
Preliminary Results: Critical Thinking and Communication Skills of Chinese Students

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Abstract

A survey is being conducted of faculty who have taught in China and initial responses have been collected. The main survey issue is a comparison of Chinese and U.S. students in regards to critical thinking and communication skills. Previous research and anecdotes suggest that Chinese students would lag behind their U.S. counterparts in these areas. Although too few responses have been collected so far to statistically refute the earlier research, indications from faculty who have recently taught in China show they have different perceptions from previously published research.

Keywords: China, critical thinking, communication skills, education.

1. INTRODUCTION

There is a growing focus on China and Chinese students by U.S. universities. At the same time, more U.S. students are choosing to study in Chinese universities. U.S. faculty have perceptions of the critical thinking and communication skills of Chinese students. These perceptions influence the pedagogy of classroom materials and presentation.

As more U.S. faculty accept teaching assignments in China they make first-hand assessments of the abilities of their students. Many teaching assignments are for less than 30 days although a semester long course can be compressed into that time frame. But even relatively short interactions with Chinese students in their environment can prove to form lasting impressions. Faculty immersed in the culture of the Chinese students while teaching in China may receive a perspective that was not always available to previous researchers.

The purpose of this research is to survey U.S. faculty who have taught in China to seek their perceptions of the critical thinking and

communication skills of Chinese students. This is an initial survey and the responses will be used to construct a more comprehensive survey to be launched in about a year. But early responses seem to indicate that perceptions by recent teaching experiences in China differ from previously reported research.

2. THE PROBLEM

University curriculum has always been fluid to reflect the needs of students (and society) living in an ever-changing world. It is easy to downplay the role of university curriculum when you do not connect the dots between what is taught in college to the ubiquitous interactions occurring in everyday life. For example, some people decry money wasted in universities for teaching exotic science/technology when they should just be teaching the skills students need for their first job out of college. They voice their criticism while using intelligent phones to provide turn-by-turn directions to a restaurant based upon a GPS signal.

Curriculum must be far sighted and strategic. Today's and tomorrow's student is faced with problems of such complexity that they are difficult to solve quickly and efficiently unless we approach their solutions analytically and with the efforts of many people. Critical thinking and communication skills are an essential component of a college education (UNC Strategic Incentives 2013-2018, 2013; Lee, 2012; Exter & Turnage, 2012; Eppes, Milanovic, & Sweitzer, 2012; Hill, 2012).

China has joined the ranks of countries having universities with world-class universities. Peking University and Tsinghua University have been ranked in the top 50 universities world-wide (*Times Higher Education World University Rankings*, www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/world-university-rankings) for several years. Over 325,000 foreign students went to universities in China during the 2011-12 academic year (Institute of International Education, www.iie.org/projectatlas). The U.S. was the second largest source of those students.

Over 230,000 Chinese students came to the U.S. for college in the 2012-13 academic year (Institute of International Education, www.iie.org/projectatlas) making China the largest source of foreign students coming to the U.S. for college education. With so many students being exchanged between China and the U.S. each year it is important to understand the critical thinking and communication skills of Chinese students.

3. PERCEPTIONS

There are existing perceptions about Chinese students' communication and critical thinking skills compared to their U.S. student counterparts. Some research (Ip et al, 2000) finds that Chinese students are negatively disposed to critical thinking. Some U.S. educators believe the "Confucian education" model, focusing more on rote and deference to the instructor, inhibits the teaching of critical thinking (Li, L. & Wegerif, R., 2014). Perceptions of students' inclination towards understanding a learning objective will influence how an instructor interacts with students and also the materials and approach, i.e. the pedagogy, used to teach the course learning objectives.

Communication skills of international students in classes taught in English (when English is not the native language) is an issue which continues to be investigated (Ippolito, K., 2007). Miscommunications, idioms, cultural norms for expressing oneself within a group, and even the misuse/mispronunciation of a name can erect barriers to common understanding. This can inhibit student-to-student communication as well as student-to-instructor communication.

Building upon the curriculum issues of critical thinking and communication skills, the instructor of Chinese students needs to create a pedagogical approach that encourages students to use and practice communication skills that will be useful for team problem solving. Critical thinking skills without the ability to communicate with others will not be sufficient to deal with the complex problems facing students as they graduate.

Personal Observations

The author has taught in China on two occasions. The first was a master level class in information systems for Fudan University in Shanghai. The semester-long course was compressed into a four week time frame by meeting more frequently and for longer periods during the week.

The second assignment was the fall semester of 2012 at Shanghai International Studies University (SISU). At SISU the two classes were an MBA course in information systems/databases and also the systems analysis class required for information systems majors in the School of Business and Management. All of the classes were taught in English and the students' skills in English were very good.

One difference in the classroom pedagogy in China is that students may expect to have time to accomplish assignments during the class meeting time. This provided an opportunity to observe student interaction and problem solving activities. The systems analysis class proved particularly useful since a continuing assignment in the course was the analysis of an information systems problem in an organization and creating a design to solve the problem.

Students were broken into groups of four to five. Each group had to create a plan for each step of the analysis and design. The plan had to be presented to the instructor in a written report

and also to the class in an oral summary at each stage. Each student in the group was required to have a part within each oral presentation.

The students' interactions with team members were animated. They used materials presented in the course, their own experiences, and experience gained through internships to solve the steps in the assignment. Once a consensus was achieved on the solution, all members of the group adopted it as the only communication from the group. When the group chose a solution, no dissent was voiced by a group member.

Communications with students in the group were free and open. But during the oral presentations some students had a difficult time addressing a body of their peers – an undertaking that some of them had not performed before. Communications with the instructor were formal and respectful in the class setting but were much more informal in meetings with individual students or small groups.

4. THE PROCESS

A brief survey of 31 questions was constructed to gather demographic information about the respondent and his/her university and also perceptions of student communication (student-to-student and student-to-instructor) and critical thinking ability. Recipients were limited to faculty who had taught in China.

Information about the courses taught, level (undergraduate, masters, doctoral), and materials used in the class were also in the survey. Respondents were instructed to answer questions based on their last teaching experience in China. Because this is a preliminary survey, recipients were asked to indicate what questions about critical thinking and student participation they would like to see added to subsequent surveys.

Potential respondents were selected from U.S. universities with AACSB accreditation. Web sites of the schools were searched in an attempt to discover if any of their faculty had recently taught in China. In some cases the international programs office was contacted to elicit faculty names that might participate in the survey. 81 letters were sent to faculty at 70 universities.

Each letter explained the purpose of the survey, a promise to share the results with the recipient

whether or not the recipient participated in the survey, and a link to the survey. The institutional research board at my university prefers that surveys be administrated via a secure server as opposed to returning a completed paper survey. Instructions were in the letter that explained how to contact the author so that requests for results could not be matched to survey responses.

Restricting respondents to U.S. faculty who have taught in China reduces the number of possible respondents from simply those faculty who have taught Chinese students. A few of the mundane but important barriers for U.S. faculty to teach in China are:

- adjusting to a significantly different culture, food, language, and set of accommodations
- the calendar dates of the school year are significantly different from the U.S., fall semester begins in mid-September and ends in late-January which means a U.S. faculty member teaching in China in the fall would miss part of his or her spring semester at the home institution
- acquiring a visa for more than 30 days of teaching requires the Chinese university to sponsor the U.S. faculty member, have that person certified for the visa as an expert in the field, having the faculty member appear at a Chinese embassy for the process and possible interview to work in China on the visa, and a number of other issues

These barriers when taken as a collection shed light on the plight of U.S. faculty that may wish to teach in China.

5. RESULTS

The response rate was disappointing. Especially since specific individuals with current experiences of teaching in China were identified. Only 10 responses were made but all were usable. Two requests were made for the survey results. With so few responses no generalizations can be made. Results will be presented and observations made.

The author is beginning a second round of the same survey but will seek a much wider pool of respondents. While the response rate will probably decrease, the total responses numbers will increase. The most limiting factor seems to be that even with the increased attention on

China, relatively few U.S. faculty members have taught in China.

While the low number of respondents is a cause of concern there are mitigating factors for the researcher to pay attention to the survey results.

- all respondents are from AACSB accredited schools,
- four of the 10 respondents are full professors,
- all respondents are from schools granting graduate degrees
- four respondents are fluent in Chinese
- two courses reported in the survey were taught in Chinese

The results below are in narrative form but Table 1 at the end of the paper presents the results in a more concise format.

The length of time teaching in China was mainly less than 30 days (8 out of 10). This may be because a tourist visa is limited to 30 days and longer stays involve a much more complicated process. One respondent was on a study abroad experience lasting more than 30 days and one respondent spent more than a year in China. Five reported an experience in the last year and all 10 were within the last three years.

All but one respondent taught master or doctoral level classes in China and they all came from universities offering graduate programs. Seven were from schools of business, two from engineering, and one from social sciences (but not languages). Four of the respondents were fluent in Chinese.

The perceptions of the effort Chinese students expended in the classes compared to similar classes taught in the U.S. were evenly distributed. The survey provided responses of 50% less, 25% less, the same, 25% more, and 50% more. One respondent chose "50% less" and three chose "the same" amount while two responses were returned for the other options.

The perception of student-to-student interaction was markedly different than prior research would have suggested. Five responded a 25% increase and one reported a 50% increase. Previous research citing the "Confucian method" of instruction would not have predicted this outcome.

The question concerning the effort of Chinese students to interact with the instructor, no respondent perceived less interaction than U.S. students. Four responded the interaction was the same as U.S. students, three said 25% more and three said 50% more. Survey responses and the author's observations contradict much of the published research.

Perceptions of critical thinking skills of Chinese students versus their U.S. counterparts also differed from published research. Seven responded that the skill level was the same. One each responded 50% less, 25% less, and 25% more. This clearly contradicts the findings of Ip et al (Ip et al, 2000) which would predict a negative inclination to critical thinking.

6. CONCLUSIONS

Early survey results contradict previous research concerning Chinese students' communication and critical thinking skills. But with only 10 responses the previous research cannot be dismissed. The survey will be reopened and a larger audience will be asked to complete the survey.

Acceptable respondents will have the same characteristics as the original respondents.

- must have been a faculty member at a U.S. university when the teaching assignment occurred
- teaching assignment must have occurred in China
- must be from an AACSB accredited school (although respondents are not restricted to business school faculty)
- access to results will be allowed even if the recipient does not take the survey

The survey results will continue to be preliminary even with a larger respondent pool.

The results of the initial survey will guide the design of a follow-up survey. The initial survey asks respondents what questions they'd like to see in a survey. A comprehensive survey is projected to be disseminated by April, 2015.

7. REFERENCES

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Table 1.
 Frequency of Survey Responses

<i>Survey Response</i>	<i>Response Frequencies</i>			
	Question 1	Question 2	Question 3	Question 4
50% less than U.S. Students	1	1	0	1
25% less	2	2	0	1
the same as U.S. student	3	1	4	7
25% more	2	5	3	1
50% more than U.S. students	2	1	3	0

Legend to Questions:

1. Perceptions of the effort Chinese students expended in the classes compared to similar classes taught in the U.S.
2. Perception of student-to-student interaction among Chinese students versus U.S. students.
3. The effort of Chinese students to interact with the instructor versus students in the U.S.
4. The critical thinking skills of Chinese students versus their U.S. counterparts.