learning & development

This guide follows CALT Guides 1-3

Demythologising the Teaching of International Students

John Biggs, Visiting Fellow

Abstract

Some university teachers see international students from South East (SE) Asia as presenting a problem for their usual teaching methods; they are seen and labelled as "rote" learners, or lacking in appropriate study skills. Such stereotyping is contrary to evidence, reviewed here, that SE Asian students in general have characteristics that may lead to very effective learning. Apart from language and personal adjustment problems, the teaching-related problems of international students are not in principle different from those of local students. While some beliefs and attitudes about education are based on culture and socialisation, the principles of good teaching are as valid in the East as in the West. When teaching is aimed at actively engaging students in their learning, differences (such as "passivity") between international and local students disappear. It would help international students more by improving teaching across the university, than by labelling them as a special case of deficit requiring remediation.

International students may have the following kinds of problem:

1. Social-cultural adjustment: the stress created by adjusting to a new culture.

2. Language. Despite language prerequisites, many international students have language problems.

3. Learning/teaching problems.
We are really only concerned with (3) here, with (1) and (2) only in so far as they affect teaching. A main complaint is that international students don't easily adjust to our *style* of tertiary teaching.

Note: *The major focus here is on students from Confucian-heritage Cultures (CHCs): Singapore, Hong Kong, Taiwan, PRC, Korea, Japan, and Vietnam to a point. However, while they share many common characteristics, they also differ between themselves on other points. We have to be careful of over-generalising.*

Do CHC students give you any particular problems in your teaching? What are they?

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Stages in the Development of Skill in Teaching across cultures

Skill in teaching across cultures (or teaching anywhere) progresses in stages. It depends what the teacher focuses on.

Level 1. Assimilation

I'm doing it right; it's the students' fault. Focus: student differences

Western methods of teaching and learning become the universal model for successful schooling.

> **On first teaching at HKU**
> I found the deathly silence that preceded the start of the lecture quite unnerving, the more so when my open-ended questions met with no response. I had to plough on, and if, as was likely, I ran out of prepared material, I had to *ad lib* until the scheduled end of the lecture.
>
> (Biggs, 1989 — regrettably)

Teachers have expectations about what all good students should do. Students who are different are by definition poor students. Students should volunteer answers to questions, even interrupt teachers. This is a "blame-the student" model of teaching. When teaching breaks down, it becomes the student's fault, not the teacher's. Teachers at Level 1 are struck by student differences, which are seen as *deficits*.

International students do differ in some ways from local students that make it easy to stereotype. When that happens misconceptions and self-fulfilling prophecies arise.

Some common stereotypes... Then the evidence. The stereotypes are adapted from Ballard and Clanchy (1997), Chalmers and Volet (1997), and Samuelowicz (1987).

1."They rote learn and lack critical thinking skills"

Yet CHC students consistently achieve at higher levels than do Western students.

- at home: international comparisons (IEA, 1996) (Stevenson & Stigler (1992)

- abroad: proportionately more CHC students get First Class Honours and University medals in subjects like Maths, Engineering, Architecture, Computing...

Such outcomes could not be achieved through rote learning.

They don't: *CHC students adopt more meaning-oriented approaches to learning than do Westerners*

Comparative studies find that CHC students, compared to Western students, display a low propensity for rote learning and a strong meaning orientation, in primary, secondary, and tertiary sectors (Biggs, 1991; Kember and Gow, 1991).

So where does the "rote learning" myth come from?

rote learning: learning in "a mechanical way without thought of meaning" (Macquarie Dictionary).

repetitive learning: using repetition to ensure accurate recall, to get the big picture.

Some Sino-Japanese wisdom: "Repetition is a route to understanding"

Understanding complexity requires repetition, in any culture, but in the West we tend to forget that. We perceive repetitive learning as mindless rote learning.

2 (a) "They are passive; they won't talk in class."

Probably true, but the evidence is contradictory. Volet & Kee (1993) found the mean number of contributions in tutorials was no different between Singaporeans and Australians. What differed was the variance: Australians either held the floor or said little..

The key: The "inside/outside" rules. When is it proper to talk? CHC students have implicit rules that determine what is inappropriate. It is appropriate (inside) to talk in the café: it is inappropriate (outside) to talk in the classroom. The trick is to make it appropriate, e.g. by setting up learning partners, thus making it very difficult to attack academic tasks without talking. But there's still the language problem: it is "outside" to talk inside the class when you're self-conscious about your oral language ability. Nothing queer about that.

2 (b) Therefore: "Progressive Western teaching methods won't work with Asians."

Wrong. The following speaker was arguing against the introduction of problem-based learning at a Hong Kong tertiary institution:

Students in Hong Kong…expect lecturers to teach them everything they are expected to know. They have little desire to discover for themselves… They wish to be spoon fed and in turn they are spoon fed…

From internal documents

His self-fulfilling prophecy had served him and his students badly, over many years. Fortunately, this time he lost, and PBL won. Several Hong Kong universities now use problem-based learning, where it works as well as it does at Newcastle.

From my own teaching:

I listed points on the board as the various group leaders summarised their discussions, leaving it to the students to come to their own conclusions. Reactions:

Lecturer's opinion is not clear enough. Discussions can't draw up a conclusion.

When we are reporting in one big group, our lecturers seem to accept every opinion but seldom criticise them or give a conclusion. Are all our ideas right? This makes me puzzled…

These objections I was told were "cultural"; teachers were supposed to give leadership and draw matters to a single correct conclusion to be accepted by all. Yet by the end of the unit, the comments changed drastically:

The reason why our lecturers seldom criticised our opinions for there are no fixed answers. One really has to find one's own way out. There are no fixed routes of becoming an expert teacher… That was why they kept throwing us a lot of questions to stimulate our thinking.

Is this last conclusion "Western" or "non-Chinese"? Or is it an entirely reasonable response in the context in which learning took place?

3 (a) "They appear to focus excessively on the method of assessment…"

What ambitious student doesn't? The answer is in the method of assessment …make sure it contains the content you want them to learn!

I used the portfolio (see CALT Guide no 6) in which the learner gives examples indicating their best learning. At the beginning, an obsessive concern with the assessment:

This (the portfolio) is going to be a nightmare! At least, if it had been an essay, I would have known what is expected of me…

How am I supposed to do it well when I'm not sure exactly what the professor wants to see in it? …though he did say that we can put what means much to us in the portfolio, yet how can I be sure that he agrees with me?

At the end:

Now I have changed my perception of assessment and I have practised with it. It really works!

Now I do not see the portfolio as an assignment to be handed in, it's rather a powerful learning tool for the learner himself.

I found lots of fun (in making my portfolio)… it led me to think about many questions that I never think of…

(Biggs, 1996)

3 (b): "They don't understand what plagiarism means"

Neither do Western students. But it may be more complex with international students, because some have been taught that it is disrespectful to alter the words of an expert. Also sometimes seen as foolish to attempt to "put in own words" if you don't know the language too well.

The rules of citation must be made crystal clear.

4. "They stick together… won't mix with locals."

Often true. Two aspects to this: educational and social. Collaborative learning is very common in Hong Kong students (Tang, 1996), inevitable that they prefer to do so here. Volet and Ang (in press) studied mixed groups and found stereotypes were challenged and attitudes changed positively, yet both locals and international students preferred like-with-like tutorial groupings next time.

What are your views? Do you deliberately mix international students and locals in tutorial/lab groups, or let them decide (which inevitably means unmixed)? Mixed groups means intercultural learning; homogeneous groups probably means better content learning. Trouble is most international students have two learning agendas.

5. "They do not easily adjust to Australian conditions"

Wrong, if *teaching* conditions are meant. CHC students are very adaptable in spotting cues, picking up coping strategies (Singaporean: Volet & Renshaw, 1996; Japanese: Purdie & Hattie, 1997).

6. "They tend to look on lecturers as close to gods"

The teacher-student relationship is hierarchical, respect oils the wheels. First names makes international students uncomfortable.

Then the teacher may be seen as powerful uncle. Gifts may be embarrassing if there is an implied bargain: "I'll be a loyal and diligent student; in return, your obligation is to ensure that I pass." (roughly according to Ballard & Clanchy, 1997, who make much of this. I have never found it to be a problem). What is true is that some cultures, like Korea, have a tradition of bringing gifts to the teacher on a special Teacher's Day, but there is no suggestion of bribery in that.

The sort of stereotyping in the above quotations leads to a *deficit* approach, based on the assumption that international students lack something our students don't, which makes them a problem. In fact, CHC students tend to have positive learning-related characteristics that should make teaching easier:

- Success is attributed to effort and failure to lack of effort, whereas Westerners believe success requires ability more than effort, and failure is attributed to lack of ability.

  The bottom line is optimistic: "I can succeed. If I fail it's my own fault."

- Motivation tends to be complex and often stronger than for Western students.

Pressures to succeed are collectivist — familial, peer - as well as personal. Socialisation practices "create a sense of diligence and receptiveness that fit uncomfortably into… concepts of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation" (Hess & Azuma, 1991: 7)

Which brings us to Level 2.

Level 2. Accommodation.

OK, maybe I do need to change a little Focus: teaching practices.

> **Wanted: An alien teaching technology**
> Lecturers in Australia teaching classes with half or more students from East Asia are likely to… be put psychologically off-balance and become indignant and confused. It will be difficult for the bulk of lecturers to learn good lecturing practice for Asian students. Few academics have interest in learning an alien technology…
> From Professor Robert M. March, Professor of International Business, University of Western Sydney. *The Australian*, 9th Sept, 1996.

Each educational system evolves and operates in a cultural context, and educational procedures are relative to that context. To teach successfully in a system you have to know what works for that system, which is alien to other systems. To teach aliens, we need to know how the aliens tick. That's what Professor March seemed to think. As that's not on, the aliens need to know how we tick:

> many of the difficulties international students experience in their study derive not from "poor English" (though lack of language competence is in many cases a real problem), but from a clash of educational cultures
>
> (Ballard and Clanchy, 1997, p. vii)

So:

> …they must undergo an intellectual and cultural sea-change if they are to succeed.
>
> (*op. cit.*; p. ix).

So it's back to deficit models

Most programmes for international students are based on a "blame-the-student" deficit model. For example, Pearson and Beasley (1996: 83) describe "Student orientations" as follows:

- *Australian*
  Values individualism and low power distance. Usually a self learner, better analytical and problem solving skills…

- *Overseas Asian*
  Often a surface learner, employing memorisation and rote learning. Seldom questions authority sources or works independently…

Pearson and Beasley developed an out-of-class intervention; those who attended it did better than those who did not. But so they should: they had more time on relevant tasks.

The deficit approach rests on three assumptions:

1. Asian students memorise and are therefore "surface learners".

2. The way Asian students learn is inferior to the "problem solving and analytic skills" of mainstream Australian students.

3. Asian students therefore have a "deficit" to be remedied.

All three are incorrect:

- Asian students are more meaning oriented as we have seen.

- I know of no studies confirming the superior problem solving and analytic skills of Australians.

- How overseas students adapt over time is not considered.

- Do local students show similar "deficits"? That is not checked.

But what if locals and international students face similar problems?

According to Mullins, Quintrell, and Hancock (1995) they do. Both local and international students nominated the following:

- poor teaching

- mismatch between student and staff expectations

- lack of access to staff

- workload

Differences between the two groups of students were not in the nature of the problems, but that international students often experienced more difficulty in handling some of them.

You can't nominate one group of students as being unable to adapt to our teaching, and fix them up, when other groups have the same problems! So much for the deficit approach.

So how can teachers of international students cope better than they do at present?

> we suggest minor modifications in current teaching practice, and in almost all cases the changes should be of benefit to all students…The problems of teaching students from other cultures are very often a more acute expression of the common problems of teaching our own students
>
> (Ballard and Clanchy, 1997; p. viii)

Such as:

- taping lectures and making tapes available

- speak slowly, avoid colloquialisms

- start lecture with "Following from last week when we…What we are going to do today…", and summarise at end, with "So next week we will…"

- visual backup: OHs, diagrams as advance organisers, notes, handouts

- make rules and procedures clear, and in writing

- modelling, using "think-aloud" to socialize students "This is how I would do it …" also in tutorials and discussion groups; model how you would read material for subsequent discussion.

- preferred names in front of people including you.

- pair international student with local, latter introduces international student to class.

Ballard and Clanchy's tips address language and expectations. They are useful, but seem to be about *management* not teaching itself. Is there not such a thing as *good teaching*, that works anywhere?

They say: ***address the problems presented by international students, and you'll teach better.***

I say: ***teach better, and you'll address the problems presented by international students.***

Good teaching is inclusive. Which brings us to Level 3.

Level 3. Education

How well are the students learning what I'm supposed to be teaching them?
Focus: how to get students learning.

What might such principles of good teaching involve?

> **"Five Postcards on Good Teaching"**
>
> Teaching that promotes learning…
>
> 1. …allows students to make *choices*. It also allows them to experience the consequences of their choices
>
> 2. …develops *self-evaluation*
>
> 3. …offers a *variety* of experiences, beyond the steady diet of lectures more lectures and further lectures called tutorials and even the more expensive lectures called information technology
>
> 4. …has a feasible *workload*
>
> 5. …is teaching that offers *feedback*
>
> (Jackson, 1997:102-106)

The key is the *focus* of teaching. Jackson's postcards encourage you to focus on getting students to engage *high cognitive level learning activities*.

But these activities must also be relevant, *aligned* to what we want students to learn:

> If students are to learn **desired outcomes** in a **reasonably effective** manner, then the teacher's fundamental task is to get students to **engage in learning activities** that are likely to result in their achieving those outcomes… It is helpful to remember that **what the student does** is actually more important in determining what is learned than what the teacher does.
>
> (Shuell, 1986: 429. Emphases supplied).

Good teaching aligns teaching and assessing methods to the objectives (Biggs, 1996).

1. Objectives should require *high level activities* from students. Understanding is manifested in *doing* not telling.

A list of content topics does not tell students what it means to understand those topics in the required way. If they have to demonstrate that level of understanding by doing something, this also solves most assessment problems.

2. Teaching methods should address the activities required in the objectives.

Lecturing usually doesn't get students doing performances of understanding. CHC students work well in groups (mixed or unmixed? See above). Learning partners of the same ethnicity could be part of regular teaching (Saberton, 1985), but formal groups might best be mixed ethnicity: depends what you want. Particularly helpful to International Students to build-in the study skills appropriate to the area (Chalmers & Fuller, 1996). Several books suggest teaching/learning activities that are more powerful activators than the lecture, even in large classes (e.g. Gibbs & Jenkins, 1992).

3. Assessment should call out the performances addressed in the objectives.

Assessment is probably the key to most teaching problems, but unfortunately it is the first to suffer as class size increases. Nevertheless, there are ways of addressing the class-size problem without resorting to multiple-choice tests, which are very difficult to align to most tertiary level objectives. Teachers clearly need help with assessment problems. A useful collection of assessment practices is in Nightingale et. al. (1996).

When teaching addresses these principles of good teaching, all students benefit. They certainly worked in Hong Kong.

(Biggs, 1996; McKay & Kember, 1997).

Summary

1. The heart of the problem lies not in the student but in the teaching.

> Blaming students relieves the teacher both of control and of responsibility. It is unprofessional.

2. Focus on similarities between students rather than on differences.

> Learning processes are universal; focus on eliciting the ones you want. Individual differences exist, but focusing on them distracts from the main task; differences sort themselves out by allowing students to make their own teaching-related decisions (setting personal objectives, compiling learning portfolios, negotiating contracts and deadlines, undertaking independent learning…).

3. Allowing for the needs of special groups, such as international students, is best done inclusively, within the whole teaching system, not as a separate exercise.

If the Level 3 position means anything at all, it is that good teaching is good teaching; all students benefit from it.

Will you do anything different now in your teaching of overseas students?

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Demythologising the Teaching of International Students

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