

Challenges in a cross-cultural university setting: Students and teachers' adaptive strategies

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Abstract

This paper takes a phenomenological approach to look at how a group of teachers and students cross cultural educational boundaries in their daily teaching and learning interaction. The aim of the study was to investigate how the contrasting socio-cultural values and associated perceived differences of South East Asian students and their Anglo-Saxon teachers affected teaching and learning processes. The findings discussed suggest that both students and teachers, perceived participatory behaviours in the classroom as mutually challenging and also the most difficult behavioural adaptation. The focus of the study on adaptive strategies revealed how both groups addressed their respective challenges.

A considerable amount of research has been done on student's behaviour in the classroom their learning and studying styles and more recently cross cultural studies into these areas.

Wong (2003) disagrees with the notion that Asian international students learning styles are totally predetermined by their culture and argues that if placed in a different educational context, Asian international students can adapt to different teaching and learning styles. Wongs' work supports my own research in this area observing that Asian international students make adaptations to engage with different styles of teaching and learning.

"Asian students generally come from a more passive learning environment...and the teaching style in Asian countries is more teacher centred, where the teachers or lecturers would give all or most of the information to students." (Wong 2003)

Wong (2003) asserts that his findings also supported the concept that assessment systems in Asian educational environments require students to memorise what they have learnt in class and good grades are obtained by repeating back what they have learnt in the examination.

Tan and Goh (1999) note that the high numbers of international students studying in Australian universities has prompted numerous studies in cross cultural issues particularly in cross cultural approaches to study and learning. However they are critical about much of this research stating that many studies do not look deeply into the cultural values that affect attitudes and behavior.

Tan and Goh point specifically to the SPQ method developed by Biggs in 1987 commenting that it was developed using western views of culture to examine studying and learning approaches and that such methodology does not properly take into account cross cultural issues. Tan and Goh suggest a more ethnographic approach drawing on anthropology to look at cross cultural issues conducted using broad qualitative techniques to provide a more complete picture of cross cultural issues in education.

Jones (1999) cites literature on the Chinese learner and Confucian Heritage Culture (CHC) and warns against stereotyping students from these backgrounds. Earlier perceptions and beliefs that students from these backgrounds are non participatory surface learners is challenged.

In addition Jones (1999) explains that university and academia is in fact a culture of its own with beliefs, behaviours and practices which need to be learned by all students regardless of their cultural background.

This points to a need for researchers to be aware when studying South East Asian students in western universities that these students have also made the transition from high school to university which inherently makes demands on adopting new learning styles regardless of cultural backgrounds.

Renshaw and Volet (1995) note that much of the literature still stereotypes the South East Asian learner as respectful of authority, prodigious note taker, rote or surface learner whose main aim is to fulfil the requirements of the teacher without question and non-participatory in tutorial and class situations.

Volet and Renshaw (1995) observed that South East Asian students adapt in similar ways to local students after studying for a semester or two at university. They point out that the change from high school to university is challenging to learning styles for all students regardless of culture.

Biggs (1996) notes that Confucian Heritage Culture (CHC) learning environments emphasize co-operative student activity and group work. This is supported by Chan and Watkins (1994) who reported that CHC learners prefer collaborative learning environments.

The literature provides valuable insights into students' learning behaviours and also classroom dynamics. However, little has been done to investigate teacher and student interactions and the mutuality of the classroom dynamics in a cross-cultural setting. My research work investigates both students and teachers in a cross-cultural educational environment and seeks to understand the dynamics of the cross-cultural classroom and the adaptations made by teachers and students in such an educational environment.

1. Perceived differences and Adaptive Strategies

As the title of the paper suggests, my research focus is on adaptive strategies in cross-cultural education. In particular, I am focusing on a group of South East Asian students studying in a North American University campus located in Thailand and the North American faculty who are teaching them.

My work concentrates on three research questions;

What are the perceived differences for students and teachers between South East Asian and North American educational environments? What are the comparative strengths of these perceived differences for South East Asian students and North American teachers in this cross-cultural educational environment? And finally, what types of adaptive strategies are utilised by South East Asian students and North American teachers studying and teaching in cross-cultural educational environments.

This paper concentrates on adaptive strategies made by students and teachers in a cross-cultural educational environment. How do South East Asian educated students adapt to the North American classroom environment, teacher and educational methods? And how do North American teachers adapt their behaviour and pedagogical methods when teaching students coming from a South East Asian educational environment?

2. Cross cultural teaching environments

My own experiences in cross-cultural educational environments led me into this research area. As a teacher of marketing and management, I lived and worked in Thailand for nearly ten years. During this time, I taught in the business schools of several universities in Bangkok, Shanghai, and Singapore. More recently, upon my return to Australia, I taught business school courses at universities in Perth where there are many overseas students coming from South East Asian countries.

Some of my first experiences, although now several years past, are amongst the sharpest in my mind. My first teaching appointment was with Assumption Business Administration College (ABAC) at Assumption University, Bangkok. Assumption is an English-speaking university originally founded in 1969 as the Assumption School of Business and is administered by the Brothers of St. Gabriel, a Catholic order which originated in France at the beginning of the 18th century.

Today Assumption is spread over two campuses, the HuaMark campus in Ramkhamhaeng near the city centre and the BangNa campus on the south eastern seaboard just outside Bangkok and close by the site of Thailand's new international airport. Assumption has more than 20,000 students enrolled in undergraduate and post graduate programs in Arts, Science, Engineering, Business and Law. When I was working there the BangNa campus was still being built and the university operated only the HuaMark campus at Ramkhamhaeng.

The first class I taught was Marketing Research, a fourth year undergraduate course in the business school. As I waited at the door of my classroom for my students to come into the room I noticed as each one of them entered the classroom they ducked or crouched down so that their head would be lower than mine as they passed by me standing in the doorway.

When the last student arrived, and they were extremely punctual, I walked into the classroom and saw row upon row of expectant faces, all uniformed in regulation black skirts or trousers and the regulation white shirt of the university. The students, more than 50 of them, were uniformly seated in the fixed row seating of the classroom.

I introduced myself and began the class in my usual manner by asking the students a question. Which data do you think is more important to the market researcher, primary data or secondary data? There was absolute silence and nobody volunteered an answer. I knew at that moment I would need to make some major changes in my teaching style.

Asking questions and getting answers was a nightmare until in the end one student came up to me after class and told me that what I was asking them to do was just too difficult. She told me that;

"In our culture questioning our elders, our teachers, or our parents is just not done. We are uncomfortable with this and it is too difficult for us to do this even though you ask us to."

Another student from the same class commented to me that;

"We are used to having our teacher stand up the front of the classroom and read the book and teach us what we need to learn from the book."

During my research for this paper I conducted several one on one interviews with students from South East Asian countries who were studying at Webster University Thailand (WUT) a North American University campus situated some 200 kilometres south of Bangkok. Many of the comments made by students during these interviews were similar to what my first class told me.

One Thai student studying at WUT told me;

"It is the book and me, me and the book, just us two" when explaining his study methods.

Another Thai student explained to me in a one on one interview;

"We learn the book for the class and that's it, no more reading and no other interpretation. What the teachers say is the correct interpretation our opinions do not count. The best way to pass is by learning the book and what the teacher tells us."

3. Socio cultural values and norms

Against this backdrop of socio cultural behaviour, South East Asian students and North American teachers who find themselves working in a North American styled educational environment are sorely challenged.

Clashes over differing socio cultural behaviours and norms are unavoidable and misunderstandings of the possible interpretations of their respective belief systems and values are common.

The South East Asian students have been raised in a social hierarchy which precludes them from questioning their elders, it does not allow them to exhibit behaviours which the North American teachers are familiar with. North American teaching methods, similar to those of my own country, tend to be student centred, questioning students and debating topics in class is the norm.

Students are expected to read from a variety of sources and teachers see themselves as facilitators of student learning. At WUT the majority of teachers do not use one set text for their class preferring to give the students a reader of articles and excerpts from a variety of different sources. Other teachers including myself will often combine the two, a set text to provide the framework for the subject and a variety of additional readings.

Memorization is not key in the North American classroom and at WUT teachers seek to generate an understanding of the concepts and principles which students may then apply to many different problems leading the students to a deeper understanding of the subject matter.

Given the above scenario what adaptations can the teachers and the students consider in order to achieve some congruency in the classroom taking into consideration their different socio-cultural behaviours, values, norms and expectations,

4. Teachers and student adaptive strategies in cross cultural educational environments.

Prior to investigating the adaptive behaviours of teachers and students I first focused on the perceived differences which teachers and students observed when they entered this cross cultural education environment. Investigating the perceived differences of teachers and students was key to my initial research questions;

What are the perceived differences for students and teachers between South East Asian and North American educational environments? What are the comparative strengths of these perceived differences for South East Asian students and North American teachers in this cross cultural educational environment?

Once this data had been collected I progressed further with the study into the adaptive strategies employed by teachers and students to compensate for these perceived differences. However the work on perceived differences and the relative strengths of these differences is outside the scope of today's paper. Statistical analysis is still ongoing and I hope to present a paper on this work next year.

Underlying all of the research was my interest to investigate the perceived differences and the adaptive behaviours employed by both teachers and students within the context of their cultural and social values and norms. The hierarchical social culture of South East Asian countries together with their Confucius Heritage Culture (CHC) provides a unique set of socio cultural behaviours, values and norms. In contrast to the socio cultural behaviours, values and norms of the predominantly North American faculty differed considerably to those of the South East Asian students.

Given this perspective my research includes students and teachers; encompassing two sides of the classroom dynamic and the cross cultural aspects of the student teacher relationship in the context of their differing social and cultural backgrounds.

This approach differs too much of the research work which has been conducted into student behaviours and learning styles as my research looks at both teachers and students behaviours and at their teaching and learning styles respectively. Investigations into the interactions between the two groups involved in this educational environment can yield rich and informative data.

Observing student teacher behaviours and interactions, looking at what works and what doesn't work, also looking at what teachers and students think would work in this environment and what in fact doesn't work at all. Feedback from students and teachers validated comments from individuals of each group.

5. Data Collection in Thailand

In 1998 I became one of the first lecturers to join Webster University Thailand (WUT) at their Cha Am campus located between the coastal towns of Cha Am and Hua Hin 200 kms south of Bangkok on the Gulf of Thailand.

Webster University is a private North American university founded in 1915 and is located in Webster Groves, St Louis, Missouri. Webster has both undergraduate and graduate programs in the arts, communication, business and soft sciences such as computer science and IT. Webster also offers science and nursing science programs. Webster has more than 100 campuses located worldwide with an enrolment of approximately 22,000 students representing more than 100 different nationalities.

Since relocating back to Australia I have worked on an adjunct basis for WUT returning each year to teach in the business school during the Spring 2 term which runs from March to May. It has been during these teaching assignments that I have been able to do much of my research and almost all of my data collection.

Living in mixed student and faculty housing, close to the university campus enables me to immerse myself in the research but also more importantly allows me to work within the socio cultural context of the study. Living and working in the cross cultural environment of WUT highlights the socio cultural values and norms of the South East Asian students attending the university. Language, greetings, social formalities and interactions between the different nationalities highlights the contrasting socio cultural behaviours, values and norms of the different cultural groups.

While the majority of my students came from South East Asia countries I also have several study abroad students from North America, Canada, Europe and recently two from Australia. The contrasting behaviours of this multi cultural student cohort, their behaviour in the classroom and the differing approaches to their work assisted considerably with the analysis and interpretation in this study.

6. Phenomenological approach

Taking a phenomenological approach to this research my data gathering spanned two three month periods, March-May 2004 and March-May 2005. During these two terms I conducted one on one interviews with 8 teachers and 12 students. Set and collected essays on cross cultural education experiences from 24 students and held 5 student focus groups and 2 teachers' focus groups. The data was collected on location at the WUT campuses in Cha Am and Bangkok

At the beginning of this year based on the qualitative data collected in 2004 I developed a Likert scaled questionnaire to measure the strength of the perceived differences. This was administered to a total of 138 participants, 126 students and 12 teachers in March and April 2005. The data from this measurement instrument is currently being prepared for a Rasch analysis and will be included in my PhD thesis and hopefully form the basis of a future paper.

There were of course limitations. I am not South East Asian and in my role as study leader the cross cultural aspects of my interaction with the student participants first as a foreigner and second as a teacher should be noted. The interviewer bias is heightened under such conditions and I was concerned how this could interfere with the research. However after triangulating the data gathered, student essays with the focus groups and the one of one interviews an acceptable degree of validation was achieved.

When participants came from my own classes, student focus groups were easily set up and creating a relaxed informal atmosphere when opinions could be freely expressed was achieved with ease. On the other hand when trying to set up additional focus groups with students who were acquainted with me only as a member of the faculty and not as a teacher proved to be more difficult. I was able to create three more focus groups, two with predominately Nepalese and Bangladeshi students and another with all North American students.

In order to gather more informal opinion I visited the school cafeteria during the midday break and asked if I could join tables of students during their lunch hour. I was made welcome and in this manner was able to go from group to group and elicit comments on my research questions during 10 to 15 minutes of conversation with the students. I took my recorder with me and asked the students to talk to me about their experiences, this worked well and I was able to gather a lot of data on student adaptations in a cross cultural educational setting. Many of the students had only been at WUT for a short time, one to two years, and they were able to reflect back to their home country experiences and compare and contrast the two educational environments. In addition many of the students had also returned home for at least one holiday period and many of them told me that after these visits they saw the contrasts between the two environments even more starkly.

Finally, I cannot return to question these students again as most of them will have moved on to another campus or gone back to their home countries. Collecting the data over a two year period is probably the maximum length of time that it would be possible to maintain a degree of continuity before the faculty and the student body change.

7. Research findings

Students and teachers reported that some adaptations they made worked well, and some adaptations did not. In addition there were adaptations which both groups thought would work and they didn't. Both groups reported that there were some adaptations which just could not be made by teachers or students. As the study involved teachers and students this enabled the findings to be cross validated between the two groups. Cross adaptation between the teachers and their students is usually found after two semesters or at the end of one academic year when a level of congruency is reached in the classroom.

For both groups the adaptive behaviours and adaptive strategies fell into five categories.

Adaptive behaviours and strategies of teachers;
 Adaptations made by teachers due to their expectations
 Adaptations made by teachers in response to student behaviours
 Adaptations made by teachers in response to classroom dynamics
 Teachers' adaptations which work and are validated by students
 Teachers' adaptations which do not work and are validated by students

Similarly the adaptive behaviours and strategies of students;
 Adaptations made by students due to their expectations
 Adaptations made by students in response to teachers' behaviours
 Adaptations made by students in response to classroom dynamics
 Students' adaptations which work and are validated by teachers
 Student adaptations which do not work and are validated by teachers

The implementation and development of these adaptive behaviours and strategies is an interactive and dynamic process carried out both inside and outside the classroom.

Simone Volet (1999) in her work on the appropriateness of knowledge transfer for learning across cultures described this as an "experiential interface". Volet discussed four types of knowledge transfer in the cross cultural learning environment, appropriate, ambivalent, difficult and inappropriate. The diagram on the following page illustrates the "experiential interface" of adaptive strategies and behaviours made by teachers and students in a cross cultural educational environment.

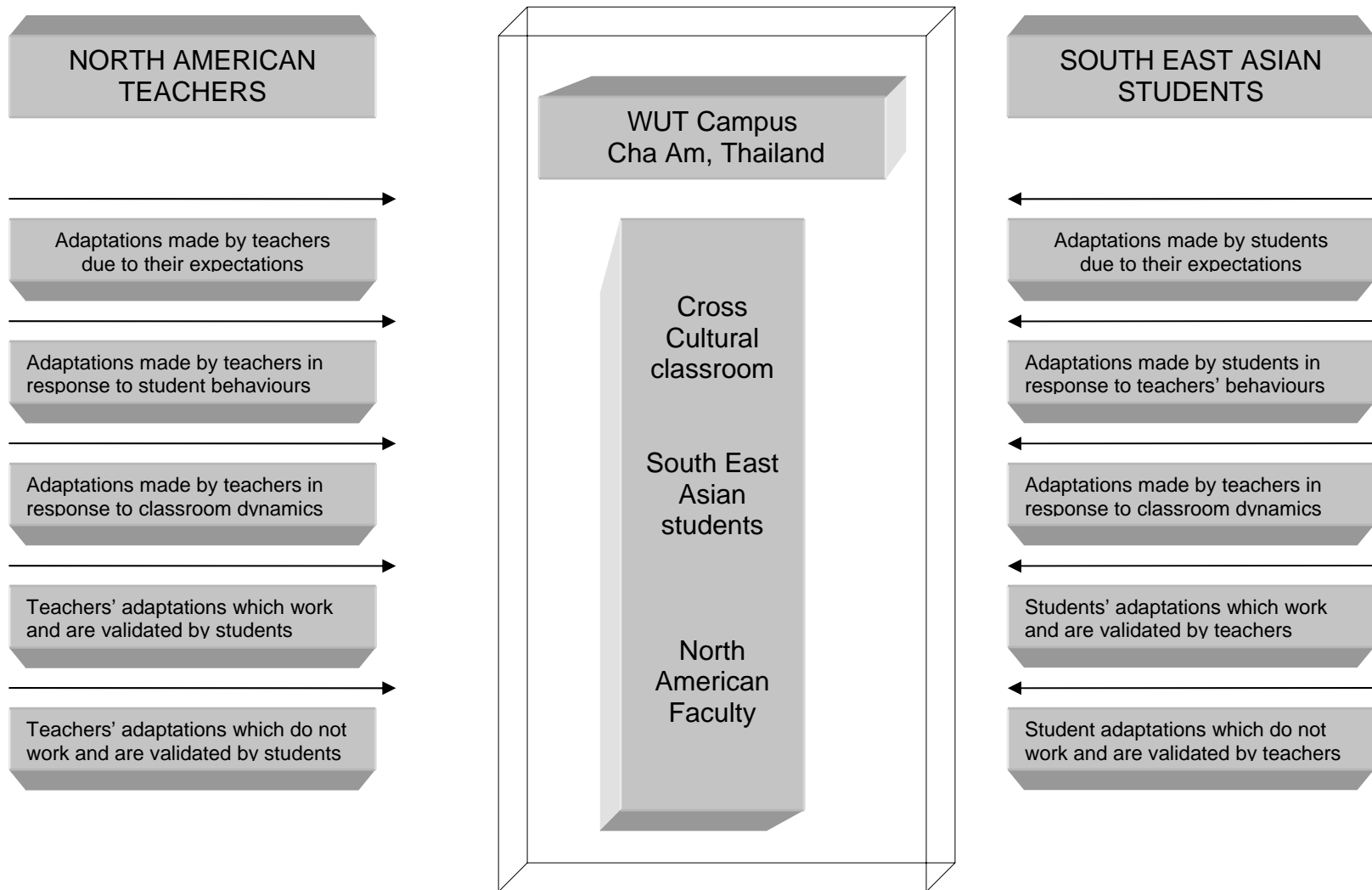


Fig 1: Experiential Interface in the Cross Cultural Classroom

As Volet (1999) noted in her paper, certain types of transfer of learning were appropriate and others were not. Similarly in my research the findings demonstrated that some adaptive behaviours and strategies were more successful than others.

Both groups came to the cross cultural educational environment with certain expectations. Students had been informed about the higher degree of student participation in lessons and teachers had been told by their colleagues about various cultural differences they would encounter. However both teachers and students reported that their first experiences were quite challenging.

A North American teacher who had been teaching at WUT for five years told me;

“You are dealing with students here that have had twenty years of cultural, literally training, as to the observation of respect and to the teacher (the teacher) simply isn't questioned and to actually to speak up and ask a question class is disrespectful.”

The same teacher went on to explain;

“Of course the fact that I am male and older makes it even worse because those are other Asian characteristics that require respect and that respect is in the form of deference and deference is most often manifested in never questioning and being quite. So I walk into class I am big I am loud I am an older Caucasian male Caucasian teacher I have everything against me possible in trying to engage students in class room discussion.”

This teacher told me that his previous teaching methods were unsuitable in this new cross cultural environment;

“I have a whole career having taught from questions. I didn't care if we started the course from the middle, or from the back or from the beginning it didn't matter to me because if you would ask me a question I can teach the entire thing without ever opening the book without ever having a note I have always worked this way. It didn't matter give me a question. I can go in here and ask are there any questions and they have no questions of any kind.”

However the same teacher embraced the challenge and recognised that adaptive strategies would need to be employed and would result in a learning experience for him personally as well as his students.

“The opportunity to try and generate discussion, or to try and bridge the distance so that I can get them to try and understand what they are taught, this is I think is most wonderful teaching opportunity a person can have.”

This teacher told me that he would work on establishing trust so that students would feel more comfortable asking a question in class. He also maintained an open door policy in his office for students to come and ask questions after class and even encouraged students to come in groups to talk with him at his home. He explained that over time his students learned to enjoy new teaching and learning styles.

Comments from a Thai student whom I interviewed validated this teacher's observation.

“I was kind of scared we were all told that we would have to do a lot of talking in the class participation points were important.”

This student explained that;

“I found it difficult rather (to give an opinion/participate in class). I had never had to express my opinion before I was like what should I think if I think like this is it right or wrong are they going to frown upon I didn't really know what to do or what to think or how to express myself.”

In the end he told me that he couldn't adapt to this participatory behaviour very well;

“I didn’t really adapt to it that much. You know I wasn’t one of those who raised their hands and said I think this is what I think. OK I just sit quietly I was kind of like more give my input on the technicalities.”

Commenting on the teacher student relationship the student explained that it was;

“Not like in Thailand it’s (the student/teacher relationship) very close, you can talk about pretty much everything. That kind of relationship made it easy for the teacher and the students to carry out the study because you can just kind of you can just talk to them. Like let’s say you have a question on the reading on your homework you know and you don’t have to be afraid of the teacher hey I don’t understand this can you explain it to me. Without that distance it made learning a lot easier.”

These comments validated the North American teachers’ adaptive behaviours in establishing trust and a close relationship with the students.

Other North American teachers at WUT told me that they did more group work explaining that the students “are more comfortable to ask questions in a group.”

Another teacher at WUT explained that being informal encouraged participatory behaviour in the classroom telling me that she was;

“Less formal, I have to relax things a lot and a lot of humour so they don’t feel the big gap between me and them....and make myself more approachable so they are ok to come up and speak to me.”

The same teacher also noted that she encountered other cross cultural challenges with respect to the studying and learning styles of her South east Asian students.;

“The kids got really upset (in her class) what they said was that to do well in the exam we have to memorise the book and we don’t understand the book. This is the approach they take and that’s not what we are about; we ask how you apply it. The grad students are having a really hard time making that link between this is a general principal and this is how I have to apply it.”

Again the teachers’ comments were validated by students telling me about their experiences in their previous educational environments in South East Asian countries.

During a one on one interview with a Thai student the student explained;

“Thai, (Teachers expected us) to memorise the material in the textbook just in the textbook not outside. And then we would be tested on that on the mid term or final exam. Read the text book and figure out all the questions in the exam come straight from the text book so if you know if you are an A student you have to a photographic memory.”

This same student went on to explain his study techniques and the adaptations he tried to make;

“Although when I was younger I did not know which path I would take but then later on I realised that you know like I somehow my unconsciously I adapt to memorisation. I can still memorise a lot like when I watch movies I can memorise. Just like you can just look at the text, me and the text, me and text, memorise it, no outside thinking, no connection.”

In a focus group a young Laotian female student told the group;

“The way we study was memorise everything, especially with Chinese we have to memorise every stroke I mean it didn’t matter I felt like I studied till fifth grade and I can speak Chinese like a second grader or something because I had to memorise I didn’t care if I didn’t understand the “yetko” the homework and all the lessons I had to learn I didn’t care about understanding as long as I memorise get a “ekow” which is 100.” All the participants in this focus group agreed vehemently with this statement.

In the same focus group a Thai student explained;

“That what happens in Thai school and as she (referring to the Laotian student) said we just remember but we never think anything we just remember that OK. I think we nowadays we try to improve the way of education in Thailand because we have problem like as I said what we used to learn right we just remember but we never create anything. So nowadays we try to improve by let the student to create and use their own to think not just study from the book.”

Humour was mentioned as being another cross cultural issue as one WUT teacher explained;

“The main thing I do different is I can’t tell the same jokes no one knows what I am talking about because no one has the same frame of reference.”

Both groups told me that over time successful adaptations and changes were made by teachers and students and they also recognised that some things just could not be changed and they would have to work around these issues. For example some students told me that even after a year they just can’t ask a question in class and many students told me that they still did not feel comfortable giving an opinion. These same students will however come up after class and ask a question or try out an opinion with the teachers privately but will not do so during class in front of their classmates.

In general the findings demonstrated that;

Small groups work in so far as students feel more comfortable asking questions of the teacher on behalf of the group and in front of their group rather than asking questions in front of the whole class. Classroom appointments outside teaching hours and open door policies are imperative particularly in the first year. These questions can then be used in the classroom.

Building friendship and trust with the students was seen as being very important and teachers felt they had to gain the trust and confidence of their students before they would venture into new behaviours.

When the new behaviours manifest themselves and teacher and students make appropriate adaptations to their new educational environment student teacher relationships improve and an improved learning environment is achieved. The variety of adaptations made by teachers and students inside and outside the classroom suggests that this is a dynamic process where teachers and students are constantly trying out adaptive behaviours to search of what works for them as individuals, as a group, and in the classroom. This is particularly noticeable during the first year in the cross cultural educational environment.

Over time the adaptive behaviours from both the teacher and the student create an environment where the cultures work together synergistically and you could even say that in this instance 1 plus 1 really does equal 3. The dynamics in well adapted cross cultural classroom environment are superb and real learning takes place for both students and teachers. As a teacher in this environment I found my own insights into teaching and cultural approaches to learning were greatly enhanced.

8. Congruence in the classroom

Students and teachers adaptive strategies often overlap, at times they miss each other, and at times are in such synergy that congruency in the classroom is realised over a period of time. The critical issue is the extent to which both groups adjust and the resultant educational environment is created where the two groups understand each other and a congruency of expectations is achieved. When such a congruent educational environment is created, enhanced teaching and learning outcomes can be achieved.

A diagrammatic illustration of this congruence in the class room illustrates the phenomena. Initially the two groups while within the same educational environment, in this study WUT Cha Am, meet for the first time in the classroom. The teachers and the students bring with them their individual socio-cultural values, norms and behaviours and a set of expectations about the cross cultural educational environment they have entered.

As the semester progresses and teachers and students try out various adaptive behaviours and strategies congruency in the adaptive behaviours can be seen. For example when teachers ask questions based on facts, these questions will be more readily answered by students than questions which seek an opinion from the students. Once participatory behaviour has been initiated in this way students feel more confident, and begin to participate more readily in class. By the end of a full academic year many students feel confident enough to voice an opinion in front of the class.

Before such congruency is achieved however, a variety of adaptive behaviours and strategies from both the teachers and students will be tried. Some strategies are adopted successfully by both groups while others are rejected outright. Certain strategies can be employed by students or teachers alone; some of these strategies may be successful and others may not. Furthermore, some adaptations made by teachers are not understood or not appreciated by the students. Finally some adaptations are not possible from a socio cultural perspective and compromises need to be made on both sides

When teachers and students can make adaptations with respect to each others socio cultural values, behaviours and norms within the cross cultural educational environment, these complimentary adaptations generate a better understanding between the groups an improved learning environment is created.

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