

One Classroom, Two Cultures: The Experiences of Chinese Students in an American College

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore undergraduate Chinese international students' perceptions about their classroom experiences in a United States institution of higher education. Banking education, a term used by Paulo Freire to describe and critique the traditional education system, was used as the theoretical framework for this study. After analyzing the ten interviews of Chinese international students, the following areas were discussed: comparison of classroom experiences in the United States and China; assessment practices in the United States versus China; and the differences in the relationship between students and faculty in both countries. While most of the participants preferred the American classroom practices to practices in China, all faced challenges as they navigated cultural differences in the classroom. The concept of banking education helped to illustrate the difficulties Chinese students face when they enter Americanized classrooms and a different pedagogy.

1. Introduction

The globalization of the higher education landscape has increased the number of students who decide to go to foreign countries to pursue undergraduate degrees. Some students depart cognizant of the likely barriers they may face and need to overcome. For other students, the foreign classroom is a shock.

The largest national groups of foreign students studying outside of their home country come from China, India, and Korea Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) [4]. Since 2004, China has been the country sending the largest numbers of students to English speaking countries such as the United States, Australia, the U.K. and Canada. In terms of Chinese enrollment in U.S. universities, this translated to 235,598 international students during the 2012-2013 academic year [1]. The economic implications of large numbers of Chinese students (especially in the fields of business and engineering) caught the eye of educational administrators and enrollment managers. This has not translated into researchers and administrators

examining the classroom experiences of Chinese students.

The purpose of this study is to explore undergraduate Chinese international students' perceptions about their classroom experiences in a two-year technical college located in Manhattan New York. Although this research is focused on Chinese students, what is discovered could apply to a range of national groups and global universities.

2. Methods

Over a one-month period, data was collected through open-ended interviews with ten undergraduate Chinese students enrolled for the summer 2017 semester at a two-year technical college in Midtown Manhattan. Prior to being interviewed, the participating students were told about the study and asked to give the subject matter some thought. The interviewer met with each student one time. Each interview lasted between sixty and seventy minutes. Initial questions were developed, and follow-up questions were used to clarify or expound on initial responses. Follow-up questions were asked within the context of the relationship established with each participant. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

The following research questions guided the study:

- What are some similarities and differences between classroom experiences in the U.S. and China?
- What U.S. classroom practices are perceived as positive? What U.S. classroom practices are perceived as negative?
- What are the participants' perceptions about the way American faculty and students interact?

3. Analysis of Data

The interviewer took limited notes to capture body language and non-verbal communication displayed by the participants. The transcribed interview data was

analyzed and interpreted using qualitative methods applicable to open-ended interview data. The aim of the questions was to gain access and explore Chinese students' perceptions about their classroom experiences.

4. Theoretical Framework

The concept of banking education was used as the theoretical framework for this study. Paulo Freire first introduced the concept of banking education in his highly influential book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* published in Portuguese in 1968 and translated into English by Myra Ramos in 1970. Freire describes this form of education, as the student acting in a passive role while the teacher is active. The student enters the classroom with no knowledge and the teacher imports learning into the student much like money is deposited into a bank.

In the banking concept of education, knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing... The teacher presents himself to his students as their necessary opposite; by considering their ignorance absolute, he justifies his own existence. [2]

For the purposes of this article, I argue that prior to entering the American classroom, Chinese international students have mostly been exposed to banking education. One of the greatest hurdles students must overcome in order to achieve success in the American classroom is gaining their own emancipation through participation in their learning. The American classroom, which emphasizes participation in classroom discussion, assertion of one's own opinion, and active learning, creates a different classroom atmosphere. Adjusting to a new pedagogy may create obstacles for Chinese international students. It is important to clarify that the intention of the use of the banking concept of education is not to critique the Chinese education system, but rather to explore specifically the classroom experiences of Chinese international students through a critical lens that offers a better understanding of this growing population in institutions of higher education in the United States.

5. Literature Review

There are a limited number of published studies regarding international students' perceptions of classroom experiences. Even fewer studies focus solely on international Chinese students in America. A few researches, whose articles can be accessed using major search engines like ERIC and Google Scholar, have explored this topic. According to

Hofstede [3], the main challenges for foreign students in American classrooms stem from the different cultures between teacher and student. Hofstede concluded that education in China can be characterized by a large power dynamic where the "esteemed professor" disseminates information to the student. The learning atmosphere in a Chinese classroom is formal and structured allowing for little student-teacher interaction. This is a teacher-centered learning model [6]. Most recently Valdez [5] examined the "double consciousness" Chinese students experience in American classrooms as they identify with other Chinese students, but also disassociate themselves from their Chinese colleagues when certain stereotypical behaviors, such as cheating, are perceived as negative by faculty.

6. Results and Discussion

In this study, higher education classroom practices are defined as activities that take place in a classroom including classroom discussion, teamwork, group projects, lectures, and presentations. Assessment is defined as the way students are evaluated in order to earn a final grade. This includes but is not limited to exams, classroom participation, group work, and presentations. After analyzing the interviews, the following themes emerged: the differences between the American and Chinese classroom, differences in assessment techniques, and the student teacher relationship.

7. Comparison of Classroom Experiences in the United States and China

All of the participants compared their experiences in an American undergraduate classroom with their experiences in Chinese high schools because none of the participants had attended college in China. When asked to describe a Chinese classroom, respondents frequently used words such as "discipline, respect, and time consuming." Many participants commented on the amount of time they spent preparing for classes in China verses the United States.

...for example, in China, they just give you a lot of question[s] and the text and you have to remember the... like... the wide area. Like, you have to remember everything and then – so you have to spend more time to do that. You have to spend a lot of time. You have to know everything and in a very strict way – [in a] word for word way. But here [in the U.S. classroom] they just focus which one you have to learn, so I don't have to... I don't have to remember everything. It takes less time. The study [in the U.S.A.] takes a lot less time.

Students tended to have a positive outlook towards having more free time to pursue outside interest in the United States. They saw the decreased hours they spent studying as positive. Several students commented that for the first time in their lives they had free time. When asked follow up questions regarding how they spent this time many developed hobbies, relaxed, traveled, and explored new friendships. Some respondents described this new experience as becoming “free.” One student commented that they felt like a totally different person, “a free person.”

Several participants focused on the Chinese classroom space as a place to listen and take notes in order to memorize information. In contrast, participants described the American classroom in terms of “creativity, self-expression and freedom.”

I think – I think in a Chinese classroom, I think students are – shows more discipline in terms like, you know showing respect for the teachers and listen to and follow instructions a little bit more. I feel like [in China] it’s a bit more defined and clearer than American school. And I think [in] American schools, it’s a lot about self-expression, so it’s not necessarily a bad thing, it’s just a different way of, I guess, learning in general.

This sense of “freedom and self-expression” created consternation for a few participants especially as it related to graded assignments. Several respondents commented that reflection papers were particularly challenging because they had never been asked to share emotional experiences in a classroom setting. They did not know how to “please the professor” as one student put it. The idea that a student’s response to a text actually mattered seemed ludicrous to one participant. The participants saw classroom discussion as mostly positive, but some felt uncomfortable in classes where a large part of their grade was based on this. For most participants, discussion was a new way to learn. Assessment practices in the United States came up frequently in all interviews.

8. Assessment

All participants mentioned the vast difference in assessment methods. Participants described the Chinese classroom in terms of students having to raise their hands to answer or ask a question and commented on how usually they cannot speak unless chosen by the instructor. When picked by the instructor to answer or ask a question, students must stand up to show their respect to the professor. Several participants commented that in China students do not always participate in the classroom. They believed this is because the purpose of students is to

sit in the classroom and to copy and memorize all the information that the instructor teaches and then the student must regurgitate it on the exam paper to get a good grade.

Some Chinese students commented on how they would “mute their voice through the whole semester, because they have been trained not to speak their minds and not to raise any conversation that has an opposite or different opinion to the instructor’s teaching.” In contrast, respondents commented on the emphasis of speaking in American classrooms. Many respondents had been in seminar style classroom where much of their grade was based on classroom participation.

Yeah, whenever there is a seminar class, there is a lot of discussion. If it’s a long period – like if it’s a class of more that two or three hours, usually the teacher wants us to speak a lot. And, I think in American schools, the teachers encourage questions and interactions a lot more than Asian schools... and [Chinese] teachers.

Some respondents felt at a disadvantage because they were not used to the format of a seminar class; moreover, some felt being non-native English speakers put them at a disadvantage. One student commented that his grade was negatively impacted because he received a low score for participation. He felt his final grade would have been significantly higher had class participation not paid such a large part in his overall assessment. Most participants found classroom discussion challenging but not without benefits to their overall learning.

I agree with classroom discussion because it seems like – that seems like discussion is good for you – especially where you don’t know a lot about the subject and you could learn in a different way. Maybe a different way than the teacher. Maybe the teacher is not always right, you never know. And you realize that questions could be a lot of way [a different way] to figure out [information] from other people. I think it’s important to talk to each other... listen to each other or whatever...

When students discussed exams in China they saw them as very different from American exams. One student described Chinese exams as “equal to memory tests. They test how well you can memorize the textbook contents and key words.” Many participants commented on the differences between writing an essay exam in China and America. Respondents felt that in China even the essay part of an exam has an instruction to limit the way you can show your creativity. In contrast, when taking an essay exam in America, students were graded on their creativity.

One student was exasperated by this approach because she felt her writing ability was strong in terms of grammar, punctuation, and spelling. She resented this “tricky element of creativity.” Many participants commented that the experience of learning to write creatively was harder than perfecting the English language. Some participants commented that the American classroom was the first place they had vocalized their opinions and found a voice.

8. Relationships

All participants, in some way, addressed the difference in the roles of teacher and student. One student commented she was shocked by the “friendly American teacher” who started class by greeting the students and asking them how they were or what they had done over the weekend. Another participant described the classroom dynamic as “friends chatting.” Participants tended to think of American teachers as guides or facilitators and although some participants felt it was unusual for students to call teachers by their first names, most appreciated this less formal approach. The relationship between teachers and students was described as “casual.” For some, this was a difficult adjustment and took weeks or even a semester to get used to. Participants struggled with being encouraged to question the instructor, ideas, and each other. One student commented that she couldn’t believe the professor “actually cared what I thought and that my opinion mattered.”

9. Banking Education

A pattern of what Freire referred to as banking education was suggested throughout the interviews as participants pondered previous experiences in the Chinese classroom. The students interviewed for this study reflected on how the American classroom made them participate in their own learning through classroom discussions, articulating their own opinions, viewing faculty as facilitators that could and should be questioned, and coming into a space where students’ opinions mattered. This is consistent with Freire’s idea that:

Education must begin with the solution of the teacher-student contradiction, by reconciling the poles of the contradiction so that both are simultaneously teachers *and* student. [2]

10. Conclusion

The experience of studying overseas may be one of the most rewarding and challenging adventures of a lifetime. Global universities need to go beyond recruitment and enrollment and examine the

challenges Chinese international students face in the classroom. The perceptions of the students in this study were very revealing. While most of the students preferred the American classroom practices to practices in China, all the students faced initial barriers adjusting to the pedagogical differences between the two cultures.

This research has potential impact on helping to support Chinese international students to actualize their goals. In many conversations around Chinese international students there has been a missing voice, that of the student. This voice could add to new ways of seeing barriers and possible remedies. Although the sample size of this study is too small to offer definitive findings, it is a starting point for further inquiry and could reveal new perspectives.

11. References

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