

Why don't they participate?

A study of the Chinese graduate students' classroom involvement in North American

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China has become the largest source country of international students in the world (Chinapop, 2005). It is not difficult at all to see Chinese students appear in numerous campuses around the world, particularly in Western academic institutions. For example, the total amount of Chinese students reached over 20,000 in Canada in 2001 (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2003), and there were 61,765 Chinese students at institutions of higher education in the United States during the 2003-2004 academic year (Donald, 2005). The rapidly increasing portion of Chinese students in North America classrooms changes the landscape of institutions in North America, enriches its diversity, sustains graduate programs, and presents possible challenges for instructors and students. In particular, it has been observed that many Chinese graduate students seem not to actively participate in the classroom activity, which at times puzzles and frustrates numerous instructors (Chen, 1996; Pinheiro, 2001; Wan 2001). While the higher educational institutions of North America are welcoming the Chinese students, who bring a rich cultural heritage to the host institutions with dramatically different values and learning practice, it is essential for the schools to understand this group of students, accommodate their needs, and facilitate their learning. This paper is intended to examine Chinese graduate students' performance against the backdrop of East-West culture negotiation in classroom in North America. Specifically, we are interested in what factors particularly restrain Chinese graduate students from actively involving in classroom activity in North America.

Existing literature indicates that the communication problem appears among the top four reasons regarding the difficulties that Chinese graduate students encountered in American classrooms (Sun and Chen, 1997). In general, international students had great difficulty with listening comprehension, responding to questions, and class participation (Sun & Chen). Listening has been regarded as the most frequently used language skill in the classroom. It plays an even more important role in one's academic success than reading skill or academic aptitude (Conaway, 1982). Moreover, culture significantly affects student learning styles (Oxford, Holloway, & Horton-Murillo, 1992, p.441). The Chinese proverb, "Silence is gold", marks the importance of being reserved in order to demonstrate courtesy (i.e., others first), absorb others' opinion, and focus on learning rather than giving. "Face" (e.g., dignity) and interdependency take precedence of Western values (e.g., individualism and independency) in a collective society like China (Frank, Harvey, & Verdun, 2000). In typical Chinese classrooms, neither teachers nor students should lose face (Chan, 1999; Flowerdew, 1998). To avoid losing face, Chinese students prefer thinking carefully about the topic before answering the questions or participating group discussion. "Long silences in the classroom may not indicate that students are refusing to participate, but that they may be thinking about the answers and need more encouragement from the instructors" (Chan, 1999, pp. 302-303). These conflicting East-West cultural values request Chinese students for reconciling East-West cultures, and ask their instructors for culturally-sensitive pedagogy.

Although quite a few studies have been conducted on Chinese students' experience (Chan, 1999; Oxford, Holloway, & Horton-Murillo, 1992; Phillips, Lo, & Yu, 2002), it seems that most

of the previous studies were conducted by interviewing or sending surveys to Chinese students. In the present study, we employed a new methodology, self-study, to record and analyze our own stories using narrative inquiry. This approach allows fostering a comprehensive, holistic, and in-depth understanding of the topic under investigation. The results of this study has twofold: 1) help the instructors have a better understanding of Chinese graduate students and provide more culturally-appropriate instruction, and 2) help Chinese graduate students and other international students have a better understanding of themselves and integrated into North American classroom settings for a successfully academic achievement.

Methodology

Self-study was utilized as the research framework in the form of narrative inquiry in this study. Both of the authors had extensive experiences of studying as Chinese graduate students in North American. The first author is currently a professor in the Faculty of Education in a southern Ontario university in Canada. He was a graduate student and has worked as a professor in a couple of universities in United States and Canada. The second author is currently a master graduate candidate in a southern Ontario university in Canada.

Self-study has become one of the fastest rising research methodologies in education since early 1990s, and become the largest growing Special Interest Group (SIG) in American Educational Research Association (AERA), one of the largest education associations in the world (Bullough & Pinnergar, 2001). Bullough and Pinnergar noted that “in self-study, the story takes multiple forms...the narrative form, [is] ‘a setting-complication-resolution structure’ (Nespor & Barylske, 1991, p. 810) (p.17). Narrative inquiry has been used for studies in many areas (Clandinin, 2006, p.477) because “narrative is one of the fundamental sense making operations of the mind, and would appear to be both peculiar to and universal throughout humanity” (Lodge, 1990, p.14). Creswell (2005) claimed that “narrative researchers explore an educational research problem by understanding the experiences of an individual” (p.477). Nobody could understand one person better than him/herself.

Considering that student participants and the researchers were normally separate identities, misunderstanding or misinterpretation could have happened during the data collecting or analyzing process. To bridge the gap between the researcher and the participants, we decided to examine our lived experiences and share our own stories; therefore we were acting as both researchers and participants. By recording, analyzing, and reporting our OWN stories, we avoided a few potential issues that narrative researchers often encountered: the genuineness of the story, the ownership of the story, and the privilege of the participants’ voice in the findings (Creswell, 2005). We have the full ownership of the stories that genuinely reflected what we went through and how we felt.

Narrative inquirers are concerned with both personal conditions and social structure and social process (Clandinin & Connelly, 2006). We studied our stories in a social context (a changing society), instead of an isolated condition (classrooms). We balanced the weight of personal feeling and the background of the stories. Every step of making a narrative study validate have been followed since the beginning of the study. “We engage in self-study work because we believe in its inherent value as a form of professional development” (Cole & Knowles, 1995, as cited in Bullough & Pinnergar, 2001, p. 17). Polkinghorne states that there are three levels of narrative: experience, telling, and interpreting (Bullough & Pinnergar, 2001). He notes that “the purpose of the telling and interpreting is to enable the reader to experience the narrative as if they lived it with the insight of the interpretation” (Bullough & Pinnergar, p. 16).

According to Clandinin and Connelly (1994), the main version of narrative inquiry based on telling is storytelling (p.479). There are a variety of ways of telling stories which includes “personal journals, stories, photographs, artifacts, annals, chronologies, family interviews, conversations, field notes, and so on” (Clandinin & Connelly, p. 478). We uncovered that story sharing, conversation, and discussion were the best ways of collecting data in this study.

All the data collection was conducted through ongoing recorded conversation and discussion, face-to-face and by email. Although we can communicate with others in English freely, we found speaking Chinese was more authentic in the context of East-West cultural interaction. The stories that were quoted had been translated into English first. During the process of data analysis, key guidelines for quality of self-study suggested by Bullough and Pinnegar (2001) and Clandinin and Connelly (1994) were followed. These guidelines include creating space for readers’ experience that shed light on one’s self and one’s connection to others, taking an honest stand, maintaining an authentic and genuine voice, seeking to enhance learning situation not only for the self but also for others, addressing stories in context, and providing clear description of data collection. Constant comparative method was used to construct categories of meaning. Discussion continued until eventually the work was merged into a master list of concepts/themes. Categories and themes identified were constantly compared, confirmed, and disconfirmed through intensive discussion between the two authors in conjunction with existing literature.

Results

As a result of data analysis, six interrelated themes with respect to the perspectives have become apparent: language proficiency, knowledge of educational system, knowledge of social system, personality, influence of traditional culture, and social changes.

Language

Language has been considered the biggest barrier that restrained Chinese students from actively participating in classroom activities in the initial stage of graduate studies in North America. Author A recalled what happened to her when she just started her student life in Canada.

I remembered my first Canadian History class in a western Canadian college. I went to the class with notepad and pen: I was ready to learn. However, after 3 hours’ lecture, my notepad was empty. I could not write down a word because more than half of the lecture was not understandable to me, and I was so busy, in my mind, decoding the other half of the lecture. I did not have time to write down anything. I went home with an empty notepad and frustration. I did not know how to review the lesson and what to review because the lecture was not in the textbook.

Apart from the listening difficulties she had in the class, author A also experienced communicating problems with her fellow English-speaking students:

I was also reluctant to talk to my fellow students because I found that, after a few times of trying, they did not understand my English. They either said “Pardon me” a lot or smiled politely to me. I noticed that I had difficulty to differentiate certain words when I spoke, for example, word vs. world, wet vs. white, and red vs. right. I had difficulty of understanding other students, too. First of all, I had to adjust myself to their speaking speed. Instructors in North America talked much faster than English-speaking instructors did in China. My fellow students talked 3 times faster than the instructors. They did not always complete a sentence after starting it. Slowly I started to catch up with their speed

but there were always words that I did not understand: the colloquialism or slang. For example, what is “Double-double”? Is “What’s up” a question?

This precisely echoes what Chen (1996) quoted from one of his/her Chinese participants: “Actually I’ve tried very hard to speak out in the class. Sometimes I just find, you know, that I really can’t cut in. They talk too fast. And they just like blah...blah... blah...” (p.2)

Author B also reflected on his first experiences in graduate classes in the United States. He was a national visiting scholar full of talent and energy, but felt difficult and frustrated to express himself. Like many overseas Chinese graduates, both Authors had extensive English training in their school years, even with English-speaking instructors. However, lack of practicing what they learned in the English context significantly reduces their ability and confidence in their English speaking. The finding is in line with results in Haydon’s (2003) work that indicated a positive correlation between strong language skills and class participation, as well as the international student’s ability to interact inside and outside the classroom.

In spite of the difficulties the Chinese graduate students experienced, most of them managed to achieve remarkable success in their academic life, with their strong foundation of English language and comprehensive learning capacity obtained in previous school years. The followings are the suggestions for the Chinese graduate students who are or going to encounter this above mentioned difficulties: being bold to express personal opinion in class, asking instructors for additional assistance during the initial graduate study year, socializing more with English-speaking friends (not associate with Chinese friends only), focusing on both colloquialisms for verbal communication and formal expressions for academic writing, improving language proficiency through a variety of means through media (e.g., TV, newspapers, internet), movies, and actively involving in campus and local community activities.

Knowledge of Educational system

China has completely different educational system from that of Canada. From elementary school to university, all the courses taken in China are usually fixed with minimal freedom of personal course selection. Author A described the confusion she had when she just encountered the Canadian educational system.

When I was asked to select courses myself here in Canada, I did not know what to do: What the difference does it make if I choose this course instead of that one? What if I miss important things by not taking this course? Once the courses started, I found that what I thought important was not what the instructors expected. In my first psychology course, I read every page of the big thick text book. However, the test result was not ideal because I had paid too much attention to the details but forgotten about the big picture. The process of trying to understand what the instructors were looking for took me quite some time.

Author B expressed the same kind of frustration he had in an institution in United States:

When I applied for the position of national visiting scholar to go overseas sponsored by China Scholarship Council, it is the first year to open to anyone in this 1.3 billion people country. I won. I was selected and I was awarded this prestigious title. This signified that I was a very smart person. I could understand the lecture in the class when I was in the States. However, I felt like I was lost. I realized what I studied really hard was not what was considered as important by the instructor. I did not know where to put my effort on. I felt myself a disabled person with learning disability, but I am not. I felt disoriented. I

also felt I was a fully able person but lived in a dark environment. That darkness slowly changed to grey, and it becomes bright and sunny as I felt today.

Unfamiliarity of the differences between college and university cost Author A a great deal in terms of time and money:

I thought I could save some money by going to a college and transfer courses to a university in the third year. What I did not know was that not all the courses I took were transferable to universities. Therefore I had to take courses just to fill the credits in the university. I failed to be admitted by one of the top Canadian universities by one mark because of my non-standardized resume. When I was told that my resume was too short, I pointed out that the requirement indicated that the resume could not be longer than two pages. I had one page, what was wrong with that? The answer was “Well, normally people have more than two pages. That is why we had to set the limit”. When I was trying to argue that the requirement did not say one page is not allowed, the lady who met me went on explaining that my resume did not show what exactly I did, although I had experience of teaching in several schools. I did not provide enough details. Later, from a tutor, I found out I was supposed to use certain words, such as “implement”, “design” or “lead”.

It is probably true that if the Chinese students, who were like author A, were introduced to the differences of the two systems before or just after they came to North American, it would have taken them much less time to reach their academic goal.

Knowledge of social system (local culture)

Many of the graduate students come directly from China. Without knowing what the taboo topics are, what the famous local teams and stores' names are and how much physical distance is comfortable to each other during face-to-face conversation, it is very hard for them to initiate a conversation with fellow students.

A: Not knowing what to talk about with my fellow students was another reason that kept me quiet for a long time. When I was too busy reading the textbooks instead of watching the popular TV show, when I could not afford watching Blockbuster movies, when I did not cheer for Toronto Maple Leafs, I did not have a clue what other people were talking about. They were chatting about what happened in their daily life but I was not living in the life that they were living in.

Author B's story is another example:

I was very careful not to say something offensive. I remember I had a graduate class in Canada. They were all local Caucasian school teachers except me and the other Korean student. One day, a female classmate was late for the class. There was only one chair left next to me. I saw that she was looking for a place to sit and I informed her in a jocular way, “This chair is reserved for ladies only”. The course instructor knew me quite well and he set up a meeting with me later. He cautioned me that some classmates expressed their concern of this incidence, and his responded to the concern was, “His intention is pure.” In another graduate class in Canada, when the course instructor was asking if everybody was in, a Chinese classmate said in a jocular way ‘Everybody is here except that Hong Kong girl’. I can see that statement was very politically inappropriate although this classmate had great English proficiency and knew how to make fun in the class. I can see clearly why the course instructor's facial expression responded to this saying in certain way, but not that fellow Chinese classmate. It seems that it is more important to

have adequate social knowledge than obtain language proficiency because learning occurs in a social context.

Even if the conversation starts, sometimes it cannot be carried long due to the misunderstanding of each other's nonverbal communications. For example, to show respect to each other, Chinese do not look at people's eyes directly when they talk. A western person will consider that Chinese student being rude or not interest in the topic if he/she does it here in North America. It is also funny that, in Author B's case, he felt comfortable looking at the eyes of non-Chinese in conversation, but still did not feel comfortable looking at the eyes of Chinese fellows in conversation. This interesting bi-cultural sociality needs further research.

Personality

Author A changed her personality gradually after coming to Canada in order to adapt to this western society because she realized that one's personality affect greatly in social success. She recollected one of her Chinese classmates who was an extrovert:

A girl who was directly from China talked a lot in the class by the third time we met within her first month in Canada. It took me about 3 years to reach that level. Her well-spoken English, cheerful characteristic, willingness of initiating conversations, and naturally being comfortable with physically close to people, all these were added up to her charming personality. She used lots of body languages when she was talking. She had the sunny smile on her face all the time. Everybody liked her and willing to help her when she needed it. Another person I know is just the opposite of her. He has never initiated a conversation, even with Chinese students. When I met him on campus, he would look down and avoid the eye contact. I thought he had a problem with me at first but I heard from other people that he had always been like that. He is always alone.

Author A's experience confirmed some of the personality studies on Chinese students conducted previously (Cheung & Liang, 1992; Zheng, Sang, & Lin, 2004). Extrovert people are willing to engage in, and confront the social environment (Eysenck & Eysenck, 1985, as cited in Zheng, Sang, & Lin, 2004, p. 170). The two examples given by Author A demonstrated that an extrovert person tends to be more active in learning settings and successful at building social network than an introvert person in North American where individualism and independence are encouraged. Sue summarized that "foreign Chinese appear more alienated, anxious, conforming, dependent, introverted, passive, and restrained than Chinese Americans or Caucasian Americans" (as cited in Stevens, Kwan, & Graybill, 1993, p.24). Many Chinese graduate students tend to be introvert and took much time to build up friendship with people around them than they would not otherwise.

Influence of Traditional culture

There are many traditional Chinese sayings that favor listening over talking. For example, "Silence is gold". The more you talk, the less you hear. Chinese believe that if one can be quiet and listen to others, one can learn best. Therefore the ability of being quiet, or being silent, is a virtue that is as important as gold. Author A experienced this cultural conflict:

When I just came to Canada, I wanted to learn from people around me. As I was trained more than twenty years in China, I learned by listening and watching. Considering the huge amount of money I paid for sitting in the Canadian classroom, I would not want to *waste a minute* on talking because then I would have missed the chance of listening to others. Comparing to students in North America who *take every chances* to express

themselves and share what they know, Chinese students are more like sponge to absorb knowledge and information.

Author A described how she felt upon answering questions in the class:

As many other Chinese students, speaking in public was not a comfortable thing for me. My heart started beating fast when I was thinking to respond to questions in class. The time seemed going slow. My hands were getting sweaty. The sound of my pulse was so loud in my ears that I could not hear the student who was answering the question. I repeated the answer in my mind while waiting for my turn. If I was not called, I felt relieved but agonized at the same time that I had to experience this again and again because I had to participate for the marks. If I was called, the minute I opened my mouth, my face started to burn. I could feel all the eyes on me while I was struggling to find right words. I had to stop in the middle of a sentence when I could not find the word. I heard the silence while the whole class was waiting for me. I realized afterwards that what I said was not exactly what I meant; then I was mad at myself because I lost face in front of so many people. I felt guilty because I wasted their time by saying things that did not make sense.

To both authors, it seems that cultural tradition may not reflect its meaning in different cultural context. For example, talking is also a way of learning (e.g., try and error). Talking may contain the same value as listening. Talking is not simply a way of giving, but a way of sharing in an interactive complex learning community—classroom. By the same token, Face value may not be related to dignity in western society where individualism and freedom are supported. Chinese graduates should negotiate East-West cultural traditions, re-orient themselves, and actively engage in class activities in the new learning environment.

Social change

The dramatic economical change of China and its increasing political power in the world have a great impact on Chinese students' condition overseas. The old image of Chinese and China has long gone. With the reduced difference in income between Chinese and Canadian, more Chinese students who come to Canada can afford living at the same level or even better life than the average Canadians. These changes indirectly but deeply influence Chinese students' confidence and capacity of academic performance. As A observed:

Many young Chinese international students purchased nice cars, such as BMW, right after they arrived in Canada. Some of them could even afford a house. When they live at a better life than the people around them, they feel good about themselves. When they have confidence, they are less likely to be afraid of participating in class activities.

Author B experienced that the openness of Canadian society has a significant influence on the international students' action:

Many years ago, Canadian government only allowed Chinese conducting two kinds of business: restaurant and laundry mart. The discrimination to Chinese immigrants was everywhere. Things have changed a lot over the years. The current Prime Minister, Steve Harper, made official apologies to Chinese-Canadians for the "head-tax" that was collected only from Chinese immigrants between 1885 and 1947. This is not only related to Chinese community but also a remarkable symbol of improvement of Canadian cultural pluralism.

It seems to be some patterns of the increasing of Chinese socio-economical-political power of both sides (i.e., China and Canada) in relation to the adaptation of Chinese students (see Table 1):

Table 1. *Levels of Easiness for Chinese Students Adapting into Canadian Society*

China	Canada	Level of easiness for Chinese students adapting into Canadian society
Economical & political power	Promotion of multiculturalism	
High	High	Easiest
Low	High	Easier
High	Low	Easy
Low	Low	Difficult

As it is demonstrated in Table 1, the level of easiness for Chinese students adapting into Canadian society reaches the highest when China is economically and politically strong and when Canada has great practice of multiculturalism. The lower level of Chinese students' adaptation is when Canada maintains a high level of multicultural mosaic even when China's economical and political power is weak. The third level would be when Canadian society is not open to minority groups, no matter how good China's condition is, Chinese students will have a hard time living in Canada. The worst condition for Chinese students occurs when both sides are low. This framework partially explains why the two authors felt relatively harder to adjust to North American years ago than current Chinese students do. Regardless of social changes, Chinese must adjust themselves to North American at both micro (e.g., classroom, institution) and macro (e.g., local community, society) levels in the mode integration, not assimilation, isolation, or marginalization (Berry, 2001).

Conclusions

This study explored multiple facets that affected Chinese graduate students' performance in participating in classroom activity in North American. When self-studying how we have enjoyed and struggled as international students in North American's classrooms, we realized how important that experience was in shaping us to who we are today. The six identified themes or factors cannot be examined separately. For example, it is hard for an instructor to tell whether one student eager to speak in class is due to more from the extrovert personality or more from his/her understanding of the local educational system.

There are notable variations caused by the influential degree of each element in the developmental stage of Chinese graduates. In the first year of the students' arrival, language might be the biggest barrier for them to speak up in the classroom. However, after a couple of years of language improvement, personality might play more weight in determining their performance in the class. Likewise, their classroom behavior change as their knowledge of social system and educational system increases. Once students know that not answering questions in the class will cost them loss of marks, they adjust their behavior to fulfill the academic requirement accordingly. Generally speaking, no matter how the six elements affect each other,

most of the Chinese graduate students improved their classroom participation after any given period of time.

It is our hope that the instructors could understand better of the situations of the Chinese graduate students in their class and maybe improve their teaching by implementing and carrying the lesson in the way that is welcoming and encouraging for these students. For example, knowing that “face issue” is very sensitive to Chinese students, the instructor could try to avoid making them “lose face” by calling on them without giving them time to prepare. Instructors could also consider explaining in details about their expectations for the courses or giving one-on-one time to students who are not accustomed to talk in front of class. For the Chinese students who are coming for graduate study in North American, a few things they need to keep in mind: speaking English is more important than being able to correct grammar mistakes in the exercise, to learn the host culture as much as possible and be ready to adjust yourself, initiate the conversation as much as you can, and believe you will have a bright future no matter what happens today.

There are some aspects deserving future research attention, for example, how the attitude of the instructors and how the tolerance level of domestic classmates affect Chinese students’ classroom performance. We feel that a supportive environment encourages everybody involved to be successful. An unfriendly class atmosphere could give unpleasant pressure for minority students in that class. More deeply, there are imperative tasks for all instructors to ponder: how those international students negotiate and compromise cultural conflicts in their daily classroom life, how we could teach in an increasingly cultural diverse classroom in higher education, how we could provide truly culturally-sensitive instruction, and how we could become culturally competent in this globalized world.

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