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Re-thinking learning spaces to foster collaboration between Chinese and Western students

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Title: Re-thinking learning spaces to foster collaboration between Chinese students

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Introduction: Helping to overcome Chinese student participatory reticence through pedagogy

Aims and rationale:

Pedagogically, western academics need to understand Chinese students in terms of their cultural perspective and the barriers that limit their academic attainment. This inquiry uses a case study to demonstrate how pedagogic interventions and the organisation of learning spaces can enhance student participation. The interventions described below have been shown to be beneficial to all international students and indeed, home students too.

Implementation:

For the international students at the focus of this case study, it was found that two strategies (among others) can have significant benefits in enhancing student collaboration and participation in a meaningful way. The first is to reconsider how tasks and activities are framed and conducted. The second, is to reorganise the layout and organisation – the topology - of the learning space itself in such a way that it helps to diminish social, cultural and performance anxieties among international students. Iterations of this second strand (both at Coventry and at Universities in China) have consistently shown how the reorganisation of space alone can have demonstrable, beneficial effects on student participation. With increased participation and a greater willingness to contribute, students have been shown to improve their English language skills, collaborative effort, and academic and creative performance.

An empirical intervention was designed to enhance participation and engagement by reconsidering the pedagogical approach and learning space dynamics within which students were required to undertake tasks and activities. In this intervention, students were tasked with a text analysis of a piece of design writing. Upon completion of the analysis, the students were required to demonstrate an understanding of the piece by an oral presentation in their own words to their peers.

This is the sort of task that most Chinese students would find socially uncomfortable, not least for its risk of exposing any language deficit and the requirement to speak publicly, especially within large cohorts. The orthodox classroom setting of serried ranks of chairs was rearranged into a series of small circular cluster groups in which students, facing each other, collaboratively analysed and decoded the text collectively, effectively negating the feeling of being critically observed by the teacher. Within this classroom topology, the role of the teacher becomes that of an unobtrusive mediator instead of an authority figure, essentially becoming invisible to the students within a few minutes. In this context, students trustingly and unselfconsciously expressed their uncertainties and questions to each other, and eventually arrived at a mutually understood interpretation of the text that could be couched within a narrower vocabulary than the source text, but which was collectively-understood within the limits of their common vocabulary.

For many students – certainly for the Chinese students - the orthodox learning space environment is one which features traditional rows of desks facing the tutor at the front that enforces a didactic, high power-distance form of teaching (McCroskey and McVetta 1978; Kao and Gansneder 1995; Cheng and Guan 2012). In contrast, group cluster-style learning spaces help to foster an environment in which students are willing to participate rather than just to listen. They are encouraged to trust each other, admit to gaps in knowledge (which is often typically counter-cultural), and to share their thoughts on the task given to them as a group.

Much western academic writing on the Chinese learner emphasises the passive nature of their behaviour within learning spaces and the common explanation for this is that this has its origins in cultural norms (Chan and Rao 2009; Hofstede, 2010; Sit 2013). This author is somewhat sceptical of an uncritical acceptance of this position, having empirically observed that outside of the traditional classroom in social informal and relaxed contexts Chinese students are every bit as dynamic, extrovert, fun-loving and uninhibited as their western counterparts (Hilton 2016). This strongly suggests that their classroom behaviour is a habituated response to the classroom environment in which the student-teacher power-distance relationship triggers a deep-seated behavioural role expectation that manifests itself as introverted passivity.(Gieve and Clark 2005).

To illustrate how perceptions of Chinese student introversion and learning space passivity can be positively challenged, the following case study describes an intervention that was designed to elicit within the learning space, the same degree of gregarious engagement that they demonstrate elsewhere within socially informal contexts. Students were tasked with collecting a range of household junk and cardboard boxes which they were instructed to bring to the planned session, while the purpose of the task was kept from them. Once at the session, it was only then that the students were issued with the activity objective; that, in groups, they were to design and build a 'fighting robot' within one hour, using only the material they had brought with them. Having been allocated to three small groups they were simply left to get on with it, with the teacher retreating to the background as a passive observer, available for assistance or questions but otherwise serving no other purpose (Finkel 2000).

After an initial few moments of silence and clear uncertainty, a small number of students approached the materials and began to pick them up and explore their potential. Within a very short period of time all students had spontaneously engaged fully and gregariously with the task and their communication became loud, animated and unselfconsciously playful. Strikingly, the normal paradigm of concept generation and design development schema with which they were familiar were not evident during this process. Instead, they simply responded to each other's actions osmotically and collaboratively, appearing to construct the fighting robots organically in response to each other's actions and focus. Certainly, there was little sense that activities were being coordinated under the direction of any single leadership role.

The resulting robot outcomes were fabulously successful (the students themselves were delighted with their designs), and it was starkly evident that even the most innately introverted students were fully and unselfconsciously engaged in this collaborative, free-form mode of active exploration and creative problem-solving (Hilton 2018).

This immersive, collaboration ethos is written directly into the course module guides and is a critical aspect of its DNA. From the initial introductions at induction week, students know from the first session that transcultural and cross-disciplinary working is an expected part of working practice and ways of thinking. The pedagogue's role from then on is to gently but consistently reinforce, through repetition and praise, the value of collaborative effort as an effective motivator to learning and academic progression. Statistically, grades for group-work assignments are consistently higher than typical grades obtained for individual work. This means that the students come to see the tangible value of collaboration and participation and as such they are less likely to revert to 'passive -style' learning and introversion. In fact, many students continue to collaborate with each other, across disciplines and cultures, outside the classroom and into their social sphere.

Language skills and confidence in using English is also an area where teaching spaces can influence international students' experiences. By creating collaborative, non-threatening environments in which students can feel relaxed, they are more prepared to engage in discussion. This has the added benefit of improving their language skills, especially when they digitally interact together beyond the classroom via mobile phone software such as *WhatsApp* and *WeChat*. For example, students themselves have self-reported in interviews about how they recognise that English language deficit harms their confidence and willingness to participate:

'I think aspect of the most difficult to understand is the problems discussed in the classroom, I need time to understand the different thinking from the different country.'

'When we hear word we don't understand is difficult. We don't like to ask question if we don't understand so is why we don't speak in class.'

In light of this, smartphones and the use of *WeChat* and translation apps are now an integrated part of the pedagogic strategy aimed at improving language skills among Chinese students, especially when difficulties emerge over the meaning of unfamiliar words in the discipline-specific lexicon. At such moments, discussions are diverted to explore and mutually discover the contextually most accurate Chinese translation. Once agreed, discussion returns to the topic in question. What has emerged from pedagogic experimentation and enquiry is that there exists an interconnected relationship in the way learning space dynamics (its topology, formality/informality), pedagogy, participation and language proficiency - all mutually combine to affect performance and academic attainment:

'...where teaching space topologies, learning tasks and student-teacher dynamics are modified to permit students to democratically move, discuss, engage and interact within the space and with each other, then the likelihood is the students will feel less intimidated and more likely to actively participate,' (Hilton 2018).

For some years now, the author has been using WeChat as an additional environment in which students and tutor can interact, share information, ask questions, conduct research and collaborate. This conceptual expansion of the learning space into the digital realm has added, literally, a further dimension to the students understanding of what constitutes a learning space. While they themselves may not consciously consider the *WeChat* environment in terms of a specialised environment in which learning takes place, it is clear that as digital natives, students are extremely comfortable when they engage in discussions within this online world. In this digital environment, students tend to show very little reluctance in participating, regardless of their standard of English. Diagram.1 below, illustrates a conceptual hybrid learning space and shows how learning space characteristics can serve to enhance, or degrade the students' language skills and learning experience.

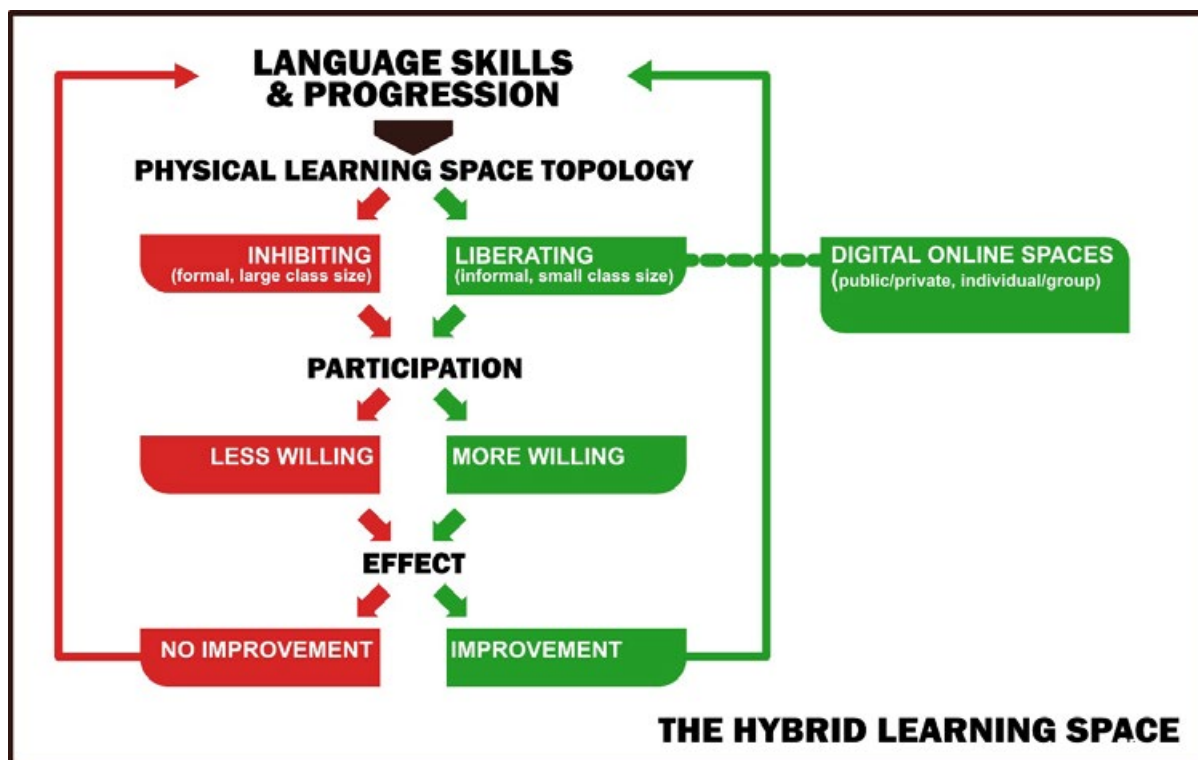


Diagram.1 The Hybrid Learning Space (Hilton, 2019).

Feedback

The students find this module highly stimulating and a positive learning experience that embraces cultural differences:

'I like the philosophy of the course in that students are encouraged to become independent and have confidence in making decisions.'

'Forces us to work with people we don't know. Quickly became a team.'

From an employer's perspective, collaborative cross-cultural working is an essential requirement in global workplaces. One of our industry partners propounds how communication across cultures is an important employability skill:

'Flexibility and adaptability of these students is very important. The confidence to be globally adaptable. Academic ability is one thing but the most important is the ability to problem-solve via processes to the end solution through communication skills, organisation skills and skills obtained from multi-cultural team working,'
Dr David Shuttlewood, Ricardo.

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Key words: Design pedagogy, Chinese learner, hybrid learning space, participation, attainment