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The transition from rote learning to critical reflection: experiences of Chinese Masters students in the UK (0194)

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### **Background**

There are 2.9 million international students across the world, of whom 22% study in the USA, 12% in UK and 11% in Australia. India and China account for one third of the sending population (Wildavsky, 2010). Chinese students abroad increased from 11,000 in 1998 to 120,000 in 2006 (Ji, 2006). It is therefore pertinent to study the experience of students from China, a principal sending nation, whilst in the UK, a main receiving nation. Collini (2012) questions the future of the current Chinese higher education model and believes that the Anglo-Saxon model is being adopted in China. Professor Zhou Ji (2006), then Chinese Minister of Education, cited the need to encourage international tertiary education in subjects such as engineering, business and science in order to meet Chinese skill shortages. With this backdrop, the specific aspect of student transition from educational rote learning to critical reflection in the context of management education will be explored.

### **Literature**

Critical management pedagogy often refers to critical reflection as an inherent part of the process, implying that it is this reflection which leads to higher-level learning (see, for example, Perriton, 2000; Currie and Knights, 2003; Samra-Fredericks, 2003; Perriton and Reynolds, 2004; Fenwick, 2005; Corley and Eades, 2006 and Anderson and Thorpe, 2007). Reynolds' (1997; 1998; 1999) work on critical reflection provides the touchstone for much of the work on critical pedagogy. He proposes five principles upon which critical reflection is based.

Black and Mendenhall (1991) cite stages of U-curve cultural adaptation: honeymoon, culture shock, adjustment and mastery. Transitioning from rote learning to critical reflection could be viewed along the same trajectory. The 'mastery' on a one year Masters programme is time-compressed, with limited deep reflection time and high student adaptation demands. At UK Masters level, individual work of a critical rather than descriptive nature is valued. In the more collectivist Chinese context, verbatim rote learning, group work and sharing ideas are more culturally accepted. Montgomery (2010:35) says that the rules of plagiarism need to be understood by the students and that 'these are context-specific academic practices that need to be learned'. This is one aspect of the student transition.

### **Research**

The research is longitudinal in approach, from July 2012 until July 2013, and of an ethnographic nature within a single case study – a Management School in a Russell Group university. A pilot focus group of Masters students took place in 2012, before they returned to China. Results were analysed and helped to inform the design of the questions used in the subsequent focus groups during the

following academic year of 2012-13. The focus groups have been recorded and transcribed. A thematic review has occurred and key themes are highlighted, with the emergence of direct quotes to support the ideas.

The Goffman (1959) concepts of performance, impression management and the interactive side of communication informed the group questioning. Furthermore, concepts of Chinese 'face' and 'guanxi' informed design, due to the interplay of both internal and external influences. Participants, for example, aimed to retain 'face' rather than necessarily speaking about their lived realities. Goffman (ibid) refers to the metaphor of a theatre, whereby players come onto their stage and act a part. In one sense, the focus group is a theatrical set, to lengthen that metaphor, with different actors playing their parts, having rehearsed their scripts in advance, by way of preparation, having read the interview questions in advance.

### **Findings**

From the pilot group, opinions reflected an annual review of learning which are encapsulated in certain sentences:

'the thinking mind, the thinking ability has been changed, to another direction.'

'I feel the critical side of me has been brought out and much more encouraged.'

'the critical thinking ability.....you cannot just be like a robot and, yes, you do have accepting ability but also you need to have thinking ability.'

The transitional nature was evident and occurred along a continuum. Although personally testing, students recognised the benefits of critical reflection. Students from the longitudinal study echoed these sentiments:

'.sometimes we copy. But we come here and we cannot do that and we should do critical thinking... In the long education history, we have no chance to make our own opinions.... And maybe we should critique some of those opinions but it is impossible in China.'

The general focus among students was to welcome the educational transition from rote to critically reflective learning; this change was deemed to be beneficial for their future lives. However, this was coupled with a sense of frustration as their educational learning patterns were somewhat entrenched due to their schooling and undergraduate experiences. Also, the compressed nature of the Masters degree made this challenging, as did the expectation to write well academically and master self-studying techniques in the English language. Given their high academic achievements in China, this was exacerbated still further, as they sought to retain 'face'.

### **Conclusion and impact**

Trahar (2010:152) makes a highly challenging remark, questioning whether in the UK educational system we are acting 'as a coloniser'. In one sense, there is truth in this as there are a prescribed set of educational mores expected of all UK Masters students, regardless of their own origins. Initially, these expectations can be vague, seemingly hidden from view and hard to navigate for the students. Additionally, teaching staff can be ill-prepared for the arrival of international students and high quality students may find the educational expectations inaccessible initially, not just from the

obvious linguistic perspective, but also from the very demands of the system itself. By understanding the importance of the Sino-UK intercultural educational differences, via the personal learning narratives of these students, future teaching competence can be re-adjusted to assimilate and respond to the specific needs of these students. The academic context could be made more transparent for them and initial student orientation from an academic perspective could enable earlier success as they transition to become critically reflective students.

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