Borderless education and teaching and learning cultures: The case of Hong Kong

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Abstract

In the context of the need for Australian universities to retain their place in an increasingly competitive global environment, this paper examines the issues surrounding the quality of education offered to overseas students from the perspective of their educational goals and expectations of effective teaching and learning environments. It is argued that courses designed for Australian students, even though they are of demonstrably high quality, will not necessarily be viewed in this way by these students. Research on teaching and learning in the context of Hong Kong is used as the basis for an exploration of how on-campus teachers and learners view their educational experience. Contrary to Western stereotypes of Asian learners as rote learners and teachers as harsh authoritarian figures, the research points to learners as using memory as one step in the process of understanding rather than as an end in itself. Teachers reveal themselves as highly student-centred, as helping and guiding their students, while carefully orchestrating the learning experience of all students. It is argued that these qualities extend to provision of distance education in Hong Kong and to online teaching as well, though for practical social reasons the latter is likely to find greater acceptance in on-campus education than in the Open University which caters mainly for adult students.

Introduction

Recent advances in communications technology, and deregulation of financial markets, have enabled global imperatives to take on a new and altogether more powerful meaning. In common with other sectors of Australian society, higher education is faced with the implications of globalisation, and in particular, increased competition for local and international students arising from the possibility of further market deregulation.

The response of the Australian Government to global pressures has been to move towards economic rationalism in the spirit of a free market economy. To date, the response of many, if not all, Australian universities caught up in politically motivated demands to rationalise their activities has been to seek funding elsewhere, mainly through enrolment of full-fee paying overseas students with the competition among universities that this implies. In an attempt to further boost overseas enrolments and the income which this generates, some institutions have also taken initiatives in offering their courses to overseas students by distance education.

However, to remain viable in offering Australian education in the global marketplace, universities will need to find ways of providing an educational experience to overseas students that is not only of high quality in Australian terms, but also in terms of the educational expectations of potential students in a range of countries. Central to the question of what constitutes a quality education in another culture is the issue of what educational goals students and teachers espouse and what they perceive as the attributes of a high quality university education. How can we as educational providers understand and cater for the perspectives of those cultures which may be recipients of our education?

This discussion will focus on the issue of the culture of teaching and learning, using research conducted in Hong Kong as a case study, since Hong Kong (and more recently China) are seen as large potential markets for Australian higher education. Even though borderless education is increasingly viewed as being synonymous with online education at a distance, we would argue that understanding the values and practices of students and teachers in more traditional forms of education in their social and educational contexts is central to the development of distance education and ultimately to effective online teaching across cultural boundaries, since the student's response is as much to the quality of the educational experience as it is to the technology that is employed to deliver it. This discussion will focus on teaching and learning cultures at three related levels, using Hong Kong as a case study:

1. What are the educational goals and perceptions of effective teaching and learning among on-campus students and teachers in Hong Kong universities?

2. How has distance education been designed in the context of Hong Kong to take account of that society's educational values and practices?

3. What are the responses of students and teachers to online courses in Hong Kong?

Goals and perceptions of effective teaching and learning

Though there is a strong Western influence in Hong Kong by virtue of 150 years of British colonial rule and the myriad of foreign business interests which it attracts, Hong Kong still retains much of its Chinese character. While clearly not a Confucianist society in the traditional sense, Hong Kong is arguably a Confucian Heritage Culture along with China, Singapore, Korea, Taiwan and Japan. In the universities, almost all undergraduates are of Chinese social and cultural origins and the same is true of over 70% of their teachers, though a considerable number of these have been exposed to a Western style education at some stage.

In Western countries many differences in approaches to learning and studying between Western and Chinese students have been noted and there seems no reason to doubt that these differences are also present in Hong Kong. Very often Western understanding has been marred by stereotypic views of Asian learners and their apparently "dysfunctional" learning environment.

Stereotypes of the Asian learner

Numerous stereotypes arise from observations by Western educators teaching Asian students in countries such as Australia, United Kingdom and USA. Samuelowicz (1987) is a good example of how academics teaching Asian students in an Australian university view these students. In this study, staff characterise overseas Asian students unfavourably as learning to rote memorise rather than to understand; relying on the content of learning rather than argument; being reluctant to discuss, criticise or express an opinion; expecting the teacher to give "correct" answers. As a result there is the recommendation that universities pay serious attention to the learning needs of overseas students to enable them to respond positively to the teaching styles and innovations in these Western-style universities. Overseas students need to go through a process of acculturation to the learning culture in which they are studying. The universities must take at least part responsibility for this process. While there may be an argument for expecting Asian students studying in Australia to learn to adapt to the prevailing cultural and educational norms, the same expectation does not necessarily apply when

they are studying Australian courses in their own countries where they are clearly embedded in their own language, family, work, peer and social groups. In either case, whether the aim is to design appropriate support for Asian students studying on campus in Australian universities or to design culturally appropriate distance education or online courses a stereotypic view of Asian learners will not contribute to these processes.

Countering stereotypes of the Asian learner

In recent years several educational researchers in Hong Kong have asked whether this stereotypic picture of the Asian learner is a valid one, and whether in fact the learning environments in Hong Kong and other Confucian Heritage Cultures are as dysfunctional as they might at first appear. Biggs (1996) addresses the question of why Asian learning environments in Confucian Heritage Cultures that appear to Westerners to be conducive to surface, reproductive approaches to learning should produce academically successful students, who appear to use deep approaches to learning aimed at understanding rather than reproduction of text, and who outperform their Western counterparts. In Biggs' words, it may be that "... what some Western observers are seeing is not what they think it is" (Biggs 1996, p. 50).

Kember and Gow (1990) examined whether instruments developed in a Western context for assessing student approaches to study could be successfully transferred to Hong Kong. They found that factor structures for deep (understanding) and achieving approaches to study were consistent with those obtained in Western countries, but doubted that the surface, rote learning construct directly transfers to Hong Kong students. After subsequent interviews with students, they concluded that a "narrow", systematic, step-by-step approach, rather than a rote learning approach better described the role of memorising. It appears Hong Kong students are as likely as their Australian counterparts to attempt a deep level of understanding in their study and when they do memorise it is with the intention of understanding, not rote learning for its own sake.

In addition to the rote learner stereotype, teaching in Confucian Heritage Cultures is often seen by Western observers as teacher-directed and as stressing imitation rather than student-centred and fostering creativity. However Biggs (1996) points to Gardner's (1989) conclusion after studying art and music teaching in China, that the imitation is only the first stage in the teaching and learning process, and not the only stage:

> In the West, we believe in exploring first, then in the development of skills; the Chinese believe in skill development first, which typically involves repetitive, as opposed to rote learning, after which there is something to be creative with (Biggs 1996, p. 55).

In short, the memorising process may be but one stage in the total learning process rather than an end in itself.

Stigler and Stevenson (1991) further challenged the Western stereotype of the Asian teacher as authoritarian, dispensing knowledge and expecting students to memorise rather than construct knowledge for themselves, claiming that in China, Taiwan and Japan they observed teachers adopting a decidedly student-centred approach. Likewise O'Connor (1991) in a study of Chinese teachers found teachers to be student-centred and concerned for their students. In fact Confucian Heritage Culture teachers appear to spend a good deal of time interacting with their students both inside and outside the classroom, pointing to a need to ask whether teaching and learning in Confucian Heritage Cultures is as dysfunctional as Western observers have previously assumed.

Educational goals and perceptions of effective teaching in Hong Kong universities

Over the period 1995 to 1997, Kelly, Wong and Pratt (1998) conducted research in Hong Kong universities which aimed to explore teaching and learning goals of Western and Chinese teachers and Chinese students and to explore conceptions of effective teaching among these three groups. The research was prompted in part by the observation that, in Hong Kong universities, many dedicated Western academics from countries like USA, Britain, New Zealand and Australia who were apparently successful teachers in their own countries, nevertheless constantly expressed frustration and disappointment that they were unable to be "effective" teachers with their Hong Kong students.

In all 82 teachers from four Hong Kong universities (54 Chinese and 24 Western) completed a survey questionnaire. To deepen the survey findings, seven group interviews were conducted - three with Chinese teachers and four with Western teachers, involving 24 participants in total. In addition, 397 Year 2 students from four universities responded to the survey. This was followed by four group interviews with 11 students in all.

In the survey, the majority of both Chinese and Western teachers expressed the goal of developing academic skills: knowledge, skills, critical thinking and problem solving. Neither group was particularly concerned with knowledge transmission per se. Overall the aims expressed by both groups were not dissimilar to those in Kember and Gow's interview study with Hong Kong academics (Kember and Gow 1993), in which they report that to teachers the main function of higher education was to develop general problem solving ability. However, in our study the group interviews revealed that the Chinese and Western groups had quite different perspectives.

For instance, many Chinese teachers were concerned with transmitting basic knowledge, not as an end in itself

but as a building block for intellectual skills such as knowledge application, problem solving, or critical thinking: the familiar step-by-step intellectual approach. A second theme among Chinese teachers was of orchestrating the learning experience: estimating how much knowledge needs to be given to students as a basis for analysis and critical thinking and how much structure students need. The Western teachers were also likely to emphasise the growing intellectual independence of their students, but seemed inclined to skip over early, thorough preparation of students in achieving this end. There were more extreme views among the Western group, in particular about subject knowledge *per se*: specific subject or discipline knowledge was often seen as irrelevant. Rather it was seen merely as a vehicle for teaching thinking skills and approaches to problem solving. As one stated:

> *This is the whole point. ... It doesn't matter what it is you teach. It's how you go about it. The fact that you might end up getting the knowledge that you need to be a lawyer is an irrelevancy. It's irrelevant to the education* (Kelly, Wong and Pratt 1999 (forthcoming)).

When we examined the responses made by the Chinese students to the survey question about the main things they are trying to achieve through study, it was clear their goals were not necessarily consistent with the teachers: the majority were focused on preparation for their future careers. Consistent with the earlier study by Gow *et. al.* (1989), student responses confirmed high levels of vocational orientation: many entered university for job-related reasons. Among the vocational group, however, only a small number were extrinsically motivated in that they just wanted to pass their degree, get a good job, earn more money etc. Most expressed a detailed interest in preparation for a particular profession. In contrast to the view of some Western academics that the students were only there for the pragmatic reasons of doing minimal work to satisfy requirements to get a degree and get a good job, less that 14% of the students surveyed took this approach.

Teachers were also asked, in those situations where they judged their teaching to be effective, what made it so. In the survey responses, the main difference between the Chinese and Western teachers was in their attribution of effectiveness to either the teacher alone, students alone or both. The Chinese group were more inclined to view effective teaching as the responsibility of students or teachers and students together. For both groups the most important qualities of students were that they were responsive, interested, attentive and diligent. However, the Western teachers passed more negative judgements. Students were variously described as:

- Having short term goals and poor time management

- Being unable to connect knowledge

- Not wanting to want to read or study

- Trying to do as little as possible

- Wanting correct answers

- Lacking self criticism

- Needing too much structure

The Chinese teachers were not uncritical of students, but their criticisms were much more focused in a few areas, were more sympathetic to students, and were more inclined to see why students were the way they were - what influences might have produced them:

> *I think everyone has his or her own threshold. Some students are more mature while some are slow. Some students take the initiative while others need to be coerced to hand in assignments* (Kelly, Wong and Pratt 1999 (forthcoming)).

In terms of the teacher's contribution to effective teaching, overall the Chinese group emphasised the importance of lecture presentation skills and preparation for lectures, followed by helping and guiding students in their learning. Responses were similar for the Western teachers. However, the interviews again revealed differences in interpretations of key teaching qualities.

In the Chinese group this seemed to imply a sensitivity to students' needs and interests and the need to continually adjust their teaching accordingly. The Western group on the other hand was much more concerned with helping and guiding via assignment marking or with providing opportunities for students to be successful, rather than structuring the learning experience to take account of individual needs. Furthermore, a version of helping and guiding among the Western teachers is the idea of critically challenging and provoking students.

> *It's certainly making challenges. I mean giving students challenges is part of the thing of giving them the opportunity to do something. If we don't challenge them and yet we expect them to discover something, I mean how can they do it?* (Kelly, Wong and Pratt 1999 (forthcoming)).

Likewise in both groups of teachers there was a concern for the relationship between teachers and students but once again this was expressed differently in interviews. The important aspects for the Western group were adopting a "professional" approach, allocating office hours to students, and presenting oneself as a caring person but within the boundaries of allocated class time. Some were wary of becoming too close to students as it was seen as conflicting with their role of assessor of students work. The emphasis among the Chinese teachers was much more on informality in their relationships with students outside class. Uniquely the concept of "Heart" was used to express the way in which they demonstrated a caring attitude.

When asked what made their teachers effective, students expressed a range of attributes: knowledge of the subject, presentation skills, the ability to motivate students, caring for students and helping them learn. However, emphasis on these characteristics varied according to their own goals. The small percentage of students studying for pragmatic reasons conformed to the stereotype, in that they were much more inclined to want their teachers to give clear guidelines about what to study, give model answers, explain the subject clearly etc. Those students interested in training to become a professional expected the teacher to be knowledgeable, but also placed emphasis on the teacher's practical or applied knowledge in the field of work. They also expected their teachers to act as guides and caregivers, taking a personal interest in them. Referring to a Western teacher, one student expressed very clearly the kind of attributes that were unacceptable:

> *I think he doesn't care. … he just kept talking on his own and just gave us some quizzes. He was devoted to teaching. But he did not have the same kind of patience as the Chinese teachers. … Chinese teachers are caring for their students and encouraging students…he adopted the American way of teaching. … He would try to tell us anything he knows about the professional knowledge. But he was not ….approachable. … Students dared not ask him questions* (Kelly, Wong and Pratt 1999 (forthcoming)).

In spite of their need for teachers with a caring attitude, for the most part the students found it valuable that their teachers had high expectations of them, were even strict and demanding in their treatment of students. But they clearly resisted the idea that an effective teacher will provoke and challenge students.

From this study we can see clear differences between the Chinese and Western teachers in their interpretation of how educational goals are achieved and the attributes of effective teachers, as well as a marked conflict between the academic goals of most teachers and the more vocationally oriented goals of students. Clearly though the style of teaching adopted by Chinese teachers of working step-by-step through the subject, paying individual attention to students and personalising the relationship with students was more consistent with students' evaluation of effective teachers than the "professional" but more distant approach of the Western teachers.

There are implications here for both the attitudes of Australian educators towards their Asian students and the approaches which they adopt in their teaching. In the first place at least some of the negative stereotypes implied by students' having short term goals, trying to do as little as possible, wanting correct answers, being unwilling to read and study and requiring too much structure, may apply only to those small number of

students who are studying merely to pass exams and get a degree. These should not be confused with the majority who have a clear vocational orientation but nevertheless are interested in the professional substance of their degree study and its subsequent application.

Other negative observations such as students not speaking out in class and not challenging their teachers are consistent with the hierarchical nature of Chinese society in general and the accepted relationship between teachers and students in particular. But educators should be aware that there is a positive side of this relationship in terms of the helping and guiding and out of class assistance expected by and given to students by their Chinese teachers. In particular the behaviours implied by this relationship appear to run counter to Western notions of "professionalism" in teaching and present a considerable challenge to Western educators in terms of how they might successfully adapt their approach to meet the needs of their Asian students. From our research and that done recently by other educators in Hong Kong it appears that the issue of student-centredness is not the main point. Chinese teachers do indeed seem to be very student-centred but this is expressed in ways that are outside the professional expectations of many Western teachers.

Distance Education in the Hong Kong context

In terms of the export of education, another area in which Australian universities benefit is in offering distance education courses to overseas students. In the case of Hong Kong, competition for students has intensified greatly in recent years so much so that the Hong Kong government has recently taken positive steps to accredit all new distance education courses. Added to this, the Open Learning Institute of Hong Kong, recently upgraded to the Open University of Hong Kong (OUHK), is now well established and since it operates without government funding it will want to protect its potential student market against erosion by students enrolling in foreign courses. So Australian universities may well find that the situation in Hong Kong is much more competitive and in some ways more restrictive than it has been in the past.

Once again, the issue is how can Australian universities provide Hong Kong students with courses that preserve, and extend, Australia's reputation as a provider of high quality distance education courses. As with on-campus provision, a greater understanding of the cultural and social conditions in Hong Kong and attitudes to distance education can make a positive contribution to this. (See for example, Kelly, 1992.) Central to this issue is not merely that course materials and assessment have been carefully designed and evaluated within the Australian context, but rather the approach to teaching and learning that the course embodies. Added to this is the

important consideration that almost invariably Hong Kong students will be studying in English as their second or even third language while simultaneously embedded in a culture which does not use the English language as a matter of course. A high quality distance education course tailored for Australian students may be a useful starting point, but this is no guarantee of its acceptance by the Hong Kong Chinese community.

The esteem in which teachers are held and the uniquely close relationship between Chinese teachers and students demonstrated from the study by Kelly, Wong and Pratt can influence the attitudes of potential students and employers towards distance education as a valid mode of study per se. That the OUHK had a protracted and difficult beginning is some evidence for this. (See for example, Kelly and Kember, 1992.) We would maintain that the OUHK has been able to maintain its share of students, in spite of the full fees charged and the length of part-time study required by its courses, because care has been taken to recognise these factors and accommodate them in their total pattern of distance education provision. For instance, in addition to the close scrutiny of course proposals and the care taken with design of learning materials, all students have access to qualified local tutors who are both trained and monitored closely.

Moreover, it should be noted that, in spite of Hong Kong's fascination with technology and the wide access to computers within the community, the vast majority of courses offered by the Open University are print-based rather than computer-based. Practical social circumstances intervene here which make it unlikely that there will be a major shift away from print based courses in the near future. The great majority of Hong Kong students live in small apartments, usually with an extended family, making it difficult if not impossible for a student to have a dedicated workspace. To compensate for this, on-campus students in Hong Kong have good access to computer areas and library spaces but the same is not true for off-campus students who are left to the resources in their homes or possibly in the office, both of which are likely to be extremely crowded by Western standards. For these reasons, overseas online courses may eventually find greater acceptance in campus-based universities where students have excellent access to computer facilities on campus, either as supplements to certain programs where local courses do not exist, or where a course could be provided more cost effectively, for example in the General Education area and in some postgraduate courses. This would of course imply a move away from the current population of distance education students who are largely young working professionals towards young school leavers.

Responses to online courses in one Hong Kong university

While at the moment there are few examples of fully operational online courses in Hong Kong, interest in online teaching is growing rapidly, particularly in campus-based universities. With a view to providing guidelines for academic staff who wish to engage in online teaching, Muppala and Ha recently engaged in a project to evaluate Chinese teachers' and students' responses to online Web-based courses developed and taught to on-campus students at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology (HKUST), a relatively new university with a student population of around 7000. Their work focused on students' Web readiness and their responses to Web-based courses. They also looked at teachers' experiences in using the Web for teaching.

Role of websites

Consistent with the approach taken by the OUHK in its print-based courses, the teaching provided on the Web at HKUST is not intended to stand alone, but is embedded in a context in which the lecturers and teaching assistants provide face-to-face support for students in lectures or tutorials and one-to-one discussion: there is no suggestion that the pastoral role of the teacher be abandoned. In some cases the Web materials are used as a supplementary resource for face-to-face teaching, while in other cases, by placing basic course materials on the Web the teachers were aiming to reduce the number of large group lectures given and replace this time with small group tutorial work and other forms of interaction with students. Rather than remove the teacher from the system, the intention is that he or she would become more actively involved with students and more able to provide effective guidance to them in their study. Consistent with their intended use in the context of teacher-guided study, the Web resources feature excellent navigation aids but do not necessarily conform to the instructional design principles of guiding the student in independent study as would typically be observed in Western designed distance education course materials.

In the courses so far developed at HKUST, the website serves three major functions for students, namely an information centre for accessing course materials, a self-assessment centre, and a centre for communication with the teacher and other students.

To most students the course website is like a 24-hour information centre, a one-stop shop for all course-related information, including course syllabus, announcements, course materials and links to other websites. All of the courses provide this service and for practical reasons both teachers and students generally find it very convenient. For teachers, they can make an announcement at any time, update the course notes as often as required, and do not have to worry about how to make sure all students can access the course materials by attending lectures. As one teacher commented:

In the past, before a lecture I had to make sure copies of the notes were ready, and carried piles of notes to class. Now I can issue new course notes to students any time and update them frequently. I don't have to carry anything to class (Kelly, Wong and Pratt 1999 (forthcoming)).

Students also appreciated the convenience of having unlimited access to all course related information:

In the past, we had to borrow copies of the course notes from the reserve library and then duplicated them. Sometimes, all the copies were out. We had to wait for someone to return them. Now I can print them from the Web any time, even at night from home (Kelly, Wong and Pratt 1999 (forthcoming)).

Printing materials from the course website is a very common practice. The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology in common with other universities in Hong Kong provides extensive facilities for students to access computers and printers on campus. In response to the question "When you study the "Lectures" in the website, what would you usually do?" More than 60% of the students reported printing out over half of the pages from their course website. Seventy % said they would study from a printed copy of the course notes and only 8% said that they would read from screen directly.

It would seem that the website is viewed primarily by students as a source of information to be extracted conveniently, and screen-based study is not a reality for most of these students. One is tempted to assume that as an information carrier the web does not offer much more than a well produced text book or a printed set of teacher's notes and is surely less cost effective than these alternatives. However, from the teachers' point of view, it does have additional advantages in that most can take control over it themselves and bring their materials up-to-date with far greater ease than if they were engaged in course book or notes preparation.

The course websites also provide students with links to other websites which allow them to explore beyond their classrooms and textbooks. However, students' and teachers' responses to such links were mixed. Some said they could not find time to explore such links while others found them useful. One teacher pointed to the importance of providing students with guidance when they were asked to explore those links. To encourage their use there was also the suggestion of setting assignments that require students to make use of such links.

The course website is also a self-assessment centre, since many contain online quizzes which the students can use to test their understanding. Quizzes very often contain multiple-choice type questions, to which students respond online. Some form of feedback is often provided. From the student survey and online log, the

online quizzes were found to be a popular feature, especially when the examination was near.

In one first year course which put out a new quiz almost every week, students said they found it useful (about 50%). Over 80% of them said they had used it. The survey also showed the students took the online quizzes seriously: the majority spent time reviewing the materials before doing the quiz. They found the quizzes difficult and spent on average over 45 minutes on each. The online system in this particular course provided only limited feedback, which included a percentage correct score and answer key. If more elaborate feedback is provided, students will probably benefit more, but on the whole quizzes provide a convenient way to test understanding of the basic materials.

The course website is also a communication centre where students and teachers can exchange ideas through email, newsgroups or discussion forums. In a typical face-to-face teaching session in Hong Kong, one often finds that students seldom ask questions or engage in a discussion with the teacher, a phenomenon often attributed by Chinese teachers and students to a fear of speaking publicly (especially in English) or fear of "losing face" when they ask a "silly" question. As already noted, outside class, students certainly can and do talk to the teacher face-to-face in a less threatening environment even though finding the time to meet as a group with the teacher can sometimes be a problem.

How the Web media with its asynchronous communication feature would enhance teacher and student communication is often considered as an interesting issue. It has been suggested by Harasim, Hiltz, Teles and Turoff (1995) that asynchronous communication has some apparent advantages. First, it allows students time to reflect on a topic before composing a message. This is particularly useful for students who have to use a second language to communicate. Second, students can ask questions or send messages any time, without the time limits of a class. However, student surveys and communication records reveal a less optimistic picture in that students were not too enthusiastic in using newsgroups or discussion forums. Often, only a few students would actively participate in newsgroup discussions. The majority probably just read the messages posted by others and these participants seemed to be passing on what they learned to others. So for these students the newsgroup appears to be functioning as another information source rather than as a means to practice discussion skills and contribute to the overall quality of the discussion. But in spite of a high degree of computer literacy among this student group about 30% of students reported difficulties with actually using the newsgroup and discussion forum applications. When communicating with their teachers, however, the surveys showed that students did prefer using emails to face-to-face discussion

and more so when the teacher did not speak their first language, though even here a language barrier made it difficult for some students to express difficult concepts. An important feature of being able to send email to their teachers was the possibility of getting immediate feedback to their questions.

In spite of being able to place course materials on the Web and update them frequently, and with the exception of teachers who are really Web enthusiasts (say, those from the Computer Science department), first-time web teachers generally found that using the Web in their teaching did not save time. They often had to spend more time and effort than anticipated, even when extra assistance was available. However, all found the time was worthwhile. Some reported that students appeared to be learning better and asked more meaningful questions in class. This observation certainly needs to be followed up more closely. Depending on how they intended to use the Web at the outset, others talked about much easier class management and better communication overall.

In summary, in spite of the initial extra effort required in designing and teaching Web-based courses for the first time, teachers saw both practical advantages for themselves and possible enhanced learning in their students. The Web course materials have nevertheless been embedded in a teaching and learning context which is acceptable to these Chinese teachers in that in addition to a sound knowledge base, the helping and guiding component of university teaching is integral to its effectiveness. It is also consistent with current distance education practices in Hong Kong which focus on providing on-going tutorial support for all students.

From the students' point of view the outcomes are less clear cut. At this stage the website appears to be used primarily as an information and self-testing centre and the information component could equally well be provided in printed form. Also, arguably more needs to be done in terms of educating students in optimising their use of the various opportunities for asynchronous communication that the site provides, but whether this will be any more successful than attempts to encourage these students to ask questions in face-to-face classes is open to question given the cultural and language constraints on these modes of behaviour.

If future opportunities in Hong Kong for online courses from Australia will be more in the campus-based universities than among typical adult part-time distance education students, then by observing the way in which online courses are developed within the total teaching-learning framework in this on-campus university and by monitoring the ways in which teachers and students subsequently use and respond to the course websites in practice, Muppala and Ha can provide some interesting insights for Australian educators.

In particular the shift in emphasis away from design of high quality independent learning materials and towards using the course website as a means of distribution of course lecture materials and self-testing for students accompanied by increased opportunities for face-to-face interaction needs serious consideration. Moreover, it should be noted that at the present time the website appears to afford greater advantages to teachers in terms of convenience in distributing materials than to students who do not use the website as a major learning resource in itself and who are often as inhibited in asynchronous electronic communication as they are in the more direct face-to-face teaching situation.

Conclusion

If we look beyond the typical Western stereotypes of Asian learners as rote memorising and lacking creativity, and teachers as harsh authoritarian figures in what appears to be a dysfunctional learning environment, quite a different picture begins to emerge leading us to question whether teaching and learning in Confucian Heritage Cultures is as dysfunctional as Western observers have previously assumed. It appears that students do indeed engage in repetitive memorising tasks but as part of a step-by-step learning process aimed at understanding, and that knowledge of basic facts is seen not as an end in itself but as a necessary prerequisite to creativity. Contrary to Western expectations, teachers demonstrate many student-centred behaviours and attitudes by carefully orchestrating lessons to cater for the learning needs of individual students and by acting as guides and mentors outside formal class time.

These findings are largely confirmed by research with university students and teachers in Hong Kong. While students differed from both their Western and Chinese teachers in their vocational orientation to university study, Chinese teachers and their students were much more closely allied in their evaluation of what constitutes effective teaching. From the students' point of view, teachers may be strict and demanding, but helping and guiding and patience both inside and outside the classroom are highly valued. The Western view of a professional teacher operating within the boundaries of the classroom and not being too close to students, and the attitude that learning proceeds best by provoking and challenging students may be quite foreign and indeed unacceptable to these students.

We argue that these values extend to the design of distance education systems in Hong Kong and to the design of online campus-based courses as well, where the aim is not to remove the teacher from the system through instructionally designed independent learning materials but to provide opportunities for enhanced teacher-student contact either with tutors or instructors.

There are implications here for a review of stereotypic attitudes towards Asian learners on the part of Australian educators and for the design of high quality learning experiences for overseas students, particularly those studying in their own social and cultural contexts as is implied by borderless education. Clearly we are not suggesting that Australian teachers become "Chinese" teachers. It is equally unlikely that Chinese students will become "Western" students, but we would argue that their culturally determined values and expectations need to be considered and understood in the design and teaching of courses, whether they be on campus in Australian universities or studying at a distance in their own countries.

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Please note that in the correct Chinese style, Mr Ha's name should be written as Ha Tak Shing. In this title we have given it as Tak Shing Ha hopefully to avoid confusion among Western readers who may want to cite the paper. Another practice in this situation is to put both surnames in capital letters.