. I don't need to set a time for everyone ... everyone's schedule is different. Maybe I've started writing about [topic], but they haven't, so we can't discuss this. [Jennifer, Interview 3]

Likewise, Chris observed that his classmates were all focusing on completing their own activities without interacting with one another:

There are topics for students to work on, but everyone says what they want to say and doesn't respond to others. The reason is that the teacher makes each topic a task, so subconsciously, everyone thinks that once they submit it, they have completed that particular task, and there's no need to keep doing that task. And they move on to the next task. [Chris, Interview 6]

Chris also commented that if these tasks were implemented in a face-to-face study unit, it would be very likely that the teacher would have students complete them together in groups (Interview 5), suggesting that interactivity would be higher when students worked at the same pace. This comment shows his desire for stronger framing by the teacher in pacing student learning.

The third problem seemed to be exclusive to Vivian. She was distressed by not knowing how much work she was supposed to do each week, and it seemed that weak pacing of learning exacerbated the situation as she found herself studying non-stop. For example, in reference to the compulsory online contributions in one of her online

units, she said she wished her teacher had specified how many postings the students should make each week:

There is no black-and white rule ... it tells you that in the end, participation will count for 10%, but it doesn't say clearly what you have to do each week, like write a certain length of message or comment on a certain number of messages. There are no such requirements. ... Here are a few general principles of participation, but they are all very abstract, no specific rules. [Vivian, Interview 3]

As this shows, Vivian preferred the task to be broken up into smaller, weekly activities (i.e. more strongly paced), rather than stretching over the whole semester (i.e. weakly paced). This might be because since she was not receiving signals from her teacher about when to end the task or whether what she had done was adequate, she felt she had to keep doing the task:

If the computer is on, I feel I should be reading things online, and if I feel I am tired and I lie in bed to have a rest, then I'll say to myself, "You're wasting time. The time is running out. You shouldn't be taking a rest!" [Vivian, Interview 3]

As for the various forms of support provided by teachers of online units to assist students with the weak framing of the learning environment, such as forum discussions, online chats and face-to-face workshops (see Chapter 5), the students did not consider them to be effective. The main reason appeared to be that the students had different expectations of these activities to the teacher participants. That is, while the teacher participants intended these activities to help students to complete the assessment tasks, the students expected to explore the subject content through these activities, as discussed in Section 6.2.3.1.

### **6.3.3 Relationships with the teacher**

Overall, students' remarks about their relationships with teachers in the online units indicate that they felt there was a weak hierarchy in the relationships. In fact, all of them commented that their teachers were virtually invisible in their learning process. The volume of references to this issue throughout the interviews is significant, but to summarise, the teachers were perceived as having taken a "passive" role (Jennifer, Interview 5) in teaching the content knowledge as well as in organising learning activities, two central teaching responsibilities in the participants' views. Consequently, the majority of the students commented that no intellectual or

interpersonal relationship was formed between them and their teachers. In fact, some even had difficulty describing how their teachers taught or what they were like.

### **6.3.3.1 *Perceived roles played by the teacher***

The interview question that asked the students to describe the roles their teachers played in teaching the online units brought similar responses. Generally, they noted that the teachers in the online context played a diminished role compared with teachers in a face-to-face environment:

Online, I feel a teacher's charisma is diminished ... because the teacher's role is limited. He or she can only be a consultant. But in face-to-face classes, the teacher can be a lecturer, instructor, consultant, and many other things. [Jennifer, Interview 4]

In a subsequent interview with Jennifer, she added that the teacher played this consulting role by “hiding in the dark” and only providing help when students requested it. Then she emphasised this was passive teaching as the teacher did not take the initiative to disseminate knowledge or to “elevate” students’ levels of knowledge. For this reason, Jennifer thought her teacher made little impact on her learning (Interview 5). In supporting this opinion, Chris said his teacher played an even lesser role, that is, “she only marked the assignments” (Interview 6).

With regard to the facilitating role the teacher participants claimed to play (see Chapter 5, Section 5.3.4.1), Megan said she did not witness this role being fulfilled by her teachers:

But online learning, the teachers are not required to lecture. They are not required to see me. Then their role is ... not “facilitator”. In my experience, I didn't see them playing this role. At most, I can only say they were more like “assistants”. I don't think they were entitled to be called “facilitators” yet. This was how I felt. [Megan, Interview 2]

In Megan's opinion, her learning was facilitated by the assessment tasks, not her teachers, because her teachers did not offer her “feedback on which level of knowledge [she was] ... supposed to have reached” (quoted in Section 6.3.1).

Unlike Megan, who had learned the term “facilitator” in her study, the other students said they did not know what a “facilitator” meant but insisted that if that was the role their teachers were playing, it should be practiced in moderation. The following

quotation represents a typical description of the teaching approach the students felt was being implemented in their units:

What I'm experiencing now is the extreme. I feel like I was thrown out completely. No one cares what I'm doing. The teachers can integrate this approach into their teaching to help us think while teaching us at the same time, but not leaving us completely alone to decide how much we want to learn, how much we want to understand. [Vivian, Interview 3]

While Megan referred to her teachers as “assistants”, as indicated in her quote above, Vivian likened her teachers to “tour guides”:

Point you to a direction. Not a teacher. They are teachers, but not teachers in the sense that they lecture to you. They're like a guide, like a tour guide. They take you to a place, and say, you have an hour to look around on your own. Have fun yourself. Go wherever you want to go. [Vivian, Interview 6]

Jennifer lent her full support to this tour guide analogy, depicting her teacher's approach as: “It's up to you. If you want to have a look at some spot, go for it. If you want to learn, do so. And if you don't, so be it” (Interview 5).

Throughout the interviews with Jennifer, she seemed to be torn between her resistance against the traditional teacher-centred approach in China and her doubt about the hands-off teaching approach in her current online unit. In the last interview, she appeared to come to the realisation that some of the traditional teaching roles had their value, despite her reluctance to use the word “traditional”:

I think the teacher should still stand above and elevate you. I really need to think of a good term for this ... this is still a more traditional role of a teacher ... “instructor” ... I shouldn't say a traditional role. I mean it's been a part of traditional teaching for centuries, but it's still the core, the essential part of teaching that shouldn't be missing. I think current theories have weakened this role, which I think is not good. [Jennifer, Interview 5]

This traditional role, judging by the context from which the above quote was taken, mainly referred to the teacher's responsibility for teaching the content knowledge. The students in this study were in unanimous agreement that their teachers did little in this regard. As Jennifer pointed out, the content was provided on the Website of the online unit, not taught by the teacher (Interview 5). This view is clearly demonstrated in an analogy Jennifer drew in expressing her preference for face-to-face learning over online learning. She stressed that in saying so, she was only referring to a face-to-face class taught by a great lecturer, and that “if the lecturer in a face-to-face class

simply reads the text from textbooks, then it's the same with what's happening in the online context." This analogy between a poor lecturer and online teaching reflected most students' perception of the way they were being taught online.

Moreover, some students expressed the belief they would have learned more effectively and efficiently had their teachers taken a more active role in enforcing organised learning activities. For instance, several students thought compulsory participation in forum discussions could have a positive effect: "Students will think more. They not only think about their own stuff, but they also have to think about how to respond to others" (Diana, Interview 3). However, as reiterated in the preceding sections, those whose classes included assessable compulsory online contributions spoke unfavourably of this type of activities. Vivian admitted that she did not post messages because she had anything to say but because she simply wanted to get higher marks (Interview 6). Chris suggested that instead of forced participation, teachers should design activities that result in students' voluntary involvement (Interview 6), an opinion supported by all the other students. None of the students, however, was able to give an example of such an activity.

### **6.3.3.2 *Distant teacher-student relationships***

Interview questions relating to the students' relationships with their teachers yielded responses indicating that the students perceived the relationships to be non-existent. The following response is typical:

I think the teacher probably doesn't know me at all. He probably only knows there is a student by this name. ... I handed in my assignments and the teacher gave me feedback. Nothing more than that. That's all. [Jennifer, Interview 5]

Two participants said that an interpersonal relationship with the teacher was deemed to be insignificant in the Australian learning environment. They found that unlike in China, making a good impression on the teacher was not necessary in Australia:

The teacher won't take into consideration what kind of person you are. It doesn't matter how well you learned or what good marks you got before. If you write a bad assignment, you get a bad mark, as simple as that. [Chris, Interview 6]

While not necessarily disagreeing with this opinion, the other students argued that an interpersonal relationship with the teacher was crucial for their study because it affected their intellectual relationships with the teacher. The interviews consistently indicated that a lack of interpersonal relationship with their teachers was the major reason why many students hesitated to initiate conversations about their study with their teachers. Vivian, for instance, had particular difficulties with one online unit as she wanted to consult the teacher about aspects of the subject content but kept delaying this because the teacher was new to her. She said she could not feel what he was like or whether he liked students to ask him questions or not: “You can’t feel anything, the teacher’s feelings, personality, or the emotional relationship between you and the teacher. It’s all writing, emotionless writing” (Interview 4). Likewise, Jennifer refrained from discussing issues that interested her with the teacher of her online unit, which she normally did in face-to-face classes, because she also felt she did not “know” the teacher:

Because the relationships between classmates and with the teacher haven’t been built up. The interactions between you and the teacher in [face-to-face] class makes you feel close to them, so you feel you can and want to have a chat with them after class. Online, even if the teacher is very friendly, you don’t know them. This is the huge gap online that you can’t cross. [Jennifer, Interview 5]

While Vivian and Jennifer blamed their poor relationships with their teachers on the limitations of the online communication medium, Chris attributed his poor relationship with his teacher to the insufficient effort on the teacher’s part to establish the relationship:

I realised there was no interaction between the teacher and students, not at all. All we did was submit our assignments, and all she did was add a short comment on it, saying, ‘good point’ or something like that. Every comment is similar. No interaction at all. So I feel it makes no difference whether there is a teacher in this online unit or not. I don’t need to go online to read the same comments every week. [Chris, Interview 6]

As a consequence of an absent intellectual relationship with their teachers, the students felt unable to access their teachers’ expert insights into the subject content of their online units, as previously discussed in Section 6.2.3.1. This, in turn, substantially reduced the students’ chances, as Vivian (Interview 5) put it, of being “inspired” by their teachers. For example, Vivian claimed that this was why she had greater difficulty generating ideas for her assignments in the online units than in her



face-to-face experiences (Interview 5). Diana and Jennifer also mentioned the holistic influence the teacher had on them in their academic pursuit. Jennifer, for instance, recollected how she was motivated by one teacher in a face-to-face study unit in Australia:

The teacher showed us the way she did research, and we were all very inspired. We admired her, and we realised that was how one does research. Before that, we had no idea. After that, we felt we wanted to do that too. This demonstration was the same as disseminating knowledge. You can disseminate content or methods. Content is knowledge itself, and method is the teacher's method to gain knowledge. [Jennifer, Interview 5]

Both Jennifer and Diana stated that they did not experience this type of teacher influence online.

#### **6.3.4 Relationships with fellow students**

None of the participants reported the formation of a learning community in their online units. The absence of such a community had different impact on the individual students. Some insisted that it affected them in both interpersonal and intellectual aspects. These students said they did not like to share their opinions with their peers before getting to know them. They explained that this was because they did not want to risk offending others or causing misunderstandings (Megan, Interview 1; Vivian, Interview 6). Rita, for example, confirmed that whether she knew a person was a determining factor in her decision to respond to a message (Interview 1). Megan and Jennifer also noted that a lack of interpersonal connections among the students lowered their interest in forming study groups (Megan, Interview 1; Jennifer, Interview 4).

The above comments show that the participants generally agreed that an intellectual relationship had to be preceded by an interpersonal one. Several students also expressed the belief that even when an interpersonal relationship did not lead to intellectual interaction with their peers, it still had a motivational effect in their learning. Vivian's experience attested to this view. She repeatedly complained about feeling "isolated" and "like a hermit" throughout the semester:

I feel very lonely. Every morning, as soon as I wake up, I log on to Janison, while all my roommates go to the uni. I stay at home, reading the messages the whole morning,

doing the reading the whole afternoon, and writing the whole evening. In the afternoon, they come back from the uni. I feel like a hermit at home. I have no contact with people, and no one knows what I'm doing ... no one sees me. [Vivian, Interview 3]

Then she said that these feelings caused her to “lose passion” for her studies, and that she wished she could talk about her problems with her classmates even if they were not able to help her solve the problems. Other students expressed similar feelings. They described online learning as “lonely learning” (Diana, Interview 3) and “boring” (Jennifer, Interview 5; Megan, Interview 2).

For Diana, the learning communities she had experienced in face-to-face learning encouraged “positive competition” among the students, hence providing her with an incentive to learn. She stressed that she was referring to the positive type of competition, or “good pressure” as she called it. She said, for instance, “when you interacted with the teacher and your classmates, you found other people were making progress each day. You found them changed each time they did a task, so you felt great pressure” (Diana, Interview 3). A few other students indirectly spoke of this advantage of a learning community, although they tended to use the phrase “atmosphere of learning” instead of “positive competition”, as is indicated in the following comment:

[In this online unit] I didn't see anyone. I felt as if there was only me in this class. So I wondered if I was really in a class, or if I was actually learning. I couldn't feel it. There was no atmosphere of learning. In face-to-face study units, at least I know what I'm doing when I go to the weekly classes. [Chris, Interview 6]

It should be noted here that Chris was actually the only participant who initially claimed that the presence of his fellow students had no bearing on his learning at all. In his earlier interviews, he asserted that he learned mainly through reading and that discussing issues with his classmates rarely inspired him. Nevertheless, in the final interview, when reflecting on his learning experience of the online unit, he revealed a dramatic change in his opinion. He stated that he did not realise his relationship with his peers played a part in his learning until he felt he was deprived of it completely in the online unit:

In face-to-face classes, I felt there was a learning environment no matter what, so I didn't care about interaction that much. But online learning made me feel there was no learning environment at all. So I thought about it, trying to figure out why, and

finally realised that it was because there was no interaction with the teacher or my classmates. [Chris, Interview 6]

The interview data suggest that among all the students, only two made attempts to build a learning community in their classes. Jennifer, as formerly mentioned, tried to organise a study group. This, according to her, was to seek “a sense of belonging” (Interview 2). Megan’s approach, on the other hand, was to remain active in the online discussions. Whereas Jennifer let her plan lapse when no one responded to her invitation, Megan persisted with hers for two semesters. Still, Megan did not find the interactions with her classmates satisfactory because, she said, her classmates were not as involved as she was and her teachers did not endeavour to motivate students to participate (Interview 3).

In addition to the reasons mentioned by Megan, two other key factors emerged from the data to account for this lack of success in building a learning community: the asynchronous nature of online learning and the design of the assessment tasks. First, all the students believed that in a face-to-face context a learning community would naturally develop because students interacted in class and during the breaks, but the asynchronicity of online learning made these interactions less likely to happen. More importantly, many found that the focus on utilising one’s own context in the design of assignments, and the weak pacing of learning, rendered peer interactions unnecessary (see discussions in Sections 6.2.1 and 6.3.2). Of particular relevance to the issue being explored here was that this could be one reason why some students felt there was no “common ground” to build a peer relationship on (Jennifer, Interview 5). As Jennifer pointed out, “you need a purpose to communicate online ... it’s weird if you chat with someone you don’t know without a specific purpose” (Interview 4).

To conclude, the students felt that online learning, as they experienced it, was similar to traditional distance education, in which students had very little chance to communicate with their teachers and classmates (Diana, Interview 3). Jennifer described this type of learning as learning “in a vacuum”:

When I learn face-to-face, my learning is situated in a larger ‘context’, larger culture, larger life, which is definitely more beneficial. All aspects of it mutually interact with, and benefit, one another. But if all the study units in my course were online units, my learning would be still, insubstantial ... It doesn’t bother me too much to do nothing

but learn the content in one online unit, but I'm thinking that if I had to study in a vacuum like those whose study units are all online units, I don't think I'd like it.  
[Jennifer, Interview 4]

Taking only one online unit did not bother her too much because, she explained, her other face-to-face study units could “compensate for” this social deficiency. Those whose study units were mostly online units seemed to share Megan's feelings below:

You surely won't have as deep an impression of what you have learned because when you study on your own ... your learning context is you reading on your own ... when I study, my environment is, I sit in front of the computer reading and reading, constantly. There is no change at all. So in this situation, there are very few things that can stimulate me [Megan, Interview 2]

Megan and Vivian spoke of switching to a specialisation that did not involve this form of learning. For the first half of the semester, Vivian talked about dropping out of the course during the interviews. All the other students, except for Fiona, noted that they would avoid this form of learning in future. Jennifer, for example, decided to study another degree towards the end of the semester, and she said she would first eliminate the options that required her to study online no matter how interested she was in the content of the courses (Interview 5).

### **6.3.5 Discussion**

Three main themes surfaced in this section. In the students' experiences, (1) the teaching practices were not based on a systematic plan; (2) the teachers were passive and invisible; and (3) valuable peer support was unavailable. These perceptions were expressed accompanied by emotions associated with feeling in limbo.

First, the students did not consider the teaching approach characterised by relatively weak framing of knowledge (i.e. weak sequencing and pacing rules) to be effective because they felt it lacked systematic procedures to inform learners when to accomplish what. Most students felt they gained little insight into their progression in their online units. Put another way, from the students' perspective, signals indicating they were ready to move on to the next step of their learning were missing in this form of teaching. Clearly, the relatively weak framing of these online units was experienced by the participants as an *absence* – a lack of structure, procedures and explicit guidelines for learning content knowledge. It was experienced negatively, as

a vacuum of legitimacy rather than as positively (as, for example, enabling more space for personal creativity). This experience can hence be described as one showing a relatively weak epistemic relation (ER-) to the teaching of content knowledge. It left many students in the study constantly wondering whether they were learning or not.

The intended flexibility of the pedagogical design did not have an enabling effect on these students' learning. Instead, weak sequencing and pacing were said by the students to segment their learning. For example, many described their learning as compressed into intensive but separated blocks of time, in accordance with the due dates of the assignments. Students emphasised they could not learn effectively this way, as the knowledge taken in was not "digested" well. Moreover, students' remarks suggesting that the assignments were like separate 'patches' with little connection with one another show that not only the learning process but also the subject content was segmented. These descriptions of not gaining coherent content knowledge and not fully understanding what they were reading indicate the students felt their learning outcomes in terms of gaining content knowledge were not legitimate. This experience again exhibits a relatively weaker epistemic relation (ER-) to content knowledge. The perceived adverse effects of weak sequencing and pacing rules were amplified by the pedagogical relationships in the online units, also characterised by weaker framing, as discussed below.

The second theme that emerged from this section is that the students concluded their teachers were passive and generally invisible in teaching the online units. According to students, their teachers left most decisions about the content and the methods of learning to them. This indicated students experienced a weak hierarchy (weak framing) in the pedagogical relationship. However, this weak framing was again experienced as a lack of structure and explicit guidance, as noted above. For example, the students described their teachers as 'assistants', 'consultants' and 'tour guides', who only offered assistance in response to particular problems encountered and raised by individual students. This form of instructions, in the students' opinion, were occasional and given on an ad hoc basis. That is, the students thought their teachers only acted upon request without systematically imparting content knowledge and guidance to students. The students therefore experienced relationships with their

teachers in which knowledge and techniques for obtaining knowledge were both downplayed (a weaker epistemic relation).

Judging by the teachers' remarks about their facilitative roles (Chapter 5, Section 5.3.4.1), however, it seems that these students were unaware of, or not prepared to accept, that the teacher's invisibility was intentional, and that learners were expected to take the initiative in their interactions with the teacher. Putting this another way, the invisible pedagogy employed in the online units, which was based on a knower code, required learners to expose, or "exteriorize" (Bernstein, 1977, p.121) their learning to the teacher's surveillance. Not knowing this rule of the game (i.e. not possessing this recognition rule) made it difficult for the students to behave and communicate appropriately in the online environment. It appeared that they did not experience the teaching methods as intended by the teachers and that they responded to the teaching by doing exactly the opposite to what would have benefited them; that is, they avoided being visible by detaching themselves from the learning context.

There are a variety of reasons for this detachment, among them the students' worry about being judged in public in terms of sharing their opinions; the perception that the teacher would not respond to their postings; and their devaluation of peer perspectives. As mentioned in the curriculum section, the students' devaluation of peer opinions is indicative of a weaker social relation. Here, the students' reluctance to express their views for fear of being unfavourably judged confirms an earlier conclusion that they did not see their personal insights as legitimate, which manifests an experience of a weaker social relation (SR-). As for the comment that their participation in the learning context was unnecessary because the teacher would not respond to them, it highlights the students' desire for a stronger epistemic relation in the teaching. Furthermore, this section revealed that the students not only yearned for the teacher's insights of the content knowledge and instructions to help them decide what is legitimate in this context, but they also looked to the teacher to inspire them to become legitimate knowers. This latter desire is illustrated by the students' discussions about the consequences of a distant teacher-student relationship. According to students, opportunities to become a legitimate knower were not present in the learning context because of this form of pedagogical relationship, which suggests a weak social relation (SR-).

The third theme is that the students did not experience the kind of peer support they considered valuable, which sums up their feelings that there was no legitimate knower (except for the teacher) in their online units. The social relation characterising this experience, hence, is relatively weak (SR-). The support the students were seeking from their peers can be categorised into three types, none of which, according to the students, was readily accessible to them. The first type was support for learning the subject content. This resonates with an important finding reported in Chapter 4 that Chinese students tend not to find a learning community useful unless it is knowledge-oriented (see Section 4.3.6). Specifically, what the students expected to gain from a learning community was information that could assist them in conducting their assignments. Since they found the weaker classification of knowledge and weaker framing of knowledge of their online units rendered this expectation unlikely to be met, they decided engaging in this form of community was not conducive to learning. In other words, they judged the value of the knower-oriented learning community not in social relation terms but in epistemic relation terms. It was felt to be a community with little capacity for generating useful information, one that represents a weak epistemic relation (ER-). To these students, this community comprised members who did not possess any more legitimate insights into the techniques for gaining content knowledge than the students themselves, so it was not entitled to be called a *learning* community. Consequently, the students did not feel they belonged to a learning community. This lack of a sense of belonging also suggests a weak social relation to knowers (SR-).

The second type of support sought was ‘positive competition’. By this, the students meant that what was also missing from the online units was a learning community that allowed them to ensure they were not falling behind by being able to compare their own progress with that of their peers. In this sense, a peer could be identified as a knower if his or her states of knowledge served as a yardstick against which the students could measure their learning of the content knowledge. The two forms of support discussed so far show that for these students, the importance of the presence of their peers resides not so much in who they are, or what they think, as in their knowledge about the methods for learning the subject content and in the content

knowledge they possess. Both types of knowers, in the students' experiences, were absent from the online units (SR-).

The last type of support the students anticipated obtaining from a learning community relates to the affective dimension of learning, particularly emotional support from their peers. In the face of the perceived insufficient instructions and guidance from their teachers, the students felt they were often left alone to do everything themselves. Under these circumstances, some students spoke of yearning for the emotional support of their peers but found they had no access to this. These student remarks can be interpreted as a realisation of a weaker social relation (SR-) as well, as they show the students experienced not being part of a community in terms of interpersonal relationships. Strong feelings of being neglected and abandoned by their teachers and being completely isolated from their peers were thus ubiquitously articulated. It was like learning in a 'vacuum', or as a 'hermit', as some succinctly put it, without stimulation or inspiration from the environment. As a result, most students concluded that their experiences of the online units were uninspiring and disappointing intellectually and emotionally.

To summarise, the students did not see the invisible pedagogy characterised by weaker framing of knowledge as legitimate pedagogy nor as enabling flexibility and learner choice (see Chapter 5, Section 5.2.3). Instead, they felt the teaching methods were inadequate for offering them knowledge, principles and techniques in a systematic manner (a weaker epistemic relation). Moreover, they did not experience the communities formed in the online units as knower-oriented or feel they were part of those communities (a weaker social relation). Consequently, the students could not base their success in their online units on the 'right' procedures to gain knowledge, on their own positions as knowers, or on their membership of a group of knowers. Like their experiences with the curriculum, their experiences with the pedagogy are also specialised by a relativist code (ER-, SR-). Similarly, the effects were a string of negative emotions, in particular, feelings of being in limbo, having no sense of time and place, not knowing what they had achieved, where they were heading, or where they should be.



## 6. 4 Assessment

### 6.4.1 Assessment criteria

The students' struggle to cope with the weak framing of knowledge in their units was also shown in their difficulty in interpreting the assessment criteria. As will be illustrated here, many students did not recognize the assessment approach as weakly framed. Jennifer and Chris, for example, recalled experiences of failing to meet the criteria, both insisting it was because their teachers did not explain the criteria clearly enough. In Jennifer's case, she said she received a low mark for one assignment asking students to compose a timeline for an educational issue. The teacher commented in his feedback that Jennifer's assignment "needed an introduction and a conclusion to make it more readable" (Jennifer, Interview 4). Jennifer argued this was not specified in the assessment criteria and that she did not think a timeline needed to be accompanied by an introduction and a conclusion. In fact, in an earlier interview, while still writing this assignment, she remarked that the assignment was "basic. You don't need to give your personal opinions" (Interview 3). At that time, she was concerned about which format of the timeline her teacher wanted and felt disappointed when the teacher did not give her a definite answer when she asked him:

I asked the teacher, and he said, any form of timeline was fine. But I'm the type of ... you should know by now, I am a "test-taker." If the teacher doesn't give me a standard, I don't know what to do. If the teacher had specified Power Point as the form, or other things, then I could have done it very well, and I would have come up with some "original ideas." I mean, I will come up with "original ideas" based on the requirements. If there are no basic requirements at all, I don't know what to derive my ideas from. [Jennifer, Interview 3]

The above quotation illustrates that Jennifer found it difficult to work when there were no explicit guidelines. As she claimed, "We are like producers. We produce the goods as required. You need to give me the standards" (Interview 5). These responses indicate Jennifer could not recognise what her teacher expected her to do and she dealt with the assignment according to what she considered to be the correct way. She obviously felt it was unfair that she was penalised in this instance.

In Chris' situation, he said he failed to fulfil an assessment criterion for an assignment that required students to "provide evidence that demonstrated they had done the preliminary activities" (Chris, Interview 4). To satisfy this criterion, Chris said he

made a brief mention in his assignment that he had completed the activities and posted these activities on the forum as required. In the teacher's feedback, though, she commented that the arguments Chris made in his assignments did not appear to be informed by the preliminary activities (Chris, Interview 4). In his defence, Chris argued that the particular criterion simply stated there needed to be evidence he had done the activities without specifying how this evidence should be presented. In other words, it did not occur to Chris that he had to draw on these activities in his assignment. Like Jennifer, Chris did not experience the assessment approach as weakly framed; instead, he felt his teacher did not fulfil her duty of giving sufficient guidance to students. Accordingly, he was confused and upset about his teacher's feedback. As is shown in these two incidents, it seemed that the implicit rules of academic writing that were taken for granted by Jennifer's and Chris' teachers had eluded the two students.

While Jennifer's and Chris' problems in conducting their assignments concerned the style or structure of their writing, other students had trouble interpreting the topics of their assignments. These students expressed their frustration when they found their teachers did not intend to offer them explicit guidance. Again, the students experienced this teaching strategy as lacking clear instructions, rather than having weaker framing. In the following quote, Vivian revealed her impression that the teacher was purposely holding back the answer from her when she approached him for help:

**Vivian:** I felt I still don't know what to write after talking to him, and I also can't understand why the teacher is so reserved about what the assignment means. Why can't he tell me directly ...?

**Interviewer:** Do you feel the teacher knows the answer but purposely didn't tell you?

**Vivian:** Yes ... He won't tell you everything. Isn't this what they do in the West? The teacher won't tell students what they should do ... which direction I could take.

Direction is very important. Once you are on a wrong track, no matter how good your writing is, you are wasting your time. I'm constantly worried that I might be on the wrong track. [Vivian, Interview 3]

This quote indicates that Vivian could sense something was different in this new environment; that is, unlike Jennifer and Chris, who blamed their teachers for failing to perform their duties, Vivian recognised her teacher was adopting a certain teaching strategy. However, Vivian did not experience this teaching strategy as based on weak framing. She did not see the open-endedness of her assignment, and believed that

there was still a ‘correct’ answer that she had to find. After she realised the teacher would not provide this answer, Vivian said she had no choice but to “guess” it: “if I’m lucky, I might be right” (Interview 2). At the same time, she expressed feelings of guilt over doing this:

I always think that since I’ve paid so much money and come all the way here to study, if I don’t even understand what I’m learning, and when I write, I can only guess what I’m supposed to write, I feel it’s really not worth it. I feel guilty about spending [the time and] the amount of money here. [Vivian, Interview 3]

Another common theme relevant to teacher feedback of the students’ performance was that the students did not consider the feedback useful in helping them make improvements. Some students noted that this was because their teachers tended to offer encouraging feedback without pointing out specific problems in their work. Chris described this type of feedback as containing “little substance” because it did not help him to improve his future work. Moreover, the students did not believe they received this kind of positive feedback because their work was “perfect” but because the teachers did not make enough effort to look for weaknesses in their work (Chris, Interview 3; Megan, Interview 2). Megan was particularly upset about this issue. She said that since the teachers taught little in class, they should at least offer more in their feedback of student assignments; otherwise she felt her money and time were not well spent (Megan, Interview 2).

On the other hand, the students stated that even if some teachers did identify the weaknesses in their assignments, they still did not know how to rectify the problems. In other words, there was still a lack of explicit procedures. The teachers’ use of assessment rubrics, in particular, was negatively evaluated by some students for this reason:

I knew which category I did badly in and I even knew how badly, but I didn’t know exactly what I did badly. So I was unable to improve it. I might do just as badly in this category next time because I didn’t know what my problem was. For instance, it wasn’t useful when they told me my search was not good enough without telling me exactly what I did wrong. [Megan, Interview 2]

Vivian raised another problem with the marking categories in the assessment rubrics. She insisted that she was not capable of improving her performance in certain categories. Specifically, among the typical categories her teachers used – structure,

originality, style, presentation, sources and language – she said she was only confident that she was able to make changes in structure and sources:

The assessment rubric ... doesn't have a big effect on me, and I feel this is a problem with my level. Look at the individual items ... It's not like now I don't get a full mark in a specific category, so I make more effort and next time I can improve my mark. Impossible. My level doesn't change. [Vivian, Interview 5]

Whereas Vivian seemed convinced there was no solution to her problem, Chris and Megan suggested two ways their teachers could make their feedback effective. Chris considered it would be helpful if the teacher added comments on student performance for each of the assessment criteria (Interview 4). Megan found that detailed teacher feedback on a draft of her assignment before its submission assisted her greatly. She recounted how she benefited from such an approach adopted by one of her teachers:

[The teacher] offered us a chance to send her our draft before the due date, and she provided detailed instructions, like where I should add some references, and where I needed to use supporting ideas. She would add her feedback to your draft. This way, I knew what I could do in my next assignment. Because I knew how to improve this assignment, I knew the direction, and with this direction, I knew what I could do next time. [Megan, Interview 2]

#### **6.4.2 Perceived measures of achievement**

This section presents the students' comments on the type of learner that was more likely to excel in online learning with special reference to the online units being investigated in this study. It should be mentioned that several participants appeared to struggle a little when trying to respond to the interview questions relevant to this issue. Megan, for example, said she was unable to give advice on how to get a good grade in her online units because even though she had completed her entire degree, she felt she still had no idea why she only received an average mark for some of her assignments (Interview 2). The four thematic categories emerging from the analysis of the teachers' descriptions of a successful learner in their units (abilities, attitudes, personal traits, and other attributes) were used to sort the students' responses. Table 16 lists these categories and their illustrative examples. It is followed by a brief discussion on some of the issues that have not yet been addressed in this chapter.

Table 16. Students' descriptions of a successful learner in their online units

Category	Examples
Abilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ability to meet all assessment criteria</li> <li>• Ability to read a lot and provide references accordingly</li> <li>• Ability to synthesise ideas found in the literature</li> <li>• A good writing structure</li> <li>• Good search skills</li> <li>• Ability to connect theory to one's context</li> </ul>
Attitudes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Willing to learn on one's own</li> <li>• Passionate about learning</li> <li>• Self-discipline</li> </ul>
Personal traits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Quiet, introvert</li> <li>• Independent</li> <li>• Patient</li> <li>• Perseverant</li> </ul>
Others	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Work experience</li> <li>• Current work context</li> </ul>

#### 6.4.2.1 Meeting assessment criteria

Most students did not appear to have recognised the implicit nature of the assessment criteria. They did not see the criteria as negotiable, a point that the teachers repeatedly emphasised in the interviews. The students were of the opinion that the key to getting a good mark was to meet all the assessment criteria. When further pressed, they explained that this meant all the sub-questions or issues listed under an assignment topic had to be addressed:

There are rules you have to follow. You must follow the criteria when you write your assignments. When the teacher marks your assignments, they mark your response to each of the questions they want you to answer. [Diana, Interview 3]

Most students considered these sub-questions useful in helping them focus the content of their assignments. Chris and Rita, for example, stated that they usually planned what to write by integrating these sub-issues into the headings of their content (Chris, Interview 5; Rita, Interview 3). Diana, on the other hand, insisted that the sub-questions restricted her thoughts about a topic (Interview 3). On further probing, it was found that Diana *did* notice in the unit outlines that students were welcome to negotiate with the teachers about the assessment criteria, but she was reluctant to do so. In her interpretation, the teachers were referring to those students who were not capable of addressing the questions:

**Interviewer:** The teachers seem to think that students can negotiate with them about this.

**Diana:** But it's not that you don't understand the questions. You do!

....

**Interviewer:** Do you think that once students see the questions ... they'll try their best to answer them?

**Diana:** Yes, yes, no one will think otherwise ...

**Interviewer:** You think students won't tell the teacher what they prefer to do for a particular assignment?

**Diana:** If I were the teacher, I'd say that if you want to do something else, you could do it in your spare time, right? This is how the system works. Once you fulfill the basic requirements, if you're still interested in doing more, you can write another article about it.

**Interviewer:** It sounds like once it's written down, you feel it's not changeable.

**Diana:** Yes, it's standardized and systematised. [Diana, Interview 3]

Vivian did not like the sub-questions either but her reason was different. She felt she was answering separate essay questions when trying to address the sub-issues one by one (Interview 2). In fact, Vivian was so concerned about responding to all the questions that she avoided tackling any other issues, however significant and relevant these issues were. Take, for example, an assignment asking students to discuss likely problems in applying a certain theory to their own contexts, as well as to provide solutions to these problems. Vivian said that in her assignment, she only included the problems she was able to solve, disregarding problems she knew were of greater magnitude but for which she could not suggest solutions. According to her, if she had "described the situation truthfully", what she would have had to deal with would be "beyond her ability" (Interview 6). Apparently, she did not want to risk getting a poor mark by doing so.

Finally, Jennifer's comparison of writing an essay in Australia to taking a test in China, quoted below, shows that she considered the ways to attaining a good mark in the two educational contexts were similar:

I think the environments are different, but as I mentioned, I am a test-taker. Here there is no test, but there are essays anyway. For essays, we are supposed to write them in a certain way, and I researched this. I read outlines carefully and I know what I am supposed to do, so I work carefully toward that direction. ... So it's similar to taking a test in China. I know the goal, the rules. I go for those goals. ... So the approaches are the same. [Jennifer, Interview 1]

#### **6.4.2.2 Sufficient references: Evidence above opinions**

Apart from ensuring their assignments covered all the issues they thought they were supposed to address, most students believed that adding a sufficient number of

references to support their arguments improved the quality of their papers as well. As Chris said:

Whatever I write, I need to provide references. There must be evidence. Whatever I say, it has to be followed by someone else's statement to prove what I say is right or wrong. So I've cultivated this habit; I won't say my opinion without supporting it with a reference. [Chris, Interview 6]

Others also viewed this as a way to demonstrate their hard work to the teachers. As a matter of fact, all of the students, except for Jennifer and Fiona, considered this aspect of writing to be the main strength of their academic abilities. For example, when one of Vivian's teachers commented she had made progress from her first assignment to her second assignment, but without explaining why, Vivian's assumption was: "He might think that I drew on more readings, both the required ones and the ones I found myself, because I had more references for the second assignment" (Interview 6). These examples show that in the absence of explicit evaluative criteria and teacher feedback, the students were guessing that the criteria were procedural and knowledge-based and they conducted and evaluate their own assignments accordingly.

The interview data relating to the students' views of giving personal opinions in their assignments indicates strongly that many failed to recognise this as a legitimate way to write their assignments. That is, they did not consider expressing personal opinions in their assignments would earn them good marks. For example, some students said they avoided writing about a certain opinion they held or even changed their views of an issue based on the quantity of the sources they found (Chris, Interview 6; Vivian, Interview 6). In some cases, the students stated what they wrote in the assignments was usually not their opinions but the ideas they "combined and synthesised" from the readings (Rita, Interview 3). As an illustration, in the final interview with Vivian, she revealed she had developed a coping strategy over the semester to save time looking for references to support her arguments. In her English for Academic Purposes (EAP) course prior to university, she had been taught it was common academic practice to first brainstorm ideas before searching for substantiating evidence in the literature. However, in the following quote, she explained how she formulated her opinions in "a reverse order", contrary to the "right way" she was taught in the EAP course:

Now I use a reverse order. I have "evidence" first, and then I think of my "reasons" according to the "evidence" I have. Then my "claims" come last. Honestly, I feel like

cheating. It's not like I have an opinion first and then I look for evidence to support my opinion. I now have evidence first and then make up an opinion. [Vivian, Interview 6]

Vivian's example shows that she recognised the importance of giving her personal opinions in the assignments. However, she felt she was unable to do this. As a result, like the other students, she appeared to fake her opinions to meet this assessment criterion. While Vivian felt guilty about doing this, those who did not recognise this rule did not see anything wrong with this coping strategy. For example, Chris expressed the belief that at the Masters level, being able to evaluate the arguments presented in the literature was enough, and that original ideas were more important at the doctoral level of study (Interview 6).

Vivian's sense of guilt also came from the feelings that she had to lie about what she really thought from time to time. She mentioned that in her assignments, she always argued that the theories she was learning could be applied to the Chinese context even though she knew this was not always true. The purpose for doing this, she said, was to make her argument flow better:

Usually I'll have written about the strengths of the theory before I start writing about the Chinese context. How can I say it's not applicable to China if it's such a good theory? It doesn't seem like a good way to write an assignment. [Vivian, Interview 6]

Again, this statement indicates she did not know how to perform what she was told to do in the Australian environment.

#### **6.4.2.3 Willingness to learn on one's own**

Throughout the interviews, the students frequently used adjectives like "active", "independent" or "autonomous" to describe an ideal online learner. However, a further examination of these remarks revealed that they used these words interchangeably to refer to one who was willing to learn on his or her own without a teacher's help. The following quotation is one of the numerous references in the interview data that this inference is drawn from:

Some students do not like to attend classes. They like to learn on their own. Simply put, the type whose "autonomy" is higher. They might not appreciate what the teacher teaches in class. They have their own way to learn. These people might do better in online learning. Learning materials are provided for these people on the online



platform. These are not the mainstream type of students ... [Jennifer, Interview 5]

Another desirable characteristic of a successful online learner that was linked by several students to the absence of the teacher (in online contexts) was intrinsic motivation. For example, Megan said the type of person who is most likely to thrive on online learning was:

one who has a very strong desire to investigate something. One who is very interested and wants to solve the problems. I think this type of person has many channels to learn. Even if there is no teacher to turn to, they still have other means, like searching online, or using the library. These channels can help them. [Megan, Interview 3]

In short, the students did not see characteristics such as being active, independent, autonomous and intrinsically motivated as success factors in their online units. Instead, they thought these personal traits were only essential when the teacher was absent from the learning environment. In other words, having these characteristics was viewed as a means to make up for the lack of the teacher's involvement in the environment.

### **6.4.3 Discussion**

The results presented in this section can be summarised by two themes. The first theme relates to the students' perception that their academic performances were undermined by the implicit criteria of knowledge and their emotional reactions associated with this perception. The second theme is that the students highlighted gaining content knowledge and being able to demonstrate this knowledge as the basis of success in this environment.

First, the students felt that the quality of their assignments was impoverished by what they perceived to be ambiguous criteria of knowledge, which indicates an experience of relatively weak classification and framing of knowledge in terms of assessment. The perceived lack of specificity in the evaluative criteria is also illustrated by the students' experiences of assessment feedback. They commented that the marking categories and teacher comments failed to diagnose their attainment of the content knowledge and to provide them with concrete procedures for making improvements. In other words, in their view, the assessment results did not inform them whether what

they had demonstrated in their work was valid knowledge or what techniques or methods they could use to legitimise their knowledge. These remarks indicate an experience in which explicit criteria for determining and achieving the legitimacy of insight were both missing in the learning context, hence an experience embodying a weaker epistemic relation (ER-). Emotional upset associated with this experience of the assessment was prevalent. For instance, some students expressed confusion, distress or anger about being unfairly penalised for not fulfilling the evaluative criteria. Others articulated a sense of loss, frustration and powerlessness about not being able to obtain explicit instruction from their teachers and so having to speculate about their intention all the time. So while the weaker epistemic relation characterising the teachers' intentions for the learning context were experienced as such a modality, the experience was not one of freedom from the constraints of bounded and controlled knowledge but rather an absence of guidance and direction, and negative feelings of loss.

The second theme is concerned with students' beliefs about the basis of success in this educational context. In brief, in contrast to the teachers' opinions, which highlight learners' positions as knowers, the students were convinced that the key to attaining a good mark in their online units was to demonstrate the content knowledge they had gained. Clearly, they could not recognise the rule of the game in this new environment was to show who they were and what they thought, so they continued to apply the ER-based strategies that had helped them excel in the knowledge code educational contexts in China (ER+, SR-) to the SR-oriented learning context in Australia (a knower code of ER-, SR+). For instance, meeting assessment criteria, in students' explanation, meant supplying content knowledge in response to each issue raised by an assessment topic. One student likened it to giving answers to separate questions on a written test. This reasoning was indeed based on a knowledge code that emphasises atomised content knowledge, a particular knowledge code that underpins the students' educational experiences in China (see Chapter 4).

Personal opinion, on the other hand, was considered to be of much lesser educational value and was very often suppressed by these students when writing their assignments. This withdrawal of their personal views suggests an experience of the assessment as manifesting a relatively weaker social relation (SR-). As seen in this section, in order

to be able to demonstrate their arguments were sufficiently supported by the literature, the students tended to fake or disguise their opinions of the topics they were tackling. In one example, the student felt a sense of guilt about adopting this coping strategy, as she had been told this was not the right way of writing an assignment in the Australian environment. Nevertheless, even though this student knew what she was expected to do, she obviously was unable to perform it – that is, she had the recognition rule, but not the realisation rule to deal with this new environment. This can be said to be another indication of an experience characterised by a weaker epistemic relation to procedural knowledge (ER-). Most students, however, did not even possess the recognition rule, as they could not see discussing their personal perspectives in the assignments (i.e. bringing themselves to the learning context) was a determining measure of achievement in the online units (see Chapter 5).

Another point deserving particular attention is that while most students seemed to be aware that the assessment tasks were negotiable, they did not take the opportunity to adapt the tasks to suit their interests or practices. This was because they interpreted negotiating with the teacher as showing incapacity to meet the assessment criteria, which in turn they felt signified a deficiency in their knowledge. Again, rather than bringing their personal perspectives and concerns to the educational context, thereby experiencing the learning context as showing a stronger social relation to knowers, the students exhibited behaviours that emphasised the epistemic relation. This serves as another example of not having the recognition rule and so coping with behaviours based on a ‘wrong’ code.

The value attached to displaying the content knowledge they gained in their assignments is also reflected in the students’ definitions of an ideal learner in the online units. These definitions are replete with terms signifying a learner’s abilities to obtain and show his or her states of knowledge (see Table 16). It can be seen that the students experienced the measures of achievement in the online units as manifesting a stronger epistemic relation to both content knowledge and procedural knowledge. For example, possessing “good search skills” and being able to “read a lot and provide references” and to “synthesise ideas found in the literature” are all concerned with methods for obtaining knowledge. Having “a good writing structure” relates to techniques for presenting this knowledge. In terms of attitudes and personal traits,

because of a lack of explicit instructions in this environment, the students considered this form of online learning is best suited for self-disciplined, hard-working introverts who do not need guidance from the teacher. The marked differences between the student and teacher participants' views of the measures of achievement (see Chapter 5, Section 5.4.2, Table 15) in their online units substantiate an important point made in the preceding sections: the majority of the students did not possess the recognition rules for the online educational context.

In summary, the two themes outlined above revealed that most students did not have the recognition rules for excelling in the knower-code learning environment, and none of them possessed the realisation rules that would have enabled them to enact a legitimate performance of a stronger social relation. Under these circumstances, the students' coping behaviours were a continuation of what they did in China – a knowledge code emphasis on the epistemic relation. In other words, they perceived states of knowledge as the object of assessment in their online units and dealt with the assessment accordingly. Congruent with this view, they expected to be provided with explicit instructions and evaluative criteria for conducting their assignments. They also required feedback indicating what was missing in their work and how to improve it. All this suggests a desire for a stronger epistemic relation to knowledge. Nevertheless, to the students' disappointment, none of these expectations was met in their experiences with the online units. They perceived a deficiency of clear criteria for determining the legitimacy of their present performances and specific procedures and methods for enhancing the legitimacy of their future work. On the other hand, the social aspects of knowers, such as learners' personal perspectives, interests and practices, were rarely addressed by the students' discussions of assessment. Wherever these aspects were mentioned, the students downplayed their significance in helping them write their assignments. The social relation to the knower, therefore, can be regarded as relatively weaker (SR-) in the students' experiences with the assessment approach. Feeling that explicit evaluative criteria were inaccessible and refraining from utilising personal knowledge and practices for their assignments, the students felt they could not make legitimate knowledge claims on the basis of appropriate procedures or their social positions as knowers. Their experiences can thus be described as embodying a relativist code (ER-, SR-) – a lack of a basis for legitimating insights. This relativist code was in turn experienced as a limbo and

accompanied by the perception that they did not reap intellectual rewards from their sojourns and by strong negative emotions associated with this perception, such as desperation and guilt.

## **6. 5 Views of the online delivery mode**

Finally, the interview data generated some results relating to students' views of the online delivery mode. For example, in a strong and recurring theme, the students in this study referred to online communication as “impersonal” and “superficial” (Diana, Interview 1; Jennifer, Interview 5) and thus incapable of promoting deep intellectual discussion. Jennifer, for instance, said she felt a “void” in online conversations:

For instance, I'm talking to, say, someone called 'Mary.' I can't open up because I know nothing about her. Then how can I talk about things at a deeper level with her, concerning the subject content? But face-to-face, I can make judgments about this person, and so I can talk deeper with this person. Although these sound trivial, they affect the quality of your conversation. [Jennifer, Interview 5]

As a consequence, some recalled only using online communication tools to clarify the requirements of assignments, and others believed these tools merely served the purpose of solving technical problems:

When you talk about an issue [on the forums], you can't go deep. Last semester, one of my three online units produced more student postings. The reason was that the task was technically more difficult. We had to design a Webpage. Many people didn't know how to do it, so they went online to ask for directions. [Diana, Interview 1]

As a matter of fact, many tended to ignore the problems they encountered because they felt the process of asking a question online took too much time and effort, and that there was no guarantee of a reply (Chris, Interview 5; Megan, Interview 1; Rita, Interview 2). While acknowledging that their teachers usually responded to questions directed to them, some of the students insisted that these online responses were not of the same quality as those offered face-to-face because the former generally contained less information. For example:

Face-to-face, I can explain my questions clearly and the teacher can explain it in detail to me. At least, the quantity is large. With a large quantity of information, I can learn some things, if not everything. But online ... when my question was one sentence long, the reply I got from the teacher was very likely to be only one sentence as well. Maybe the teacher was busy, or didn't know how specific I expected the answer to be. I realised asking questions online wasn't as effective as I had expected,

so I gave up. [Jennifer, Interview 5]

Jennifer identified two other barriers to asking questions online. Firstly, it bothered her to have to speculate “what the teacher meant” or “what his tone of voice was” in his written messages (Interview 3). Secondly, the delay in time in receiving a reply “killed her passion” for wanting to know the answer (Interview 5).

It was also found that text-based communication added to the workload of the students whose online units required compulsory participation. This is most noticeable in Vivian’s experience. In the first few weeks of the semester, she said she tried to read all her classmates’ postings for fear that she might miss something important. And her interviews contained many quotes similar to the following:

I’m going mad. This is all I can say to describe my feelings. It’s chaos. Look at all the stuff people posted online! I’m going mad. It’s too horrible. ... Every morning when I wake up, I go online to read new messages, and there goes half of my day. I’m on the verge of breaking down. [Vivian, Interview 3]

To make matters worse, Vivian had to go through an exhaustive process of writing a draft, checking for language mistakes and revising before she could finally post a message. Unsurprisingly, she referred to writing posts as extra assignments (Interview 6).

Some, especially those who took more than one online unit, also commented on the diminished social interaction when learning online due to the absence of face-to-face contact with others. For example, in comparing her experience in the previous semester when all her study units were delivered face-to-face, Vivian said although she did not “hang out” with her classmates, she at least still went to the university and sometimes “ran into” people she knew. By contrast, she felt online learning deprived her of a social life. She said her phone never rang, her friends must have thought she had disappeared, and that she felt “suppressed” and “isolated from the whole world”:

People must have thought I had disappeared. ... Often, I told my boyfriend, ‘I haven’t been out of the house for 4 or 5 days.’ ... I didn’t even change shoes. I was wearing slippers all the time. Sometimes I thought I really had to go out, so I changed clothes and shoes, and went for a walk around the neighbourhood, and then came back to do exactly the same thing I was doing. [Vivian, Interview 6]

Lastly, the students recognised two major benefits of the written medium. One was the sufficient time to digest information. As was stressed by all participants, they had less difficulty reading than listening to English:

I'm sure I can understand the teacher, but my classmates usually have different accents. There are many barriers for me to interact with them. This is better online because communication is done through reading. I can read it slowly and digest the message before I offer my feedback. [Jennifer, Interview 5]

Another frequently mentioned benefit was the opportunity to read others' work, a teaching strategy utilised by some teachers of the online units. Chris stated that this helped him to see how well he was doing in relation to his classmates, which he had no idea of in a face-to-face study unit (Interview 4). Similar remarks were made by other students as well.

### **6.5.1 Discussion**

This final section revealed that some students tended to blame their perceived lack of success in the online units on the delivery mode. Admittedly, the asynchronous, text-based communication medium did seem to create barriers for some. As seen above, the delay in time in receiving replies reduced students' motivation for learning, and the written form of communication increased their workload. Nevertheless, as has been shown repeatedly throughout this chapter, the students' discussions about their online experiences had more to do with the knower-code pedagogic practices than with the use of technologies. As an illustration, the students' opinion that teacher feedback in the online form tended to contain little information is very likely related to the minimally guided instructional techniques (i.e. weaker epistemic relation to knowledge) espoused by the teaching staff. The students' argument that the online medium is not adequate for conducting intellectual communication with their peers may be associated with the weaker framing by teachers in facilitating peer communication in the online units. As highlighted in the previous chapter, despite the teachers' emphasis on a knower community, to adhere to the principle of flexibility and learner choice, they tended not to enforce peer communication in their online units. This could be one reason why little intellectual communication was experienced by the students. In conclusion, the delivery mode may have accentuated, rather than initiated, the problems experienced by learners due to the form of pedagogy.

## **6. 6 Summary of the chapter**

The purpose of this chapter was to examine the student sojourners' experiences of their online units at the university. The essence of the findings is that the students' experiences of this form of educational practice are specialised by a relativist code, which, in this study, is associated with learners' feelings of being in limbo or in a vacuum. Intellectually, the students doubted the legitimacy of the knowledge they gained; emotionally, they felt abandoned and disoriented. It has been suggested that some students did not possess the recognition rules, and most did not know the realisation rules for this educational context. The results reported in this chapter have also pointed to a strong clash between the students' interpretations of the teaching practices they experienced in the online context and the teaching staff's intentions for this form of practice. This clash is closely scrutinised in the following, final chapter. This remaining chapter also draws conclusions from the findings presented so far in Chapters 4, 5 and 6, discusses the implications of these findings for the study, and offers an agenda for further research.



## **Chapter 7**

### **Conclusion**

#### **7. 1 Introduction**

This research study set out to investigate postgraduate Chinese student sojourners' online learning experiences in a faculty of Education at an Australian university. A case study approach was adopted to capture the complexity of the participants' experiences. The study comprised data from focus groups with students (Stage 1), individual teacher interviews and unit documents (Stage 2), and multi-session interviews with individual students (Stage 3). The thesis drew upon three theories to analyse the students' prior educational experiences, the teaching practices in the online context, and relations between the two. The theories also helped to show how these relations shaped the students' learning experiences in the online units. These theories were Berry's acculturation theory (1980, 1997a, 2005), Bernstein's theory of educational knowledge codes (1977, 1990, 2000), and Maton's Legitimation Code Theory (Maton, 2000, 2007, 2009; Moore & Maton, 2001). The purpose of the present chapter is to discuss the key findings of the study in light of these theoretical perspectives. The chapter has three main parts. The first part reviews the findings presented in chapters 4, 5 and 6. This is followed by a discussion of the conclusions and implications of the research. The final section outlines directions for future research.

#### **7. 2 Summary and discussion of findings**

The main findings from the study are summarised and discussed in relation to each of the three research questions. Sections 7.2.1, 7.2.2 and 7.2.3 recap the findings relevant to the student participants' heritage educational culture (Question 1), their host educational culture (Question 2), and the case study students' online educational experiences in Australia (Question 3), respectively. In each section, the findings are analysed in terms of Bernstein's three message systems – curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. Each section closes with a discussion synthesising findings in terms of Maton's legitimation codes of specialisation.

### **7.2.1 Characterisation of the teaching practices in the students' formative educational context**

This section addresses the first research question:

*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?*

The study answers this question by characterising the educational practices in China as experienced by the student sojourners involved in the study. Data used to address this question was collected from the three focus groups, which comprised informants from different faculties, and supplemented by relevant information from the case study student interviews. For clarity it should be emphasised that the aim is not to present an account of Chinese education per se but rather of the educational dispositions of students with experience of Chinese education (their heritage educational culture), as revealed by their accounts of these experiences.

#### **7.2.1.1 Subject content strongly bounded in the educational context**

The Chinese curriculum was experienced by the student participants in this study as strongly bounded in the educational context. According to these students, it is overloaded with content knowledge, allowing few opportunities to use the knowledge gained. Content knowledge to be learned is determined by the teacher, which is limited to the contents of the textbook and of the teacher's lectures. Knowledge beyond the context of a specific study unit, on the other hand, is largely excluded from the curriculum. This included knowledge obtained through other study units, as well as personal experiences in everyday life. In other words, the boundaries between the subject content and both other academic knowledge and everyday knowledge are sharply demarcated, which indicates relatively strong internal and external classification of knowledge (+C of ER).

Learning in this Chinese context means gaining a thorough understanding of content knowledge, which is to be achieved by accumulating as much new information as possible. Unanimously, the students expressed the belief that quantity of knowledge led to quality of understanding. That is, the larger the quantity of information that the learners collect, the deeper their understanding of the object being studied. Judging by

the students' remarks, however, learning to make connections between the segments of knowledge they had accumulated was largely absent from the curriculum. Also of importance is mastery of the subject content through rigorous exercises and tests about the content. The students explained that this procedure helped to build a 'solid' foundation of knowledge. Once a solid foundation of knowledge is established in the educational context, one's capability to apply this knowledge to real-life situations is assured.

To summarise, the student participants experienced a highly insulated curriculum in their previous educational settings in China. This strongly bounded knowledge indicates relatively strong classification of knowledge, i.e. stronger classification of the epistemic relation (+C of ER). Moreover, the learning of content knowledge was felt to be emphasised in this curriculum. Anything beyond the boundary of a study unit, such as other forms of educational knowledge and one's everyday practice, was not considered germane to the learning of the particular subject content in such a context. The students' experiences of the curriculum can therefore be regarded as involving stronger classification that emphasises content knowledge – that is, the epistemic relation with respect to the curriculum (+C of ER). The emphasis on accumulating segments of content knowledge further specifies that it is an emphasis on the epistemic relation to *atomised* knowledge or knowledge that is broken into small fragments among which the connections are downplayed. On the other hand, in contrast to the recurring references to content knowledge, the students made very few remarks about their professional lives and experiences beyond the specific educational context. This suggests that in their experiences of the Chinese curriculum, personal knowledge developed by individual learners beyond the educational context was considered less significant. To put it another way, the curriculum did not distinguish knowers, which indicates weaker classification of the social relation (-C of SR).

#### **7.2.1.2 Visible pedagogy**

The teaching methods practiced in China can be characterised as strongly sequenced and paced. The subject content is taught in a pre-established, highly-organised sequence, usually following the table of contents in the textbook or a list of learning materials pre-arranged by the teacher. Hence, the students are well aware of the order

of the content to be studied from the beginning of a semester and are able to predict the progress of their knowledge development in every stage of their studies. It is therefore relatively strong framing of knowledge (+F of ER). In terms of the sequence of learning activities, discussion or hands-on activities are always preceded by lectures, and accompanied by explicit instructions and examples. The lecture is deemed to be the core element of the instructional procedures, so the capability to deliver a high quality lecture distinguishes a good teacher from a poor one. Specifically, a good lecture was depicted by the students as a well-prepared and clearly structured presentation with the intent to help learners understand the content step-by-step. The procedures for learning the subject content in this pedagogy, therefore, involve relatively strong framing (+F of ER).

As with sequencing, the pacing of student learning is also in the explicit control of the teacher. Again, it is stronger framing of the epistemic relation with respect to teaching (and learning) the subject content. In aiming to cover all the content included in the curriculum, Chinese teachers often move classes at a fast pace. In maintaining this fast pace, they also tend to cater to the class as a group, downplaying the needs of individuals who may have difficulties keeping up. The teacher's principal responsibility is to structure the teaching in a way that is conducive to effective and efficient learning of the content by students, and the student's main role is to keep up with the pace of the whole group (group pacing). As a consequence, students come to adopt a common repertoire of learning behaviours compatible with this environment. These include waiting for certain teacher cues before venturing to speak in class, and only articulating their opinions if they are certain that the opinions will benefit the whole class. In addition, students are also encouraged to adopt the learning strategy of listening to the lecture quietly, but processing information actively in their minds. Overall, implicit in this pedagogy is that learners have similar prior knowledge, undergo similar intellectual development and are seeking the same knowledge. This means weaker classification and framing of knowers. The social aspects of knowers, with respect to personal backgrounds and practices, and personal preferences for learning and speed of learning, is of relatively little significance in this pedagogy. The social relation characterising the pedagogy therefore is relatively weak (-C and -F of SR or SR-).

The pedagogical relationship in the Chinese context exhibits a strong hierarchy, in that learners were described as having little say in most respects of their interactions with the teacher – relatively strong framing. Overall, it is in the main a relationship of the teacher delivering content to students. In view of this nature of the relationship, the knowledge base of a teacher is a matter of supreme importance for Chinese learners – relatively strong framing of the epistemic relation. An ideal teacher in this context is described by the students in this study as one who possesses expert knowledge, selects valuable content to teach, shares insights from an expert perspective, and offers students clear guidance about the best way to learn. A good teacher is also perceptive of students' mistakes. He or she alerts students to these mistakes as well as instructing the students how to rectify them. These teaching strategies manifest visible pedagogy, which, according to the students, provides them with a “smooth pathway” for learning.

Compared with the strong focus on their perceptions of teachers, the students gave little account of interacting with their peers for intellectual development in Chinese higher education. This small number of references to their peers suggests that the role of peers was not emphasised in this environment. An exception to this was the students' mention of the self-organised study groups. The purpose of convening these student study groups in the Chinese context was to gather information about the subject content in preparation for exams, rather than for sharing personal opinions or interpretations of the content. That is, the social relation to knowers with regard to personal perspectives is less significant (SR-).

In summary, the teacher in the Chinese pedagogical context is viewed by these students as embodying expert content knowledge, and having the ability to teach this knowledge to students through clear procedures. The teacher has explicit control over the selection and ordering of content, the rate at which the learner is to learn this content, and student conduct in the learning environment. These instructional practices are realisations of explicit criteria of knowledge, explicit sequencing and pacing rules, and explicit hierarchical rules, which epitomise a visible pedagogy. The strong teacher control within this pedagogical context shows relatively strong framing of the procedures for learning content knowledge, i.e. +F of ER. On the other hand, the self-effacing roles played by learners, illustrated by group pacing, students'

classroom behaviours and learning strategies, and the form of their participation in self-organised study groups, indicate the pedagogy de-emphasises learners as knowers. This shows a relatively weak social relation to the knower with respect to the personal dimension of learning (SR-).

### **7.2.1.3 *Explicit evaluative criteria***

According to the students, the measures of achievement in Chinese education are made transparent to learners. In brief, the bases of success are effort, concentration and the willingness to withhold one's subjective views. A significant part of the assessment is exams that require correct, textbook-based answers. According to the students, to achieve the best marks, one needs to study hard and forego any personal opinions that conflict with the standardised answers. The emphases on students displaying the content knowledge they have gained and on explicit evaluative criteria show that knowledge is strongly bounded in the educational context and strongly controlled by the teacher – stronger classification and framing of the epistemic relation: +C and +F of ER or ER+.

Meanwhile, the students' emphasis that they had to suppress their personal views in order to achieve good marks on exams indicates student performances are judged against shared criteria external to individual learners. This highlights that the criteria are not in the knowers but outside them. As for assessment that is not exam-based, the students' accounts indicate that learners have easy access to exemplary assignments, on which they are encouraged to model their work. They also receive corrective feedback from the teacher instructing them on how they can improve their work. Only when a student has demonstrated the ability to meet these basic criteria is his or her creativity appreciated. Nevertheless, how creativity is rewarded remains unclear. The closest reference to this issue was that adopting a 'different' perspective to their peers in written assignments may earn a student a higher mark. By equating creativity with being different from the majority, the students highlighted the focus of the assessment method on comparing each learner's performance with the norm, rather than on evaluating the learner's personal perspective for its own sake. This indicates that despite some opportunities for the expression of personal views, the legitimacy of student performances still resides in criteria outside learners rather than within them

and, hence, in the epistemic relation to knowledge rather than the social relation to the knower.

The Chinese teacher also evaluates students' performances in class. The means of securing good marks in class, the students said, are made clear to learners – that is, by regularly attending classes, being attentive in class, and by completing the tasks assigned to them. Overall, the evaluative criteria for both exam and non exam-based assessment appear to be explicit to students in this learning environment, showing that the pedagogy is visible to learners. The students felt the evaluative criteria of this form of pedagogy are fair and attainable.

To sum up, the measures of achievement in Chinese education show an emphasis on explicit criteria for evaluating learners' attainment of content knowledge and also an emphasis on standardised learner performances (i.e. the epistemic relation). By contrast, learners' personal views and interpretations of the content knowledge (i.e. the social relation) are de-emphasised. The primary learner traits given credence are perseverance and willingness to comply.

Although these key features of Chinese education seem to be consistent with the descriptions of Chinese education found in prior research, this prior research did not identify the different emphases of Chinese education in terms of curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment. Nor did it analyse the underlying principles structuring these three message systems. There has been a strong tendency for researchers to attribute the characteristics of Chinese education to teacher-centred pedagogy (Cortazzi & Jin, 2001; Kember, 2000, 2001; Li 2001; Nield, 2004). These previous studies focused on examining the sociocultural factors that shaped Chinese learners' 'docility disposition' (Biggs, 1996, p.61). These factors include emphasis on effort (Chen, Lee & Stevenson, 1996; Hau & Salili, 1996), harmonious and hierarchical relationships, and conformity (Chan, 1999; Lee, 1996; Yum, 1994) in Chinese societies. To the best of the researcher's knowledge, the present study is the first to systematically examine how Chinese educational characteristics are manifested in curriculum, pedagogy and assessment, and to analyse the relations among them.

#### **7.2.1.4 Summary of students' discussions about their heritage educational culture**

This section synthesises the preceding discussions of the teaching practices in the Chinese context. The Chinese curriculum, pedagogy and assessment the students had experienced all manifested a relatively strong epistemic relation to knowledge and a relatively weak social relation to the knower (ER+, SR-), but these relations were realised in different ways in the three message systems. In terms of curriculum, a stronger epistemic relation was realised in the form of an emphasis on content knowledge, and a weaker social relation was manifested as a downplaying of personal knowledge. In pedagogy, a stronger epistemic relation was realised as an emphasis on the procedures for delivering the teacher's expert knowledge about the subject content, and a weaker social relation was manifested as a de-emphasis on the personal dimension of the learning process. Finally, in assessment, a stronger epistemic relation was realised through explicit criteria for evaluating learners' states of knowledge, and a weaker social relation was manifested as a downplaying of evaluative criteria internal to the learner.

In short, in all three message systems, the object of knowledge (what a knowledge claim is about) is valued whilst the subject of knowledge (the person who is making the knowledge claim) is downplayed. The basis of specialisation resides in an extensive base of content knowledge and the right procedures for obtaining the knowledge. Educational practices in this context, hence, were experienced by the student participants as representing a knowledge code (ER+, SR-). As previously argued, it is a particular kind of knowledge code, one that emphasises *atomised* content knowledge.

Moreover, judging by the students' accounts of the formation of self-organised study groups, a learning community formed in this context is knowledge-oriented. The ideal knower is a *communal* knower, which refers to a group of knowers helping one another to meet the same pre-determined evaluative criteria by contributing their share of effort. It is communal in terms of who is learning what for the community, not in the sense of their activity or knowledge. That is, although the learners congregate to share the information they have, their learning activities are conducted individually, and there is little knowledge created based on the merging of the information they



contribute. It can be anticipated that the Chinese student sojourners in the case studies of this research had brought with them to the online environment aspirations and dispositions congruent with the knowledge-code pedagogic practices they had experienced in China.

## **7.2.2 Characterisation of the constructivist teaching practices in the online units**

This section addresses the second research question:

*What are the characteristics of the online teaching practices in the online environment at the Australian university, including the pedagogical beliefs underpinning them?*

The section provides a characterisation of the instructional strategies adopted by eight teachers of the online units in the Faculty of Education. The findings are based on interview data, corroborated by an analysis of eight example unit outlines provided by the teaching staff. Overall, the findings indicate that the teacher participants were in strong support of a constructivist-inspired teaching approach, and that this approach underpinned the online units they discussed.

### **7.2.2.1 Blurred boundaries between subject content and everyday knowledge**

The analysis of the teacher interviews shows a blurring of the boundaries between the subject content in the online units they taught and both other academic knowledge and everyday knowledge. It is therefore characterised by weaker internal and external classification of knowledge (-C of ER). The teachers designed their online units based on constructivist teaching principles (e.g. situated learning or authentic learning). They explained that these online units required learners to integrate into the learning context their experiences in other study units as well as in their professional and everyday lives. Recognising the diverse disciplinary and professional backgrounds of their students, the teachers emphasised that the curriculum embraced and aimed to accommodate these differences. To accomplish this, one teaching strategy adopted by most teachers was to encourage learners to treat the reading materials as resources rather than compulsory content of a study unit. This meant that there was relatively

little core content knowledge that students were required to learn in these online units. Students were expected to be selective and make their own decisions about the relevance of the readings to their respective interests and practices beyond the educational context. The rationale behind this strategy was that, according to the teachers, content knowledge is of little value if learned in isolation of the learner's real-life context. The weaker boundaries between what is considered to be legitimate knowledge in the educational context and what each learner deems to be legitimate knowledge point to relatively weak classification of the epistemic relation that downplays content knowledge (-C of ER). This weaker classification of the curriculum is also illustrated in the open-ended assessment tasks, which were said to allow learners to pursue the topics of interest to them. In fact, most of the teaching staff reported encouraging students to negotiate with them if a particular assignment did not suit the students.

The reason why content knowledge was downplayed as less important in defining legitimate knowledge in the online units was that the teachers viewed every learner as already possessing a wealth of legitimate knowledge by virtue of their experiences beyond the educational context. As the boundary separating what is legitimate and what is not is around each knower, the social relation to the knower can be said to be relatively strong (+C of SR). Another illustration of this stronger social relation characterising the curriculum is that the teachers stressed content knowledge was subject to learners' personal interpretations. They also stated that the aim of a postgraduate programme was to assist learners in cultivating ways of knowing and creating their own knowledge, rather than in teaching new knowledge. For this reason, learning was described by some teachers as a 'transformative,' 'disruptive' and 'personal' process, during which students are confronted with new concepts and approaches to learning, which eventually reshapes their existing knowledge and enables them to develop new patterns of thinking.

In summary, the blurred boundaries between content knowledge and other categories of knowledge indicate weaker classification of the epistemic relation that downplays content knowledge (-C of ER). This curriculum emphasises personal contexts, practices and experiences beyond the subject area – that is, the social relation to the knower (+C of SR). Personal knowledge developed on these bases is considered to be

legitimate knowledge. Since every learner is believed to possess lived experiences, every learner is viewed as a legitimate knower, who is in an expert position to interpret the content knowledge according to his or her experiences. Not only did the teaching staff state that teaching content knowledge was not the major focus of their practices, but they also highlighted the transformation of learners' personal views, values, attitudes and approaches to learning as the most desirable learning outcome. In short, the object of learning in this type of curriculum is an ability to merge everyday knowledge with content knowledge covered in the unit rather than the content knowledge itself. The social relation to the knower, therefore, is valued, as the individual is the basis of all knowledge claims in this context.

#### **7.2.2.2 *Invisible pedagogy***

In relation to pedagogy, the constructivist teaching procedures enacted in the online environment are, according to the teachers' descriptions, characterised by weak sequencing, pacing and hierarchical rules. These characteristics are typical of invisible pedagogy, and they indicate relatively weak control of knowledge by the teacher, so it is weaker framing of the epistemic relation with respect to the teaching of content knowledge (-F of ER). In fact, some teachers expressed the opinion that sequential and strongly-paced teaching (i.e. stronger framing of knowledge) exemplifies a 'traditional', 'instructivist' approach, insisting that this approach is inimical to the authentic and constructivist instructional principles that inform their own practices. The teachers discussed two ways of sequencing the learning tasks in their online units: one was a project-based design, in which every assessment task is a component of a major project; and the other was a parallel, modular design, in which each assessment task follows the same structure but tackles a different issue. The teachers argued that both of these designs are congruent with constructivist principles because all the assessment tasks are complex. In terms of pacing, learners were expected to move freely in these online units provided they met the deadline set for submitting each assessment task. Without exception, all of the teachers noted that the weak pacing of learning is the greatest strength of online learning, especially for postgraduate learners.

In discussing the pedagogical relationship between teacher and student, the teaching staff defined their roles as facilitators, most of them stressing that they did not claim

expert knowledge of the subject content and thus did not intend to act as a ‘guru’, ‘sage on stage,’ or ‘giver of knowledge’. Instead, some identified their relationships with students as a ‘partnership’, in which they assume the role of a ‘co-learner’ and ‘critical friend’. As a consequence, the teachers viewed their principal responsibility as creating and maintaining an environment conducive to learner engagement. In this environment, direct instruction is of little significance. Again, the framing of the epistemic relation with respect to the teaching of content knowledge is shown to be relatively weak. For example, the teachers said they did not deliver lectures or give detailed instructions about how to conduct a task in their online units. Moreover, during the interviews, none of the teachers mentioned that they modelled for students what the students were supposed to do when conducting the tasks. This is because, to paraphrase one teacher, the pedagogical design intended to put students in situations where these skills were required, rather than ‘didactically’ teaching students the skills needed to perform a task. In the process of completing complex tasks, the teachers believed students would develop these essential skills.

Another role played by the teacher when this constructivist form of pedagogy is used is to provide support to guide students in accomplishing their tasks. The types of support mentioned include responding to individual needs, organising discussion activities, and sending reminders or updates about the online unit. Nevertheless, the teachers stressed that it was up to the learner to utilise the support. This focus on learner choice shows that learners had relatively strong control of their own learning processes. The pedagogy thus exhibits a relatively strong social relation to the knower with respect to the knower’s individuality in choosing what he or she considers appropriate for his or her learning (+F of SR). The emphasis on the knower’s individuality is also illustrated by the teachers’ attitudes towards the building of a learning community in their online units. In accord with their constructivist beliefs, the teachers generally encouraged peer interactions and agreed that collaboration was valuable. Typically, online discussion activities were used to enhance class interactivity and to facilitate the building of a learning community. However, despite this emphasis on the value of a learning community, the interviews revealed that students’ participation in discussion activities was often non-mandatory in these teachers’ practices. The teachers argued this was because their pedagogy places emphasis on flexibility and adaptability – in other words, learner choice and, hence,

an emphasis on the social relation to the knower. For the same reason, most of the assessable tasks in the online units offered by these teachers were designed to be completed individually.

Meanwhile, the teachers' statements about the positive effects of a learning community demonstrated another way in which a stronger social relation was exhibited in the pedagogy. In their opinions, online discussion activities help to foster a sense of community in two major ways: one is to facilitate learners to co-construct knowledge with their peers, and the other is to allow learners to build and maintain an online social presence by sharing their personal aspects. In encouraging learners to co-construct knowledge, the teachers believed that every learner's personal knowledge is legitimate educational knowledge. According to the teachers, students' postings formed a repository of information and perspectives, which could be interacted with or drawn upon by all students when conducting their tasks. In terms of learners sharing their personal aspects, the emphasis is on knowers legitimating their personal experiences as being the basis of insight. Furthermore, both ways of fostering a sense of community suggest the benefits of learners being present in the learning context, developing their social relationships with one another.

In conclusion, the teaching procedures used by the teacher participants embody an invisible pedagogy. The teacher's control over the sequencing and pacing of student learning is implicit; imparting knowledge by the teacher to the learner is downplayed. The epistemic relation to the procedures for teaching content knowledge is thus not significant in shaping the form of pedagogy (-F of ER). Primacy is given to learners acting in terms of making their own decisions about how to learn and in creating their individualised knowledge – that is, the social relation to the knower (+F of SR). An ideal knower in this educational context can, therefore, be described as an *individualised* knower. The aim of this pedagogy, in brief, is to develop learners as knowers rather than to advance their knowledge relating to the subject content. Moreover, although the membership and the manner of engagement in a learning community remain an individual choice, the development of a learning community in which learners share personal perspectives is still a goal of this pedagogy. Accordingly, the ideal knower is an individualised but *socialising* knower.

### **7.2.2.3 Open-ended evaluative criteria**

In terms of assessment, both the teacher interviews and unit outlines indicate that the predominant forms of assessment were through authentic tasks, projects and personal reflections. All three methods require learners to form associations between the content knowledge and their respective, real-life contexts. As there are potentially a variety of learner contexts, the criteria to compare any two learners' performances are downplayed. Put another way, the assessment recognises multiple legitimate performances. Explicit evaluative criteria are considered to be less significant in judging student performances, so it is weaker framing of the epistemic relation (-F of ER). In addition, the majority of the assignments in the online units examined did not involve reproduction of or elaboration on the subject content. Although some contained a component asking learners to critically analyse the content knowledge, learners were reminded to conduct the analysis in light of their personal experiences and practices beyond the educational context. In short, what is being evaluated is how a learner develops his or her individualised knowledge rather than what he or she knows about the subject content.

The data highlighted that what the teachers valued as the bases for achievement in the online units were the abilities of learners to construct individualised knowledge, and to reflect on their own learning. Specifically, individualised knowledge refers to the knowledge every learner creates for his or her unique real-life situation. The teachers noted that the assessment methods involved learners in interpreting the content knowledge and justifying their interpretations by reflecting on their own practices. Thus, personalised thinking is emphasised, indicating a stronger social relation to the knower (+F of SR). In speaking of learners' self-reflective ability, the teachers also indicated their expectation that learners would show their engagement in the tasks at a level they considered appropriate for themselves, as well as monitor their own progress through personal reflections. This focus on learners setting their own targets and evaluating their learning outcomes suggests an emphasis on self-evaluation, again showing a stronger social relation to the knower (+F of SR). To facilitate learners in achieving personalised thinking and self-evaluation, the assessment criteria were generalised in order to remain open to interpretations and negotiation.

In the teachers' descriptions, an ideal learner in this context is characterised by particular attitudes and personal traits. These attitudes relate to enthusiasm about *being there*, wanting to explore, discover, take risks, and seek help; as well as being willing to participate and share. As for personal traits, an ideal learner is independent, self-directed, confident and reflective. The emphasis on these social aspects of a learner indicates a strongly bounded and controlled social relation (i.e. stronger classification and stronger framing of the social relation) (+C and +F of SR or SR+). In other words, the social aspects of the knower form the basis of legitimate insight in this educational context. It is a particular kind of social relation, one that refers to the knower's attitude of wanting to engage in the learning context, rather than an innate or cultivated disposition, or other socially-based categories such as social class, gender or ethnicity.

To sum up, what is prioritised in this assessment approach is the social dispositions of the knower rather than explicit procedures for ascertaining the right answers. The particular attention drawn to the learner's apparent control over determining the legitimacy of the knowledge they have created and their own learning processes indicates an emphasis on the social relation to the knower and a downplaying of the epistemic relation to content knowledge (ER-, SR+). All this was substantiated by the teachers' shared definition of an ideal knower, in which learner dispositions (i.e. attitudes and personal traits) are given more weight than their knowledge and skills.

Overall, the online units investigated in this study reflect a particular type of educational approach, one combining online flexible learning and student-centred, constructivist-inspired instructional strategies. This combined approach is gaining popularity in higher education (Collis & Moonen, 2001; Kirkpatrick & Jakupiec, 1999), especially amongst supporters of the new technologies (Herrington, et al, 2005; Huang, 2002; Jonassen, Davidson, Collins, Campbell & Hagg, 1995; Tam, 2000). As pointed out in Chapter 2, thus far, the benefits of this educational approach are largely based on claims rather than evidence. Empirical studies have generated mixed results.

#### **7.2.2.4 Summary of teachers' discussions about the host educational culture**

To synthesise the foregoing discussions by the teachers about their online units, the constructivist instructional strategies these teachers preferred are characterised by weaker classification and framing of the epistemic relation, and stronger classification and framing of the social relation. Together these give a knower code (ER-, SR+). These modalities were realised in differing ways in the three message systems of these educational practices. In curriculum, a weaker epistemic relation was realised as a downplaying of content knowledge, and a stronger social relation was shown in the primacy given to each learner's personal knowledge on the basis of his or her professional and everyday experiences. In other words, the curriculum values the knower having been there, in the real world, experiencing things personally. In terms of pedagogy, a weaker epistemic relation was realised as a de-emphasis on the teacher delivering the subject content and structuring student learning, while a stronger social relation was manifested in the valuing of self-regulated learners creating and co-constructing knowledge. This is an emphasis on knowers being present in the current learning context, learning by themselves as well as from one another. Finally, in assessment, a relatively weak epistemic relation was realised through implicit evaluative criteria, as well as through multiple measures of student performances. A stronger social relation was manifested in the form of knowers thinking and evaluating themselves. In brief, educational practices of this type emphasise the subjects of knowledge claims (i.e. the social relation to the knower), while downplaying the objects of knowledge (i.e. the epistemic relation to knowledge).

Furthermore, the knower code that specialises these online units is a particular kind of knower code. It emphasises the knower being simultaneously a *personalised*, *individualised* and *socialising* knower. He or she is a personalised knower in the sense of the knowledge created, and an individualised and socialising knower in relation to the activities he or she does. To be specific, knowledge is constructed by each knower on the basis of his or her *personal* context and experiences through highly *individualised* tasks, hence a personalised and individualised knower. Along with this emphasis on the knower's individuality, the teachers articulated the educational value of knowers *socialising* and sharing perspectives in a learning community (socialising knowers). However, since there is a lack of stronger framing through instructional



procedures to foster knowers' interactions in the community, it can be said that a greater emphasis is placed on the learner being an individualised than being a socialising knower. Finally, the form of learning communities promoted in this online environment, unlike the knowledge-oriented study groups in the students' past experiences in China (Section 7.2.1.4), clearly centres around the knowers.

### **7.2.3 Student sojourners' experiences of constructivist-inspired pedagogies in the online context**

This section is devoted to the third research question:

*How do the student sojourners experience the teaching practices in the online environment at the university?*

The findings are drawn from extensive interview data collected from case studies of seven Chinese students. As noted earlier, the teaching approach employed by the teacher participants for their online units is underpinned by constructivist-inspired pedagogies. The seven case study students' accounts of the teaching procedures in their online units corresponded closely to those described by the teachers. To reiterate, the online learning environments experienced by the students are characterised by: blurred boundaries between the subject content and other forms of knowledge; weak sequencing, pacing and hierarchical rules; and implicit evaluative criteria. Therefore, the third research question equates to asking: *How did student sojourners from a knowledge-code background experience a knower-code learning environment?* As with previous sections, the findings will be discussed in terms of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment.

#### **7.2.3.1 Devalued knowledge**

The curriculum in the online units, which exhibits weaker classification of the epistemic relation, was experienced negatively by the students. The students did not see what they could obtain from the reading materials and peer discussions as legitimate educational knowledge. This indicates an experience of a lack of content knowledge in the learning environment. They considered that solitary reading was not adequate to help them learn because they were unsure whether their own understanding and interpretations of the content were correct or 'on the right track'.

As for peer discussions, the students dismissed them as ‘pointless’ and ‘chaotic’ as their teachers often did not provide conclusive comments at the end of a discussion or verify whether the information contributed by their peers was legitimate. In addition, the discussions revolved around other students’ individual contexts, which the participants felt had little connection with their own situations and, therefore, little relevance. As a result, many said they only read the postings that had attracted feedback from their teachers.

The students also felt that the quantity of knowledge they gained in their online units was insufficient – again, an experience of a lack of content knowledge. They attributed this to the assignment-based curriculum. They commented that the assignments did not require them to read all the unit materials, so they could easily avoid exploring the issues they did not fully understand. As a consequence, they found the knowledge they gained was limited to the topics they chose for their assignments. When speaking of their learning outcomes, many concluded they were unable to claim that they had obtained the content knowledge they viewed as essential in the online units. Overall, the students experienced knowledge being unbounded and uncontrolled in their online units. For them, this meant an absence of legitimate knowledge (ER-), and they expressed feelings of insecurity, anxiety and dejection over this vacuum of knowledge.

The students struggled to cope with the curricular emphasis on the merging of everyday and educational knowledge in their online units. Some of them did not consider their personal experiences or contexts to be of importance to their education in Australia. These students could not recognise the legitimacy of the weaker classification of the epistemic relation; they did not possess the recognition rules for this form of curriculum. Other students showed they possessed these rules, but they did not have the realisation rules. When attempting to draw on their everyday knowledge, these students experienced difficulties and feelings of inferiority because they thought their experiences beyond the educational context were inadequate. The coping strategies reported by the student participants included: ignoring the requirement of using everyday knowledge and carrying on preparing their assignments as if they were traditional argumentative essays; and trying to fulfil this requirement of using everyday knowledge by manufacturing superficial links between

the content knowledge and their limited experiences. Both types of responses indicate that the students did not legitimize their personal experiences, pointing to an experience of the curriculum being characterised by a relatively weak social relation (SR-). This experience is also shown in the students' disregard for the opinions and personal experiences of their peers expressed in the online discussions, mentioned above.

In sum, the students deemed the knowledge offered to them in the online environment to be deficient in quality and quantity. In terms of quality, they saw the knowledge available as yet to be validated by someone who is in the position to make valid knowledge claims. In relation to quantity, they felt the assignment-based design constrained their opportunities to acquire a comprehensive understanding of the subject content. In addition, the students did not regard themselves as legitimate knowers. They either failed to recognise the value of their personal knowledge and experiences in their current learning, or they felt they could not realise the right performance because their experiences were not of 'the right kind' of knower. Not seeing themselves as already possessing knowledge and perceiving that legitimate knowledge was inaccessible, the students underwent experiences that exhibit relatively weak epistemic and social relations (ER-, SR-). Emotional reactions associated with these experiences included feelings of inferiority, insecurity, frustration, anxiety, powerlessness, depression and guilt.

### ***7.2.3.2 Non-legitimate pedagogy***

The students did not view the invisible pedagogy employed in their online units as legitimate pedagogy. The weaker framing of the epistemic relation characterising this form of pedagogy was experienced negatively by the students, who saw the weak sequencing and pacing rules enacted in their online units as teaching without a systematic plan. The students were of the opinion that they were provided with reading materials and three deadlines for the assessment tasks, and were then left alone to learn without much guidance by the teaching staff. Some stated that a serious flaw of this form of teaching was that they did not know what they were supposed to have achieved after doing the readings, so were unable to judge their own progression in the online units.

The detrimental impact of weak pacing on the students' learning was demonstrated in various ways. One was that the majority of the students felt that, in the absence of any organised class activity between assignments, the sum of their learning took place in short intensive segments just before each of the three or four assignments was due. The knowledge gained in this manner, as one student remarked, was not likely to be digested well. Another detrimental impact was that many students considered that the low levels of peer interaction in the online units were exacerbated by the weak pacing of learning. They argued that since students were often in different stages of preparation for their assignments, there were few common concerns that they could discuss.

The students also spoke unfavourably of the weak hierarchy in the pedagogical relationships in their online units, and in fact held it to be responsible for the poor quality of their learning. In brief, they thought a teacher's expertise in the subject area puts him or her in a higher position than learners, and that removing the teacher from that position, as in their online units, meant depriving learners of access to expert knowledge. Terms like 'consultant', 'assistant' and 'tour guide' were used by the students to describe the roles played by their teachers of the online units, in contrast to the role of an expert or a mentor that the students expected their teachers to play. These terms used by the students highlight that they thought their teachers neglected to systematically teach them content knowledge and instruct them how to conduct the learning tasks. In short, the absence of the teacher in the online environment was experienced as a lack of structure, procedures and explicit guidelines for learning content knowledge. Put another way, the weaker epistemic relation characterising the pedagogy (ER-) was felt to be a deficiency.

In terms of peer relationships, none of the students experienced being involved in a learning community in their online units. The students stressed that they went through their online units individually. According to them, the consequences were that they were unable to tell how well they were doing by comparing their own progress with that of others, and that they could not establish interpersonal relationships with their peers and thereby gain emotional support from them. In brief, the students did not become part of the knower community, which exemplifies an experience of a

relatively weak social relation (SR-). Inextricably linked to this issue is that while the students said they longed for a learning community, they all reported lacking sufficient incentive to participate in peer discussions online. The main reason given by the students related to their lack of confidence in the authority of peer perspectives, discussed previously in Section 7.2.3.1. The students did not consider the information exchanged in peer discussions to be valid educational knowledge, as they did not think personal knowledge is legitimate knowledge. Put another way, they did not see their peers as legitimate knowers (SR-).

In summary, the students' experiences of the pedagogical environment of their online units can be best summarised as 'studying in a vacuum' (an expression used by one participant) without intellectual stimulation or any sense of belonging. The lack of intellectual stimulation was evidently associated with the students' perception that they received little direct instruction and guidance from the teachers about how they should engage in their learning. In this experience, the weaker epistemic relation characterising the pedagogy did not lead to feelings of empowerment but rather to feelings of being in a vacuum where procedures and methods for obtaining knowledge were missing (ER-). The students did not appear to know how to deal with the space for personal choices in this pedagogy. Specifically, they did not appreciate being given the choices as to the sequence, pace and ways of learning because they considered that the teachers could make more informed and appropriate decisions in these aspects. This opinion indicates once again the students' perception of themselves as non-legitimate knowers (SR-). This time it is in the sense that they did not feel they already possessed the knowledge concerning the appropriate procedures and methods for learning the subject content. Thus, this experience can again be regarded as exhibiting a relatively weak social relation to the knower. Finally, the students' feelings that they did not belong to a learning community shows that they did not have membership of a group of knowers (SR-). Under these circumstances, the student participants articulated strong feelings of loneliness, isolation and abandonment, and in a number of cases, desperation and depression.

### **7.2.3.3 *Ambiguous evaluative criteria***

As with their experiences of the curriculum and the pedagogy, the students' experiences of the assessment approach in their online units were also negative. They expressed considerable concern about a lack of specificity in the evaluative criteria, and most of them felt the descriptions of the assessment tasks and requirements were ambiguous. Consistently, they also voiced frustration at not being able to obtain clear instructions from the teachers when they approached them for help. In effect, the students experienced the weaker epistemic relation characterising evaluative criteria (ER-) as hampering their capability to produce quality assignments. Acknowledging that they understood there was no correct answer to the issues they were studying, they argued that there was still a right, or more appropriate, direction for their responses in the assignments. Yet, they felt they were not being guided towards this direction. In two cases, the students complained about being unfairly penalised because they felt their assignment response was different to what the teacher expected.

According to the students, the harmful effects of the relatively weak epistemic relation characterising the criteria of knowledge would extend beyond their current learning to their future academic pursuits. This view is illustrated by their dismissal of the teachers' feedback about their assignments as containing too little 'substance' to be useful. They said the feedback was too general and that there were few concrete instructions and suggested procedures they could follow to improve their future assignments. As a result of not knowing whether they were heading towards the right direction in conducting their current assignments or what they could do to enhance the quality of their future work, many of the students doubted they were learning at all.

The students' list of the characteristics of a successful learner in their online units abounds with items relating to academic abilities, such as the abilities to read extensively, conduct a literature review and write in the academic genre. Unanimously, they stated that the key to attaining a good mark was to demonstrate in their assignments the knowledge they gained by addressing all the issues raised in the teacher's explanation of the assignment topic. On the other hand, individual thinking in relation to their interpretations of an assessment task and their evaluation of their own performances was of little significance. Personal opinions of the content knowledge were also seen as less important, and often suppressed if these opinions

were at odds with those in the literature. The students' understanding of the basis of success in the online environment and their corresponding coping strategies are indicative of an experience of a weaker social relation (SR-).

In summary, in the students' experiences, the evaluative criteria in their online units were not explicit (ER-), which they felt had a negative impact on their learning. Since they tended to see the content knowledge and skills they gained as the object of assessment, they devalued their personal interpretations of the assessment tasks and downplayed their opinions of the content knowledge (SR-). They sought to fulfil the assessment criteria by displaying their knowledge of the subject matter. Nevertheless, in the absence of explicit guidelines and criteria, the students appeared to be perplexed about which part of their knowledge they should demonstrate in the assignments. In short, the students' experiences of the assessment methods are neither knowledge- or knower-oriented; both the epistemic and social relations characterising the assessment are relatively weak. Many of the students reported feelings of confusion, loss, exasperation and distress about the perceived vagueness of the measurements of achievement in this educational practice. For those who had to take more than one online unit to complete their degrees, feelings of angst and guilt about the time and money they had invested in their education in Australia were even more pronounced.

These findings regarding the student sojourners' online educational experiences depart from those by previous research. The current study does not lend support to past research that has identified positive learning experiences in which students felt empowered or transformed by this form of pedagogy (e.g. Gabriel, 2004; Milhauser, 2006). Instead, this study supports previous research findings indicating learners' expectations were not fulfilled in such environments (e.g. Hara & Kling, 2000; Stodel et al., 2006).

In relation to the literature on Chinese learners' online educational experiences, this study does not support the contention that Chinese students appreciate the temporal and spatial flexibility afforded by online learning (Ku & Lohr, 2003; Thompson & Ku, 2005; Zhao & McDougall, 2008). This could be because as the students in the present research were full-time on-campus students, they were free to attend regular classes

and had no need for these flexibilities. Moreover, unlike previous studies, the research did not find that the student participants showed greater confidence in stating their views online or consider the time they were given to edit what they wanted to articulate online was conducive to their learning (Ku & Lohr, 2003; Thompson & Ku, 2005; Zhao & McDougall, 2008).

The study did, however, confirm some findings from previous research, such as Chinese learners' need for high levels of teacher control and for interpersonal relationships (Tu, 2001; Zhao & McDougall, 2008). Nevertheless, unlike prior research, this study has gone beyond reporting students' anecdotal comments about their online experiences and attributing students' difficulties in learning online to their cultural attributes, such as their collectivist culture and face-saving intentions (see Chapter 2). Instead, the study contributed to the body of research into Chinese students' online experiences by exploring the relations between participants' educational dispositions and the online context in which they were situated.

#### **7.2.3.4 *Summary of students' online educational experiences***

To synthesise the above discussions about the student sojourners' experiences of their online units, the constructivist-inspired teaching practice as it was enacted in the online context did not have an enabling or empowering effect on the students' learning. Rather, the students felt marginalised by this instructional approach. First, they did not see the curriculum as having sufficient content, the pedagogy as involving systematic teaching procedures, or the evaluation as having clear criteria. They experienced an absence of anything knowledge-related: a relatively weak epistemic relation (ER-). Secondly, though the online units required learners to use the knowledge they developed in their professional and everyday lives, the students in this study experienced this knowledge as not legitimate educational knowledge. Moreover, they did not participate in the learning communities or recognise their peers as legitimate knowers, both of which they were expected to do in the online units. The students, therefore, experienced a lack of empowerment or legitimacy as knowers: a relatively weak social relation (SR-). In other words, they experienced the knower-code (ER-, SR+) learning environment as something else: they recognised the lack of knowledge (though not positively) but could not recognise or realise the need



to substitute this with their own experiences, and, in turn, felt illegitimate as knowers. In short, they did not experience the code underpinning their online units as a knower code but rather experienced it as a relativist code (ER-, SR-), an *absence* or vacuum of legitimacy.

This relativist-code experience, compared by one participant to a vacuum, is empty of knowledge and knower. Unable to base their success in the online units on either the knowledge gained or their social positions as knowers, the students felt in limbo, not knowing what to do or what direction to take. The impact of this form of pedagogy included feelings that they were learning very little and a string of concomitant negative emotions that lasted through the student participants' entire experiences of their online units. This understanding of the students' emotions during their processes of adapting to the online learning environment helps to flesh out Berry's acculturation model. As an acculturating individual is unable to cope with the host culture by adjusting their behaviours ('behavioural adjustments'), the psychological conflicts between the desire to maintain his or her original culture and the desire to participate in the host culture gives rise to 'acculturative stress'.

With the three research questions having been addressed using legitimization codes of specialisation, the next section draws these discussions together to offer an explanation as to why the case study students perceived and responded to the online learning environment the way they did.

### **7. 3 Conclusions and implications**

Overall, two main conclusions can be drawn about the online learning experiences of the Chinese student sojourners in this study. First, there was a 'code clash' between the educational dispositions the students brought to the online learning context and the teaching practices in this online context. A code clash refers to a mismatch between the code characterising the way one thinks and acts and the code underpinning the basis of success in the context one is acting within (Lamont & Maton, 2008). Secondly, the students were unable to detect the code regulating the online environment because the knower code underpinning this environment is intrinsically

invisible. This section explores these two conclusions and provides some implications of the research study.

### **7.3.1 Code clash**

The students perceived the constructivist pedagogic practice in their online units as one that did not teach them content, principles, procedures or methods. They also thought the instructional approach did not help them to establish and maintain relationships with the teachers and their peers. It appeared that not being taught explicitly the appropriate ways of acting and communicating in this learning context, the students responded to this context by utilising what they had already known. They responded to an environment specialised by a knower code with the strategies they had previously developed in their formative, knowledge-code educational context. The following three sub-sections provide details about this code clash in relation to curriculum, pedagogy and assessment.

#### **7.3.1.1 Code clash in curriculum**

As previously mentioned in the discussion about the curriculums in students' past and new learning contexts (Sections 7.2.11 and 7.2.2.1), the boundaries between subject knowledge and other categories of knowledge in these two educational contexts have different strengths. In the students' formative education in China, the basis of legitimacy is the quantity of content knowledge accumulated (ER+) and personal experience and knowledge are held to be of relatively little relevance to one's academic pursuit (SR-) – a *knowledge code* (ER+, SR-). In contrast, the teaching practices in the new, online context downplays content knowledge (ER-) and emphasises that it is lived experience rather than possession of content knowledge that renders a learner a legitimate knower. They give priority to learners bringing real-life experiences and personal knowledge to the educational context and value the learner *living through* his or her experiences. What is being highlighted is hence the learner's *presence* (in other words, participation or engagement) in those personal experiences (SR+) – a knower code (ER-, SR+).

The effects of the code clash in curriculum are illustrated in the students' coping strategies and in their perceptions of the knowledge gained in their online units. In terms of coping strategies, the students reacted to the knower-code curriculum in their new environment in two main ways, both underpinned by a knowledge code. The first type of response was made by those who simply did not understand the rules of the game they were playing; they did not possess the recognition rules. These students equated formerly gained experiences and knowledge to 'old' knowledge, arguing that recycling old knowledge was not a good use of their time during their sojourn. Hence, they continued to write their assignments by focusing on supplying content knowledge and demonstrating their understanding of the content by referencing the literature. The second type of reaction was from those who did recognise that the rules of the game in the online environment differed from the ones they were familiar with but they felt they were unable to cope with them. These students did not have the realisation rules. In their interpretations, making connections between subject and everyday knowledge meant searching for separate examples from their past experiences to 'support' the content knowledge they were learning (i.e. existing knowledge). This knowledge-code behaviour is at odds with the teachers' emphasis that learners' personal experiences and practices beyond the educational context give them unique insights into the subject content, thereby allowing them to 'challenge' existing knowledge and 'create' their own knowledge.

In short, the students did not bring themselves to the online learning environment and consequently feel empowered by being able to make knowledge claims based on their unique insights (as intended by the knower-code curriculum). Rather, as illustrated by the two coping strategies, they either continued to focus on obtaining new content knowledge without drawing on their personal experiences at all, or they used their past experiences simply as evidence to support the content knowledge they were learning in their online units. In other words, whether or not the students could recognise what was expected of them, they dealt with these expectations with knowledge-code strategies, which evidently were not compatible with the knower-code learning context.

In terms of the students' perceptions of the knowledge they gained in their online units, in short, they did not consider what they learned to be legitimate educational

knowledge. The students carried over from their prior knowledge-code environment the beliefs that the basis of specialisation resides in an extensive base of subject knowledge, and that this knowledge has to be validated by someone who has an authoritative position in the subject field. From this perspective, the students considered that neither they nor their fellow learners were legitimate knowers. Applying this knowledge-code notion to the online environment, they found the two main learning activities in this context, solitary reading and learner-controlled forum discussions, failed to offer them valid knowledge. This view forms a marked contrast to the teaching staff's knower-code claims that the relevance of content knowledge and legitimate insights are both based on the individual.

### ***7.3.1.2 Code clash in pedagogy***

Having been socialised into visible pedagogy in their previous educational context, the case study students defined good instructional procedures as being strongly sequenced and paced, with the criteria of knowledge explicitly spelled out. The online environment that they entered, by contrast, embraced invisible pedagogy, representing a different set of values. In this environment the teacher designs the learning context for students to “re-arrange and explore” (Bernstein, 1977, p.116); in turn, this design allows the students great freedom in selecting content, structuring their own learning, and regulating their social relationships. Visible pedagogy, focusing on the external performances of learners and explicit criteria of knowledge, is a pedagogic realisation of a knowledge code. On the other hand, invisible pedagogy highlights the internal competencies of learners and the unique realisations of these competencies by each learner, exemplifying a knower code. A mismatch of codes in the pedagogies employed in the students' old and new educational environments is thus evident, offering the potential for a code clash between the students' educational dispositions (as shaped by their previous experience) and the new educational environment. This code clash is further highlighted when the learners' expected roles in these two forms of pedagogy are juxtaposed. Judging by the student participants' accounts, an ideal learner for the visible pedagogy in China is one whose conduct is compliant with the explicit rules that regulate the learning of the whole class. It is clear from the data that the students applied this knowledge-code notion to their new environment in Australia. By contrast, the image of an ideal learner for the invisible pedagogy in the online

units is shown to embody a knower code. That is, in the teachers' views, a successful learner demonstrates his or her engagement, or *presence*, in self-directing his or her learning as well as in creating knowledge individually and collaboratively with others.

The effects of this code clash are exemplified by the students' responses to the weak sequencing, pacing, and hierarchical rules governing the online environment. While these rules are intended by the teaching staff to enhance flexibility and freedom for individual learners to choose their own learning paths, the students experienced this form of teaching as being devoid of systematic instructional procedures. The effects of this code clash are also shown by the students' lack of enthusiasm for participating in the voluntary peer discussion activities in the online units. The students generally devalued these activities because they found the teachers adopting a hands-off approach in conducting the activities. According to the teachers, the purpose of using this approach is to help create a knower-oriented community, in which learners (who the teachers recognise as legitimate knowers) share perspectives and learn from one another. However, the students considered this type of community to be devoid of knowledge they see as valid because they felt the teachers were not playing the gatekeeping role of conferring legitimacy on the personal knowledge brought by learners to the community.

As a result of this code clash, rather than demonstrating their presence by showing that they had taken control over their own learning processes and were engaged in the knower community, as they were expected to do by the teachers of online units, the students articulated feelings of loss and abandonment. This indicates that the code clash in pedagogy indeed marginalised the students in this study – an opposite effect to the aim of learner empowerment intended by constructivist teaching techniques.

#### **7.3.1.3 Code clash in assessment**

A code clash in the students' experiences of the assessment in their online units is manifested by the conflicting bases of distinctiveness in their old and new learning contexts. The student participants brought with them a set of measures of achievement that emphasise the ability to learn and present the states of knowledge (i.e. a knowledge code), but they came into a new environment that downplays these

measures of achievement and rewards personalised ways of thinking and specific learner dispositions instead (i.e. a knower code). Repeatedly, the data shows that the students did not recognise these new ‘rules of the game’, so they continued to use techniques based on a knowledge code to cope with their new environment.

A major effect of using a ‘wrong’ code to deal with their online units is that the students appeared to do exactly the opposite to what they were expected to do in this environment. For example, the teachers involved in this study stated they expect the students in their online units to negotiate with them when assessment requirements did not suit their situations – a knower-code intention. The students, however, construed negotiating with their teachers as an indication of their own incapacity to meet requirements – a knowledge-code response. In another example, the open format of the assessment tasks, according to the teaching staff, were designed to enable learners to select content relevant to their own practices and to construct individualised knowledge – again, a knower-code intention. Nevertheless, the students reacted to this design by choosing the content they had studied before, rather than content relating to their practices, so they could perform better. By making this decision, the students tended to indicate the belief that the assessment methods in the online environment evaluated their states of knowledge – again, a knowledge-code response. This misreading of the knower code underpinning the assessment approach as a knowledge code is also illustrated in how the students prepared their assignments. They reported concentrating on synthesising views from the literature and refraining from adding their personal opinions or discussing their practices that did not concur with the established views in this literature.

The students’ disappointment with their teachers’ feedback of their assignments is another effect of the code clash. The knowledge-code background that helped to shape the students’ conceptions and expectations of education assesses learners by what is *missing* in their work, whereas the online environment assesses what is *present* in their work. The former employs specific criteria so that learners’ performances can be distinguished from each other. The latter, however, views each learner as “the source of the criteria” (Bernstein, 1977, p.119), thereby recognising a variety of legitimate performances. The teachers’ feedback of student assignments in the online units, therefore, contains little information indicating the differences between a student’s

performance and an ideal one because for these teachers there is no single ideal performance. Operating from a knowledge-code perspective, the students were seeking explicit criteria to judge their work against, so they did not find this type of feedback useful.

In conclusion, the students' frustration and dissatisfaction with their educational experiences in the online units resulted from a code clash between the students' educational dispositions (knowledge code) and the online learning environment (knower code). This code clash, as illustrated above, was realised in all three message systems of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. Table 17 summarises the manifestations of the code clash, the students' responses to this online learning environment, and the emotional impact they felt as a result of the code clash in each of these systems.

Table 17. Code clash and its effects

	Curriculum	Pedagogy	Assessment
<b>Participants' past educational experiences</b>	<b>Knowledge code:</b> Emphasises content knowledge; downplays personal knowledge	<b>Knowledge code:</b> Highlights the procedures for teaching expert knowledge about the subject content; downplays the personal dimension of the learning process	<b>Knowledge code:</b> Emphasises explicit evaluative criteria and standardised performances; de-emphasises personal opinions
<b>Constructivist teaching practice in the online context</b>	<b>Knower code:</b> Emphasises learners' experiences and practices beyond the educational context; downplays content knowledge	<b>Knower code:</b> Highlights learners self-regulating themselves and creating knowledge individually and collaboratively; downplays explicit teaching procedures	<b>Knower code:</b> Emphasises learners' evaluating themselves and individualised knowledge; de-emphasises explicit criteria to separate any two learners
<b>Participants' responses to the online context</b>	<b>Relativist code:</b> Did not bring personal experiences to the learning context; experienced a lack knowledge they see as legitimate	<b>Relativist code:</b> Did not show they were engaged in self-directing their learning or involved in the learning community; experienced a deficiency of direct instruction and guidance from the teacher	<b>Relativist code:</b> Did not demonstrate personalised thinking or individualised knowledge; experienced a lack of explicit evaluative criteria
<b>Emotional impact on participants</b>	Feelings of frustration, insecurity, inferiority, anxiety, powerlessness, etc.	Feelings of loneliness, isolation, abandonment, desperation, depression, etc.	Feelings of confusion, loss, anger, distress, guilt, angst, etc.

Now that the code clash has been established, the question that remains is: Why were the student sojourners in this study not able to recognise that their online units

employed a different code to the one they were familiar with? The next section addresses this question.

### **7.3.2 The intrinsically invisible knower code**

The discussions in the previous section suggest that the knower code underpinning the constructivist teaching strategies in the online units rendered two important things invisible to the students in this study: (1) the knowledge to be taught and learned; and (2) the knower code itself. First, the students did not know what they were trying to learn in the learning environment that used this form of pedagogy. For instance, they did not know what they were supposed to accomplish by bringing personal experience or by creating an online presence. Neither did they know how the flexibility of this form of education contributed to their learning, or what their teachers were teaching them. Although many of the students might have heard from their teachers the rationale for adopting this constructivist instructional approach, or read about it in the unit outlines, it appears that they could not comprehend exactly what they were expected to do. To put it another way, they were unable to recognise the required performance in this context.

The findings of the research suggest that this inability by the students to recognise the required performance in the online context was because the knower code underpinning the instructional procedures in this context did not make the knowledge to be taught and learned explicit to the students. This is illustrated clearly by the students' experience of an absence of knowledge in their online units, as well as by the teachers' use of open-ended evaluative criteria and their shared belief in multiple legitimate performances (Sections 7.2.2.3 and 7.3.1.3). In fact, the teachers said they avoided using explicit instruction in the online units (as presented in chapters 5 and 6), which is characteristic of constructivist pedagogies. Rather than teaching knowledge and skills to learners by virtue of explicit instruction, a constructivist approach aims to help learners develop knowledge and skills tacitly by placing them in rich environments that comprise authentic and complex learning tasks (Duffy & Cunningham 1996; Grabinger & Dunlap, 1995; Herrington, Reeves & Oliver, 2005; Honebein, 1996; Oliver & Herrington, 2003). It is expected that in order to complete these tasks, learners will actively explore the environments in ways they consider



most appropriate for themselves. From the students' perspective, however, in allowing learners this 'freedom', the teacher became invisible, thus causing knowledge to become invisible.

Secondly, the knower code itself, which governed the teaching practices in the online units, was also invisible to the students. Constructivist teaching does not set explicit rules of how a learner should engage in his or her own task. This suggests that, as with its recognition of multiple legitimate student performances, this form of teaching practice also recognises multiple legitimate manners of student engagement in the learning context. In simple terms, learners are not expected to engage in their learning in particular ways. Nevertheless, the findings of this study indicate that the teachers, indeed, had some appropriate manner of learner engagement in mind but did not make this explicit to the students. The study argues this was because the knower code represented by this pedagogy is *intrinsically* invisible.

In particular, the study found that a key unwritten 'rule of the game' in constructivist educational practice is the notion of *learner presence*, which means that learners demonstrate their engagement with their past and current experiences, as well as within and beyond the educational context. Associated with this notion is an emphasis on a *personalised, individualised* and *socialising* knower as the basis of distinctiveness and authority in this learning context (see Section 7.2.2.4). However, constructivist instructional strategies require that this key rule of the game remain implicit in order to allow learners to explore the learning context in the ways they find appropriate. For example, the fundamental principle of invisible pedagogy, which describes the constructivist teaching practice in this study, is that instructional procedures do not follow pre-determined stages regulated by time, but by learners' individual development. This principle, in fact, contains a hidden rule: the learner is expected to externalise his or her learning to the teacher so that the teacher can give personalised interpretation, evaluation and diagnosis (Bernstein, 1977). As Bernstein says, "the greater range of [the learner's] activities, the more of him [sic] is made available to the teacher's screening" (p.121). According to this tacit rule, to receive maximum 'teaching' from the teacher, it was imperative for the students in this study to participate in as many activities in the online learning context as possible. In other words, the students were expected to create their visibility in the online environment

even though this was not compulsory. Nevertheless, in adhering to the notion of learner choice, the teaching practice did not announce the creation of online visibility as a rule of the game.

Since the knower code underpinning constructivist-inspired pedagogies cannot show itself, it takes a learner pre-equipped with the 'right' dispositions to be able to appreciate and benefit from this instructional approach. To be specific, this approach requires a learner who has the 'right' attitude and personality (see Section 7.2.2.3) or has already been socialised into the form of behaviours compatible with this form of teaching (Maton, 2004a).

### **7.3.3 Findings in relation to constructivist teaching approaches**

First and foremost, the findings of this study demonstrate the possible adverse effects constructivist teaching may have for learners who are not the 'right' kind of knowers for this pedagogy. This study concludes that these potential adverse effects can be summarised as resulting in a learning experience that embodies a relativist code, in which nothing is felt to be legitimate.

Many subscribers to constructivist-inspired pedagogies have claimed that these pedagogies, coupled with online learning, are especially suited to adult learners because adult learning is triggered and facilitated by their life experiences (Eastmond, 1998; Huang, 2002; Sieber, 2005). Adult learners are portrayed in this literature as self-directed and highly motivated when they perceive what they are learning helps to solve their problems in real life. The teaching staff in this study expressed similar beliefs about adult learners, asserting that their postgraduate students thrive in learning contexts in which constructivist instructional procedures are enacted. The findings of this study, however, challenge this assumption. The empirical evidence gathered lends support to the argument that there is little basis to many claims made about the benefits of constructivist-inspired pedagogies (Kirschner et al., 2006; Sweller, 2009). Contrary to claims made by constructivist theorists and researchers (Cooper, 1993; Honebein, 1996; Johnson & Johnson, 1996; Milhauser, 2006; Savery & Duffy, 1995; Wilson, 1997), the student sojourners in this research: did not feel they were involved in generating knowledge through personal interpretations and

negotiating meanings with their peers; did not develop ownership of their learning; and did not eventually become 'reflective practitioners' ready to apply changes to their own environments in order to test their new beliefs. On the contrary, as has been reiterated throughout Chapter 6 and the present chapter, the students felt marginalised and in a state of chaos, uncertainty and limbo.

An important point to make here is that although the present investigation is a case study of Chinese learners, Bernsteinian scholars (e.g. Hoadley, 2007; Lubienski, 2004; Morais & Neves, 2001; Rose, 2004) have long found ill-equipped learners across different countries (e.g. South Africa, U.S.A., Portugal, Australia) disadvantaged by constructivist-inspired pedagogies. Lubienski (2004) for example, conducted research on American students. The study found that learners from lower socio-economic status backgrounds did not benefit from a learning environment in which the authoritative role of the teacher is weakened, and where the boundary between everyday and school knowledge is blurred. Another study found that South African learners taught by relating their school knowledge to their personal contexts denied them the ability to abstract this knowledge beyond the localised context (Hoadley, 2007). Therefore, although the Chinese students' negative experiences in the present study may have been exacerbated by their knowledge-code educational background, the experience of a code clash identified in this research is not exclusive to Chinese learners.

The second major implication of the research findings for a constructivist teaching approach is that in choosing this pedagogy as the sole teaching approach for a learning context, teachers make the learning context a knower-code environment. More importantly, this pedagogy will remain invisible to many learners due to the tacit nature of the knower code. It should be emphasised here that the knower code itself is not a problem (Maton, 2009), and the findings of this study do not suggest the knower code, itself, or constructivist teaching, itself, is the problem. Rather, the study argues that teaching practice based purely on a knower code requires either pre-equipped learners and/or suitable learning contexts for it to work. In this study, however, neither of these conditions was met, which, in turn, led to the students' relativist-code experiences.

In terms of pre-equipped learners, it is likely to take a learner with the 'right' dispositions (i.e. a personalised, individualised and socialising knower) to reap the benefits of this approach. Alternatively, this pedagogy is also likely to suit learners who have significant prior knowledge or experience relating to the subject content (i.e. non-novices in the profession, see Kirschner et al., 2006; Sweller, 2009) because the pedagogy depends heavily on learners sharing professional knowledge and experiences. Previous studies have reported success of constructivist teaching strategies with this latter type of learner (e.g. Gabriel, 2004; Milhauser, 2006). In relation to suitable learning contexts, it has been contended that traditional craft apprenticeships may be amenable to this form of pedagogy (Maton, 2009). In master-apprentice relations, knowledge is taught tacitly through modelling rather than explicit verbal instruction (Gamble, 2001). The key lies with the apprentice's sufficiently long immersion in the learning environment, during which period of time the apprentice encounters a plethora of problems and situations. As well as experimenting in solving these problems, the apprentice watches how the 'master' and other practitioners act in the field. Through these means, he or she gradually acquires the rules of the game in that field.

This study argues that constructivist instructional strategies be adopted in combination with other forms of pedagogy in the absence of the aforementioned circumstances. This conclusion echoes the findings of research by Morais and colleagues (Morais & Neves, 2001; Morais, Neves & Pires, 2004), who found that a 'mixed pedagogy' containing strong and weak classifications and framings contributes to students' acquisition of the recognition and realisation rules of school contexts. Specifically, these studies have concluded that learning can be improved when pacing and hierarchical rules, and knowledge relations (e.g. school and everyday knowledge), exhibit weak classifications and framings, but the selection of content and evaluative criteria have strong classifications and framings. This means that a beneficial learning environment is one which is underpinned by a mix of knowledge and knower codes. With regard to which aspects of the learning environment should represent a knowledge code or a knower code, it may depend on the specific context and type of learners.

### **7.3.4 Findings in relation to flexible online learning**

The qualitative nature of this research makes it difficult to conclude what findings could be attributed to flexible online learning or to constructivist pedagogy. However, analysis of the data indicates that the student participants' dissatisfaction with their online educational experiences had more to do with the teaching practice than with the online delivery method. None of the students reported encountering problems relating to the use of technologies in their online units. They also rarely expressed difficulties or discontent about their learning without referring to pedagogical issues, such as the structure of the subject content, teaching procedures, learning activities, and assessment methods and criteria (see details in Chapter 6). These issues, as has been reiterated throughout the thesis, relate to the minimally guided instructional techniques, typical of constructivist pedagogy. The study, therefore, argues that online flexible learning largely did not initiate the problems confronting the students in this study.

Nevertheless, this does not mean that the online delivery method was not a factor in the students' dissatisfaction with their experiences. The study suggests that online flexible learning may accentuate the problems arising from constructivist-inspired pedagogies. For example, in this study, studying online may have exacerbated the students' feelings of disorientation and anxiety because they could not use cues from the teacher's body language to confirm they were doing things correctly. In other words, online learning can contribute to the invisibility of constructivist pedagogy. The students may also have been further detached than if the pedagogy had been implemented in a face-to-face context because there were fewer chances in the online environment for them to 'see' how their classmates were feeling about or coping with their learning. This point has been substantiated by the student participants' consistent remarks that they felt they were alone in studying their online units, not knowing who their classmates were. Furthermore, it is relatively difficult for teachers to intervene and mitigate the effects of constructivist pedagogy in online contexts because they do not 'see' learners' immediate reactions to their teaching. In effect, studies have shown that teachers who intend to implement constructivist instruction in face-to-face classroom settings tend to end up offering students considerable guidance when they see students are learning little from the process (see Kirschner et al., 2006).

## **7. 4 Strengths, limitations and issues for future research**

This research study has several particular strengths. Methodologically, the use of multi-session interviews enabled the researcher to examine in depth the nuances of the case study participants' perceptions, reactions and emotions towards their online experiences. In addition, as explained in Chapter 3, in each of the three main stages of data collection, the participants were selected following the principle of maximising what could be learned about the research topic. This helped the study to generate rich data, based on which, rigorous analysis could be conducted and more compelling conclusions could be drawn.

The study also made a number of theoretical contributions. It brought together three robust theories to guide the research design and formulate the analysis approach. In doing so, the study helped to flesh out several components of Berry's acculturation framework, and helped show how Maton's concepts of epistemic and social relations build on Bernstein's concepts of classification and framing. Moreover, by developing an external language of description for these two sets of concepts, the study demonstrated the differing manifestations of the concepts in terms of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. Finally, the study contributed to Maton's conceptualisation of legitimisation codes of specialisation by highlighting a particular kind of knowledge code that is based on atomised knowledge, and different kinds of knower code that are based on communal knowers, personalised knowers, individualised knowers or socialising knowers.

Maton's LCT(Specialisation) was of substantial value in helping the study to conceptualise and theorise the Chinese student sojourners' online educational experiences in Australia. As the theory can be used to analyse a diverse range of objects of study, the researcher was able to analyse a variety of issues that emerged in curriculum, pedagogy and evaluation. This led to a thorough exploration of the underlying principles structuring the educational practices in the students' heritage and host cultures, along with their learning experiences in the host culture. LCT(Specialisation) also allowed the study to see the relations among these three factors (heritage culture, host culture and the contact of both) and identify a code

clash in the students' cross-cultural educational experiences. Based on these analyses, the present investigation concluded with the evidenced conjecture that *when a learner whose prior educational experience represents a knowledge code enters a learning context specialised by a knower code, a code clash and resultant relativist-code experience can be anticipated*. It is anticipated that this conclusion, as well as other findings of this research, presented throughout this chapter, may serve as the basis of research into other learners and learning contexts. To advance future research in this area, a number of directions are provided below. These are based on the limitations and findings of this study.

In terms of methodological issues, one limitation of the research was that the online experiences examined were all drawn from the same faculty, and therefore the same discipline. The Faculty of Education was selected for this study for a practical reason; that is, at the time of the research, it was the only faculty at the university that offered online flexible learning as defined by this study. However, how this form of educational provision is being practiced in other disciplinary areas is still of interest.

Secondly, the variety of learners' online experiences presented in the current investigation may have been restricted by the fact that the students involved had higher levels of English language abilities than the majority of Chinese student sojourners in Australia. At the university, the Faculty of Education requires a higher score on the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) for entry than the other faculties that attract a significant number of Chinese international students, such as informatics and commerce. Moreover, about half of the study participants had been English majors when they studied in China. Hence, future research exploring experiences of learners who have different levels of English language abilities may offer useful insights in this regard.

Thirdly, a replication of this research on learners coming from educational backgrounds that are underpinned by different legitimization codes, particularly a knower code (e.g. Western European learners), will be an especially valuable contribution. This form of investigation will help to determine how the absence of a code clash or a different type of code clash may affect learners' experiences of constructivist pedagogies in an online context.

Finally, with respect to theoretical issues, while LCT(Specialisation) has been shown to serve as a powerful analytical tool for this study, its use here only focuses on two dimensions, namely, the epistemic relation to knowledge and social relation to knowers. There may be other aspects of an educational experience that are worth exploring, some of which can be conceptualised using other dimensions of LCT or other appropriate theories. For example, the current study has identified a lack of interpersonal relationships and emotional support as an issue of concern for most case study participants. Although this issue can be accounted for as the students' desire to have their memberships of the learning community legitimated, it does not necessarily relate to the legitimation of the knowledge claims they make, or their distinctiveness, authority and status in the field. This affective dimension of learners' experience, therefore, warrants attention in future research.

## **7. 5 Conclusion**

This research explored Chinese student sojourners' experiences of online flexible learning at an Australian university. It found that at the university, online flexible learning converged with constructivist-inspired pedagogies, reflecting a prevalent trend in the educational literature. The findings of the study challenge the claim made by proponents of these pedagogies that this form of teaching practice empowers and motivates learners. The study argues instead that constructivist teaching methods marginalise learners who are the 'wrong' kind of knowers for this form of pedagogy, as exemplified by the experiences of the Chinese student sojourners in this research. The effects of this instructional approach enacted in an online context for the students included feelings of abandonment and disorientation, as well as anxiety and guilt about not gaining sufficient knowledge during their educational sojourn in Australia.

The study contributes to the body of research into students' online learning experiences by theorising the participants' experiences using a theoretical framework based on Berry, Bernstein and Maton. The findings are summarised as follows.

- The educational practice the student sojourners had experienced in China can be regarded as embodying a knowledge code. In this context, content



knowledge, highly-structured teaching procedures and explicit evaluative criteria are emphasised, while learners' personal experiences, views and preferences for learning are downplayed. The basis of distinctiveness in this educational context is the possession of specialised knowledge and the ideal knower is a *communal* knower.

- In marked contrast, the online learning environment the students entered in Australia represents a knower code. Personal experience and knowledge, learner engagement, and multiple legitimate performances are highlighted, whereas content knowledge, explicit teaching procedures and explicit assessment criteria are de-emphasised. The basis of legitimacy in this context is the individual. An ideal knower is primarily a *personalised* and *individualised* knower, but preferably a *socialising* knower as well.
- A code clash occurred when the educational beliefs and values espoused by these two pedagogic practices came together in the students' experiences of their online units in Australia. However, the students were unable to recognise this code clash for what it was because they are not the 'right kind of knowers' to recognise the knower code underpinning the constructivist teaching practices in the online environment, one that is intrinsically invisible.
- The students were unable to recognise the performance required in the online environment, so they carried on doing things in ways they already knew. That is, they continued using the knowledge code from their past to cope with a knower-code environment, thereby becoming the 'wrong' kind of knowers.
- The effects of this code clash for the learners can be described as an educational experience devoid of legitimacy, one specialised by a relativist code. The students entered the online environment not seeing themselves as legitimate knowers. In this environment, not only was what they perceived as legitimate knowledge downplayed, but they did not learn how to become a legitimate knower. Nor did the students feel a sense of belonging to a community of knowers. In short, this educational experience was empty of knowledge and knowers, one that can be described as a learning 'vacuum'.

On a final note, the study suggests that a constructivist instructional approach as the sole form of pedagogy may only be beneficial when conditions amenable to this form of teaching are met. These conditions include when the learners are pre-equipped to

deal with this form of pedagogy, or when they have experienced a lengthy period of immersion in this form of instruction. This proposition, however, requires further investigation.

The findings of this study are potentially of considerable significance to higher education worldwide as internationalisation and online learning continue to play a major role in the future of universities. The understanding of the issues explored in this study helps to expand the knowledge base regarding the online educational experiences of Chinese learners, a student population that has been of primary interest for educators and policy makers in the growth of internationalisation. More importantly, the theorisation of the teaching practices and participants' experiences in this study is crucial in assisting universities in predicting and diagnosing whether and how their online educational practices may benefit or disadvantage certain learners. This prediction and diagnosis, in turn, facilitates the design of online teaching in higher education.

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## **Appendix 1: Interview guide for focus groups**

1. What is it like to study in your home country?
2. What is a typical Chinese class like?
3. What kind of student is considered a good student in your home country?
4. What kind of teacher is considered a good teacher in your home country?
5. What influenced your decision to come to Australia to study?
6. What do Chinese students expect to get out of their learning experiences in Australia?
7. What does 'learning' mean to you?
8. What is it like to move from a Chinese learning environment to an Australian one?
9. What are the challenges for Chinese students studying in Australia?
10. What strengths do Chinese students bring to their study in Australia?
11. What do you think of online learning?
12. Could you tell us about your experience of online learning if you have any?
13. Please comment on the past research findings about Chinese students' online learning experiences. (Handout provided.)
14. Is there anything you want to add regarding Chinese students' learning experiences in Australia?



## **Appendix 2: Stimulus material used in focus groups**

### **Past research findings about Chinese students' online learning experiences in Western countries**

#### **Part 1: General findings**

1. Chinese students are more confident and assertive in stating their views online than in a face-to-face environment.

比起面对面学习，中国学生觉得自己在线上课程用英文发表意见时，会比较有自信，也比较敢坚持自己的意见。

2. The text-based, asynchronous communication medium allows Chinese students time for editing postings and reflecting on their thoughts, so the quality of their participation is enhanced.

因为沟通方式是要透过写作，而且多半不是即时的，中国学生有比较多时间思考和打草稿，所以沟通的品质提升了。

3. The process of reading, digesting, drafting and revising messages is time-consuming and exhausting for Chinese students, so they may spend more time in an online unit than in a face-to-face unit.

因为沟通方式是要透过英文写作，中国学生要花很多时间读讯息、消化讯息内容、写讯息，所以他们觉得线上学习比面对面学习花时间。

4. Online learning fails to satisfy Chinese students' desire for learning about the host culture.

线上课程无法满足中国学生到国外念书想学习该国文化的需求。

5. Chinese students prefer to work with local Western students for the benefit of attaining multiple perspectives on issues and chances to practice using English.

活动分组时，中国学生比较喜欢跟当地学生分在一组，不喜欢跟其它中国学生分在一组，因为这样可以听到不同的观点，而且可以练习英文。

#### **Past 2: Factors that influence Chinese students' participation in online discussions**

6. Chinese students see computer-mediated communication as a formal written form of communication, so those who think they are not good at English writing tend to avoid posting messages.

中国学生认为在线上张贴讯息是一种正式写作，所以如果他们觉得自己英文写作不好的话，就比较不会想要去张贴或回应讯息。

7. Chinese students think online postings are task-oriented and bereft of personal feelings, so they do not want to post more messages than required.

中国学生觉得张贴在线上的讯息没有人情味，大家的目的只是要完成工作，所以他们比较不会想要去张贴或回应讯息。

8. Chinese students' reservations about disagreeing with people they are not familiar with may reduce their presence online.

如果不太认识对方的话，中国学生就不太愿意在线上反对他们的意见。

9. When Chinese students feel their postings are ignored by other students, they will not continue to post or respond to messages.

中国学生如果感受到他们张贴的讯息被别人忽略的话，就不会想要再继续张贴或回应讯息。

10. Some of these factors (6-10) may be related to the Chinese face-saving culture, which stresses the importance of maintaining a positive image for oneself and others.

以上这些现象 (6-10) 可能跟中国人爱面子的文化有关，因为中国人很在乎自己的形象，也会想要去帮别人留面子。

### **Part 3: Findings from comparative studies of Chinese and Western students**

11. When asked about the advantages of online learning, Chinese students tend to prioritise the advantages that can help to improve their individual work or skills (e.g. Online learning reduces language barriers; compulsory participation gives them an incentive to post messages), but Western students place more emphasis on the participation environment (e.g. Online learning allows them to express opinions in a different way).

被问到什么是线上课程的优点时，中国学生倾向强调那些可以帮助他们个人功课进步的功能，如：「线上课程可以减少语言障碍」，以及「当老师要求他们每周至少要在网上张贴几篇讯息时，可以督促他们学习」。而西方学生则倾向强调学习环境，如：「线上课程可以让他们能用另一种方式表达自己的意见」。

12. Chinese students see the absence of face-to-face contact as having a negative impact on their learning, but Western learners tend not to feel so.

中国学生觉得缺乏面对面沟通会阻碍他们的学习，但西方学生不觉得缺乏面对面沟通会阻碍他们的学习。

13. Chinese students are less able to utilise resources on the Internet for their learning than Western students.

中国学生跟西方学生比起来比较没有能力运用网路资源学习。

14. Chinese students are less inclined to use online communication for learning than Western students.

中国学生跟西方学生比起来比较不喜欢用线上沟通的方式学习。

15. Chinese students tend to post fewer messages of an intellectual nature than Western students. Chinese students' messages are often for practical (e.g. inquire about assignment requirements) or social purposes.

在中国学生张贴的讯息中，知识性讨论的内容比西方学生张贴的讯息少(他们张贴的内容比较多是询问课业缴交或社交性等)。

### **Appendix 3: Interview guide for teacher interviews**

1. Could you describe an online unit that you are teaching at the moment, or one that you think best represents your teaching philosophy?
  - How do you use online learning in this online unit?
  - Can you talk about your teaching activities?
  - Can you talk about the learning activities? Among these activities, which do you find most challenging for your students?
  - Can you talk about the assessment tasks? Among these tasks, which do you find most challenging for your students?
  - What kind of student is more likely to excel in this online unit?
  - What are your expectations of your students in this online unit?
  - If you could pick a few things that you'd like your students to take with them after they complete this unit, what would they be?
  - Do you think online learning is a suitable delivery method for this unit?
  - What are some of the challenges for you when teaching this online unit?
2. I'd like to ask you a few things about the unit outline you sent me earlier. Could you tell me a little more about [...].
3. What is the pedagogical value of online learning?
4. What are the qualities that help someone to succeed in learning online?
5. Could you tell me about your experience teaching Chinese students in Australia, if you have any?
6. Is there anything else that can help me understand your philosophy of teaching and learning that we haven't talked about in this interview?

## **Appendix 4: Interview guide for the first student interviews**

1. Could you describe your experience of studying in China?
2. What makes someone succeed in Chinese education?
3. Could you describe your experience of studying in Australia?
4. What makes someone succeed in Australian education?
5. What kind of student do you think is a good student?
6. What kind of teacher do you think is a good teacher?
7. In what kind of learning environment do you learn best?
8. What motivated you to come to Australia to study?
9. What do you hope to achieve here?
10. What influenced your decision to take this online unit (these online units)?
11. What do you expect to learn in this online unit?
12. What does 'online learning' mean to you?
13. What do you think learning online might be like?
14. What do you think communicating with your teacher online might be like?
15. What do you think communicating with your classmates online might be like?

## Appendix 5: Interview guide for intervening student interviews

1. Could you describe the learning environment in your online unit(s)? [*Question for the second interview only.*]
  - Communication tools
  - Learning resources
  - Teaching and learning activities
  - Assessment tasks
2. Over the past few weeks, how have you felt about your learning in this online unit?
  - What are the things that you feel happy about?
  - What are the things that you feel unhappy about?
3. How often do you log on to the class website? What do you do when you are online?
4. What learning activities do you do for this unit when you are offline?
5. What do you think of the learning activities you do in this online unit?
6. What do you think you have to do to get a good mark for these learning activities (if they are assessable)?
7. Have you encountered any difficulty while conducting these activities? What have you done to cope?
8. Please describe your interaction with your teacher since we spoke last.
  - How does the interaction affect your study?
9. Please describe your interactions with your classmates since we spoke last.
  - How do these interactions affect your study?
10. How does your teacher assess the assignment? [*Question for the interviews in which the participant indicates his/her teacher has returned the participant's assignment*]
  - Are you happy about the mark you've got?
  - What is the teacher's feedback? What do you think of it?

## **Appendix 6: Interview guide for the final student interviews**

1. It has been a week (or two) since you completed your online unit(s). How would you describe your experience with the online unit(s) now?
  - Which learning activity did you enjoy doing the most? Why?
  - Which learning activity did you not enjoy doing? Why?
  - Which assessment task was easy for you? Why?
  - Which assessment task was difficult for you? Why?
  - Did you have to make any changes to the way you usually study when you studied this online unit?
  - What were the strengths of this online unit?
  - What needs improving in this online unit?
2. How satisfied are you with your achievements in this online unit?
  - What did you learn?
  - What was required to succeed in this online unit?
  - What do you think your teacher would like the students to take with them after they completed this online unit? Have you learned all those things?
3. How would you describe your relationship with the teacher?
  - What do you think your teacher thought of you?
  - What is a good teacher-student relationship in an online unit?
  - What kind of teacher do you think is a good teacher for an online unit?
4. How would you describe your relationships with your classmates?
  - What do you think of your classmates?
  - What kind of impression do you think you had on your classmates?
  - What is a good peer relationship in an online unit?
5. Do you think you might have done a better job if this online unit had been delivered face-to-face?
6. Has your view of online learning changed over the semester?
7. Has your view of learning in general changed over the semester?
8. Given a chance, would you take another online unit?
9. What advice would you give a student who is about to take the same online unit?
10. Is there anything else you can tell me about your online learning experience?

## Appendix 7: Information sheet (example)

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University of Wollongong



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### Information Sheet – Student

**Acculturation to online learning: A case study of Chinese student sojourners at an Australian university**

**Rainbow Tsai-Hung Chen**

**Faculty of Education, University of Wollongong**

Dear student

You have been asked to participate in the PhD research project: *Acculturation to online learning: A case study of Chinese student sojourners at an Australian university*, conducted by Rainbow Tsai-Hung Chen from the Faculty of Education at the University of Wollongong. The aim of this study is to investigate Chinese students' experiences of online learning at your University. The results of the study will improve understanding of how Chinese students adapt to this type of learning in Australian higher education and how teachers and designers can better support Chinese students studying online.

If you consent to participate you will be asked to complete a questionnaire (approximately 20 minutes) and will be interviewed for up to four times (approximately one hour for each interview).

The following measures will be adopted to protect the identities of participants in the study:

- pseudonyms will be used during data recording process and in any published materials,
- data collected will be stored securely in a locked filing cabinet in the Faculty of Education, and will only be accessed by the researcher.

Your participation in this research is voluntary. You are free to refuse to participate and may withdraw from the research at any time by advising Rainbow Tsai-Hung Chen. Your refusal to participate or withdrawal of consent will in no way affect your scholarly work, or your relationship with the Faculty of Education or University of Wollongong. Information about who chooses to participate in the study and who does not, and data collected about participants will not be made available to your teachers or the university.

If you have any enquiries about the research, you can contact the researcher by phone on 4221 4617 or by email at [thc685@uow.edu.au](mailto:thc685@uow.edu.au). If you have any concerns or complaints regarding the way the research is or has been conducted, you can contact the Ethics Officer, Human Research Ethics Committee, Office of Research, University of Wollongong on 4221 4457.

## Appendix 8: Consent form (example)

University of Wollongong



### Consent form – Student

**Acculturation to online learning: A case study of Chinese student sojourners at an Australian university**

**Rainbow Tsai-Hung Chen**

**Faculty of Education, University of Wollongong**

I have been given information about the PhD research project: *Acculturation to online learning: A case study of Chinese student sojourners at an Australian university*, conducted by Rainbow Tsai-Hung Chen from the Faculty of Education at the University of Wollongong. I have had an opportunity to ask any questions I may have about the research and my participation.

I understand that if I consent to participate I will be asked to complete a questionnaire (approximately 20 minutes) and will be interviewed for up to four times (approximately one hour for each interview).

I understand that the following measures will be adopted to protect the identities of participants in the study:

- pseudonyms will be used during data recording process and in any published materials,
- data collected will be stored securely in a locked filing cabinet in the Faculty of Education, and will only be accessed by the researcher.

I understand that my participation in this evaluation research is voluntary. I am free to refuse to participate and I am free to withdraw from the research at any time. My refusal to participate or withdrawal of consent will in no way affect my scholarly work or my relationship with the University of Wollongong.

If I have any enquiries about the research, I can contact Rainbow Tsai-Hung Chen by phone on 4221 4617 or by email at [thc685@uow.edu.au](mailto:thc685@uow.edu.au). If I have any concerns or complaints regarding the way the research is or has been conducted, I can contact the Ethics Officer, Human Research Ethics Committee, Office of Research, University of Wollongong on 4221 4457.

By signing below I am indicating my consent to participate in the *Acculturation to online learning: A case study of Chinese student sojourners at an Australian university Research Project* conducted by Rainbow Tsai-Hung Chen as it has been described to me in the information sheet. I understand that the data collected from my participation will be used for conference and journal publications and I consent for it to be used in that manner outlined above.

Signed

Date

.....

...../...../.....

Name (please print)

.....



## Appendix 9: Coding scheme for themes emerging from the data

Node	Description	Example quote
1. Chinese education	This set of codes characterises issues related to students' educational experiences in China.	
1.1 Educational system	This category codes a response that describes Chinese education or its comparison with Australian education.	In China, it's very difficult to pass the entrance exam to enter a graduate program if you're not from that discipline. Here they let you in if your English is all right and your marks in the bachelor's degree are good enough.
1.2 Knowledge	This set of codes identifies issues related to students' conceptions of knowledge.	
1.2.1 Definition	This category codes a response that presents the students' definitions of knowledge or how they know they have gained knowledge.	If it's abstract knowledge, like the knowledge written in books or in any fixed place, as long as I remember it, and I don't have to look for it each time I need it, that is, I can totally rely on myself, or if I can express it in my own words, then I can say I've learned the knowledge.
1.2.2 Quantity	This category codes a response that addresses the emphasis of Chinese education on obtaining a large quantity of knowledge.	If I feel I have more knowledge in this area than before... or when I discuss it with other people, I find I know things that people don't know, then I know I've learned something.
1.2.3 Authority	This category codes a response that addresses the emphasis of Chinese education on knowledge being delivered by someone who has an authoritative position in the subject field.	Some of my viewpoints are right, and some are wrong. I feel I am learning when the teacher corrects my viewpoints.
1.3 Teaching	This set of codes identifies issues that relate to students' conceptions of teaching or learning.	
1.3.1 Structure	This category codes statements that refer to the structure of learning in China.	You need to reach a certain level of knowledge, so you can move on to the next step.
1.3.2 Control	This category codes statements that describe how Chinese teachers exercise control.	Teachers teach you a lot of content, but they don't ask you to search for information on your own. They tell you they've done all the research for you, and that you only have to make sure you've learned everything they

Node	Description	Example quote
		teach you. ...You don't have to do more than that.
1.3.3 Interaction	This category codes statements that describe interactions in a Chinese class.	There is little interaction in class. Interaction usually happens after class. In class, Chinese students are usually very quiet. Very few will ask questions in class.
1.3.4 Attendance	This category codes statements that address the importance of class attendance in China.	If you understand the teacher's lecture in class, you don't need to spend so much time studying when you go home.
1.4 Teacher	This category codes a response that describes the roles of the teacher in China.	A good lecture is very systematic and 'attractive'. The content of the lecture is to the point, very concise, easy to be digested by students, easy for them to remember without even having to take notes. ...The teacher highlights the main points for students.
1.5 Learner	This set of codes identifies issues that relate to the roles of the learner in China.	
1.5.1 Chinese learner	This category codes a response related to the characteristics of the Chinese learner.	Chinese students usually don't want to lose face. They will be more willing to answer questions if they think their answers are 'perfect'. If they think their answers might not be good enough, they will keep quiet.
1.5.2 Ideal learner	This category codes a response that describes an ideal student in China.	Being smart in China means ... knowing when to do what, like not doing certain things in class, etc. ...Some people may be smart but they like to express their different opinions or do different things. These people are not considered good students.
1.6 Assessment	This category codes issues related to assessment methods or the keys to attaining a good mark in China.	This is all you have to do to get a good mark: write down the information the teacher gives you. Never add your own opinions, never do that.
1.7 Sojourn purpose	This category codes a response that addresses the students' purposes of coming to Australia to study.	I want to learn Western thinking because it'll be different from Chinese thinking.
2. Online units	This set of codes characterises issues related to the learning environments of the online units discussed by the teaching staff.	
2.1 Structure	This category codes teachers'	Not so much, do this, do that.

Node	Description	Example quote
	responses that address the structure of the online units.	You have to say well this is the kind of thing that would be suitable but do you have any other ideas, what are you interested in, what are you doing at work, you know all of that sort of thing.
2.2 Activity	This set of codes identifies issues related to learning activities, as raised by the teachers.	
2.2.1 Forum	This category codes teachers' comments that address their intent or implementation of forum discussions.	I guess the group interaction occurs when you raise issues in a forum, I mean it is still a group activity even though it is non-assessable.
2.2.2 Chat	This category codes teachers' comments that address their intent or implementation of synchronous online chat.	I did a synchronous chat weekly. And you know it wasn't compulsory and so some weeks a few people appeared and some weeks only one or two students were online but it was just that opportunity.
2.2.3 Face-to-face meeting	This category codes teachers' comments that address their intent or implementation of face-to-face meetings.	Even if they didn't talk about content but just emotional issues like 'How are you going' or 'I'm struggling with this task'. You know that, and just to have that rapport with other people I think that's really important.
2.3 Assessment	This set of codes identifies issues that relate to assignments, as raised by the teachers.	
2.3.1 Type	This category codes teachers' responses that describe the types of assignments they give students or their reasons for using the assignments.	So I favour very much project based orientation where there is some level of problem solving rather than just simply regurgitating text of literature. I think that's a futile, passive and uninvolved approach.
2.3.2. Criteria	This category codes teachers' responses related to the criteria they use for assessing students' assignments.	It's not like learning medicine, you've got to get it right [otherwise] the patient will die. It's not like that. It's more open to interpretation.
2.4 Belief	This category identifies issues that relate to the teaching staff's overall teaching philosophy.	The key principles I see are to heighten engagement, heighten relevance, to develop a collaborative process and then develop a transformative process.
2.5 Goal	This category codes teachers'	I want them to understand the

Node	Description	Example quote
	responses that describe what they expect their students to learn in the online units.	link between the theory and the practice so that they can justify their own practice when they're teaching kids, and the choices they make.
2.6 Teacher	This category codes a response that describes the roles the teaching staff intends to play.	I am most definitely a facilitator. I try to figure out how to make sure the students learn whatever it is they need to learn. ... it was the coming to grips with giving students the opportunity to just explore the materials and not forcing them to do specific things.
2.7 Learner	This category codes teachers' comments that outline the desirable traits of a learner in the online units.	I think they have to be open to learning in a less structured environment, a less formally structured, less predetermined environment. They have to be prepared I suppose to meet the challenges as they go along.
2.8 Online delivery	This set of code identifies issues related to the online delivery mode, as raised by the teachers.	
2.8.1 Advantage	This category codes teachers' statements that present the advantages of online learning.	All of those things that seem to facilitate authentic learning can be readily done online. And sometimes I think it's that, as I was mentioning, that marriage of the technology, the constructivist philosophy and the online thing.
2.8.2 Neutral	This category codes teachers' responses that support the view that technology is neutral.	I don't think it has anything to do with the technology. The technology is a tool. ... It depends on the teacher and the philosophical view of teaching and learning. It has nothing to do with the technology.
2.9 Teaching Chinese learners	This category codes statements describing the teaching staff's approaches to and experiences of teaching Chinese or Asian learners.	I think there is a lot of room for us to negotiate. ... To suit their learning style without compromising our own beliefs about how people learn and how we want to do the subject.
3. Online experience	This set of codes characterises issues related to the case study students' experiences with their online units.	
3.1 Strength	This category codes a response that describes the things the students like about their online units.	I went to the face-to-face class, and the teacher happened to elaborate on the points I needed to understand more about, and he demonstrated it, which was very good.

<b>Node</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Example quote</b>
3.2 Challenge	This set of codes identifies factors of the students' dissatisfaction with their online units.	
3.2.1 Content	This category codes issues related to the content knowledge learned.	There are only three essays to write in each online unit, and sometimes I don't need to use the articles I can't understand in my assignments. So in the assignments, I explored the issue in depth, and the teacher recognised this, but in other aspects, I still knew nothing at all.
3.2.2 Lecture	This category codes students' comments about not being provided with lectures.	In face-to-face study units, teachers lecture from their perspectives. They organise what they want to say based on their knowledge, and then disseminate it. This contains their beliefs, which is very important because this is what we don't know. Why do we come here to study? We could have bought books and read them ourselves [in China].
3.2.3 Instruction	This category codes statements that address the instructions the students receive from their teachers.	The teacher only points out the things you need to read, you need to think. But as to how to think, how to read and understand, it's your own business. This can stimulate students' self-study ability, but you feel ... lonely and helpless.
3.2.4 Discussion	This set of codes identifies issues related to class discussions.	
3.2.4.1 Content	This category codes students' comments on the content of discussion.	They might be talking about their experiences teaching in primary schools or kindergartens, which is ... irrelevant to the field of my work.
3.2.4.2 Implementation	This category codes students' comments on their teachers' implementation of discussion activities.	People say whatever they want to say. I feel it is very disorganised. I told the teacher the postings made me feel 'a little confused', but he said everyone has their right to say their piece... He seems to suggest I shouldn't say that.
3.2.5 Interaction with teacher	This category codes responses that describe the students' interactions with their teachers.	There was very little contact. Often, the teacher was hidden in the dark, and he helped you when you needed him.

<b>Node</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Example quote</b>
3.2.6 Peer interaction	This category codes a response related to peer relationships.	There are topics for students to work on, but everyone says what they want to say and doesn't respond to others.
3.2.7 Assessment	This set of code identifies issues related to assessment.	
3.2.7.1 Nature of task	This category codes students' comments on the nature of the assessment tasks and challenges presented.	The pressure is too huge for me to bear. I only have one year of work experience, so there is no way I can offer an example from this experience in every assignment, but we are required to use examples from our workplace all the time.
3.2.7.2 Criteria	This category codes students' comments on the criteria for assessment.	It says that you have to use the 'notes and reflections' you take while doing these two pieces of writing. It's obvious that you'll definitely need to use them since you are asked to do it. So this item, I think, does not count as a criterion. I feel the things included in the criteria are meaningless.
3.2.7.3 Feedback	This category codes students' comments on the teachers' feedback of their assignments.	Your mark was broken down into, say, structure, language, and references. I knew which category I did badly in and I even knew how badly, but I didn't know exactly what I did badly.
3.2.8 Flexibility	This category identifies issues related to the challenges and consequences of flexible learning, as raised by the students.	To tell you the truth, I didn't spend much time on this online unit. ... I completed the required tasks, but I didn't do anything else the teacher encouraged us to do.
3.2.9 Motivation	This category codes students' response describing the impact of this form of learning on their incentives to learn.	I suppose if I get along well with my classmates, and if they can help me when I have problems, it should enhance my learning. Now, I have problems, but I have no one to help me. I feel very depressed. I have no passion for my learning.
3.3 Teacher	This set of codes identifies issues related to the roles of the teacher in the students' online units, as raised by the students.	
3.3.1 Ideal teacher	This category codes a response that describes the students' expectations of their teachers.	My understanding of authority is not that the teachers should have power, but that they should be an authority on their professional knowledge. I think online or not, teachers should

Node	Description	Example quote
		demonstrate this authority. They have to be better than students in this aspect.
3.3.2 Actual teacher	This category codes a response that presents the students' perceptions of the roles their teachers play in teaching the online units.	The teacher said I could talk to her if I had any question, but this sounded to me like I was expected to do this only when I had a question. I don't think a 'facilitator' is just someone for me to go to when I have a question, right? This is a passive role, not an active one.
3.4 Learner	This set of codes identifies issues that relate to the roles of the learner in the online units, as raised by the students.	
3.4.1 Ideal learner	This category codes statements that describe the students' perceptions of a learner that is likely to be considered by the teachers to be an ideal learner in the online units.	Those who are self-disciplined will do better because there is no teacher to assign you tasks to do and tell you what you have to achieve.
3.4.2 Key to success	This category codes statements that present the students' views of how to attain a good mark in their online units.	The key is definitely to have a lot of references, and clarity. When you answer questions, you have to be very clear.
3.5 Online medium	This set of codes identifies issues related to the students' opinions of the online delivery mode.	
3.5.1 Asynchronous communication	This category codes a response that addresses the advantages or disadvantages of the asynchronous form of communication.	When you ask someone a question face-to-face... whether they know the answer or not, they will tell you their opinions. Online, you can email them but if they don't reply, you can't do anything about it.
3.5.2 Text-based communication	This category codes a response that addresses the advantages or disadvantages of the written form of communication.	Face-to-face, there is more interaction. Typing is slower. ... There is an advantage to typing, though. There is a written record.
3.6 Personal preference	This set of codes identifies issues that relate to the students' personal learning preferences.	
3.6.1 Personality	This category codes statements that present the students' descriptions of their personality or educational backgrounds.	I'm usually the leader of my group. I'll be the one to present the ideas we have discussed. I'm very active in class.
3.6.2 Preference	This category codes statements that describe the students' learning styles and preferences.	I prefer to listen to other people communicating with each other. I can hear their opinions. I don't need to participate in the communication myself. What

Node	Description	Example quote
		they say sometimes inspires me.
3.7 Strategy	This category codes students' responses that describe their learning behaviours or approach to writing an assignment.	Usually I'll have written about the strengths of the theory before I start writing about the Chinese context. How can I say it's not applicable to China if it's such a good theory? It doesn't seem like a good way to write an assignment.
3.8 Stress	This category codes students' responses that describe their emotions when encountering a problem.	I felt sad. There was so much study to do, and no face-to-face classes, where I could interact with people. What could I do? I was very anxious. At that time, I remember I kept saying I was 'frustrated'.
3.9 Satisfaction	This category codes students' responses that evaluate their learning outcomes in the online units.	Since you only get little help, you realise you can still understand many things on your own by reading, organising your thoughts and writing about your opinions, what you know. You understand you can learn this way.
3.10 Change	This category codes students' statements that indicate a change in their learning behaviours or opinions of their learning experiences.	In the beginning, didn't I tell you that I downloaded all the online messages to read? But in about Week 3 or 4, because of the length and the difficulty level of the messages, I gave up. From then on, I didn't read a word of what people said.