

# Mutual Misconceptions : The Intellectual Problems of Overseas Students in Australia\*

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## **Introduction**

In every society when students move from high school to university they find they have to make some changes to their study habits and their styles of learning, for the intellectual world of the university is significantly different from that of the school. When overseas students, from very different cultures and educational backgrounds, come to study in Australian universities, these disjunctions are magnified.

In exploring the nature of these crucial adjustments, and some of the ways in which it may be possible to assist both students and staff in making the transition smoother, I am drawing largely on experience at the Study Skills Centre of the Australian National University where we work with both Australian and overseas students on problems relating to their academic progress. Since the great majority of our overseas students come from Southeast Asia and, increasingly, from China, Japan and South Korea, I shall focus particularly on the intellectual shifts the students from these Asian cultures face.

We have found that through analysing the difficulties these Asian students encounter in our university, we are able to understand more clearly the adjustment problems of first year Australian students who, to some extent, are themselves entering a new culture at this point in their educational career. I am sure that teaching staff in the region served by the University of the South Pacific will also recognize similar problems and may have already developed their own strategies for assisting their students to succeed in meeting the demands of tertiary studies.

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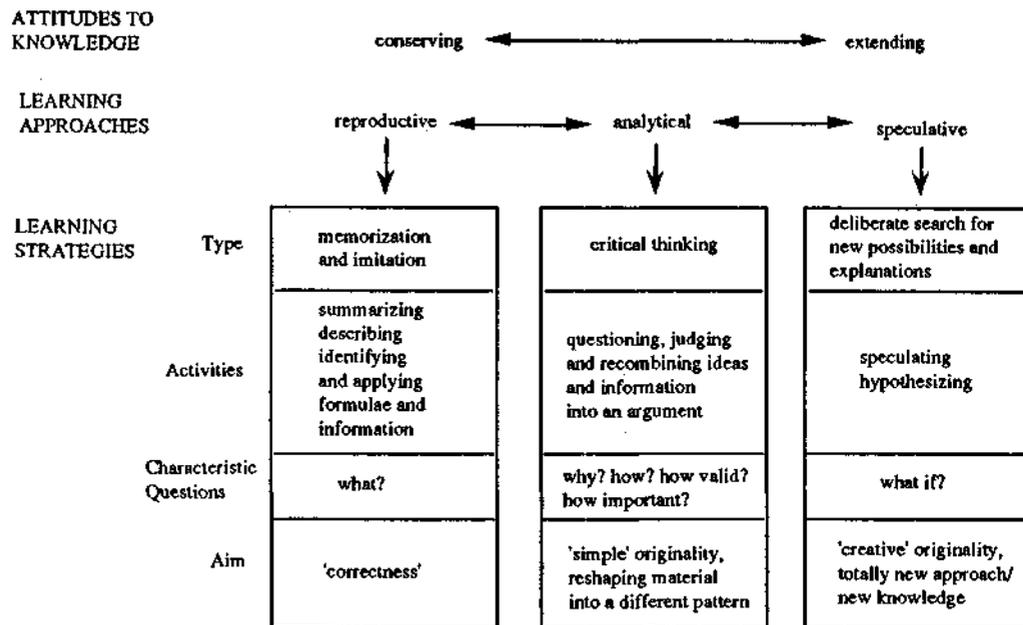
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## **Adjustment problems of overseas students**

When students from overseas come to study in Australia, they normally expect to meet some problems in the process of adjusting to their new life. In many cases they expect problems with the English language, both in social situations and in the academic context. They expect, too, to have problems adapting to the strange food and life styles of the Australian community, and they know they will feel homesick at times. Likewise, Australian staff also expect these students to have problems in these areas. Such stereotyping breeds its own consequences. Almost invariably, if an overseas student's work is poor his lecturer will assume this is because the student has language problems and so the student will be dispatched, like a patient in need of vitamins, to get a quick fix of remedial English so that he will then, presumably, be fit to rejoin the course and perform well. Yet, as we all know only too well, although a poor command of English is always a serious hazard, even highly selected foreign students with competent English may produce work of a puzzlingly disappointing standard.

There is, in fact, a more significant adjustment that these students have to make in order to be successful: they may have to change their whole approach to learning and their very attitude to knowledge itself. Such changes are necessary because there are important differences in the methods of teaching and learning which are generally considered appropriate in different societies. These differences derive from the very different answers each society gives to such questions as: what is knowledge? how can it be acquired? how should it be taught? what can be done with it? These questions may be universal, but the answers tend to be culturally determined; and the fact that the answers can and do differ is often unanticipated by the overseas students, and unrecognized by their Australian teachers.

It is important to recognize that these culturally-based differences in approaches to knowledge are not based on differences in intellectual abilities but on differences in preferred intellectual behaviours. Excellence in scholarship is never the prerogative of one culture or society. Yet just as what is considered to be appropriate social behaviour varies markedly from one society to another, so too does appropriate intellectual behaviour. And a stranger entering a new society has to be ready to modify or adapt his behaviour if he seeks to be accepted in the new environment.



(Ballard & Clanchy, *Studying in Australia*, p. 27)

## **Attitudes to knowledge and approaches to learning**

The accompanying diagram suggests an explanatory model for the continuum of approaches to learning which can be found both within any single culture and across cultures. It is the unacknowledged existence of this continuum which frequently leads to misconceptions about what is expected of both staff and students in a university.

In this diagram it is suggested that attitudes to knowledge can vary along a continuum from a strictly conserving to an extending attitude. The conserving attitude assumes that knowledge comes from earlier scholars, traditions or religious beliefs, and it is the duty of the scholar to preserve this established wisdom faithfully. In the Confucian tradition, 'I do not invent, but merely transmit.' The duty of the student, consequently, is to reproduce this knowledge accurately and at great length (following the tradition of repeating lengthy sections of the Koran or the Confucian Analects), and so the appropriate learning strategies are memorization and imitation. The aim of such learning is to achieve "correctness".

Moving along the attitudinal continuum, we come to the analytical approach which requires the student to think critically, to question, to recombine ideas and to reach evaluations. Here knowledge is open to question and can be reduced to its component parts; both teachers and students continually pose the question 'why?'. And at the far end of our continuum comes the extending attitude in which speculation is required, involving a deliberate search for existing errors, for new knowledge, and for better interpretations or theories about current knowledge. In this view all knowledge is always open to revision, a viewpoint summed up in Einstein's discussion of scientific knowledge:

Since . . . perception only gives information of this external world or of "physical reality" indirectly, we can only grasp the latter by speculative means. It follows from this that our notions of physical reality can never be final. We must always be ready to change these notions . . .

The necessarily simplified model, set out in the diagram, can be useful in identifying the intellectual shifts students must make in entering tertiary studies. In applying the model to the educational continuum as it operates within the Australian system, we would roughly equate the conserving attitude, with its emphasis on knowledge being fully provided by teachers and

textbooks, and being tested by exams in which there are "right" answers, as characteristic of school learning; though among better students and in better schools there will also be some move towards the analytical approach in the final years. The analytical approach would be generally considered a characteristic of undergraduate learning, again recognizing a move towards a speculative approach in certain disciplines, by certain lecturers, and among better students, especially in Honours courses. The speculative approach is particularly appropriate to postgraduate studies and especially at PhD level.

Clearly these divisions are never absolute. Individual students may vary their styles of learning depending on individual courses and on their own motivations for studying: they may, for example, study statistics for its theoretical elegance, or they may learn statistical formulas by rote in order to pass a compulsory section of a psychology course. Indeed the research of Marton, Hounsell and Entwistle on learning behaviour has shown us that the most successful students are those who move flexibly from deep to surface learning approaches when appropriate. Yet although different cultures, institutions and teachers may emphasise particular learning styles in specific contexts, in most Western societies the conserving attitude is superseded by the analytical and extending approaches in the course of tertiary studies.

### **Learning styles of overseas students**

Students coming to study in Australia from other countries, however, bring their own cultural attitudes to knowledge as an unconscious part of the baggage. Students from some continental European countries, for example, have very different styles of displaying knowledge in academic writing; and have to adapt themselves to the Anglo-American tradition operating in Australia. The shift required of students from Asian cultures is even greater. Among most of our Asian students there is a strong tradition of the conserving approach, which is not merely a reflection of inadequate teaching resources, crowded classrooms, few textbooks, poor library and laboratory facilities and other disadvantages endemic in many developing countries. It is an attitude more deeply grounded in the cultures from which they come. Nakamura's UNESCO study *The Ways of Thinking of Eastern Peoples* (1960) provides a meticulous introduction to traditional Asian cultural systems of knowledge, and it is clear that the conserving attitude informs both education and the whole fabric of social behaviour in this region. In such traditions learning is based on the wisdom of accepted authority. Traditional knowledge has been passed down

over generations, and modern learning likewise is to be acquired through equally faithful reproduction of the words of teachers and texts. Of courses there is also room for analytical and speculative approaches in some areas of learning, but they are less apparent and are less likely to have come within the experience of new undergraduates - they may even be relatively rare among postgraduate students from these countries. This is not to suggest such cultural traditions are moribund; indeed in many ways they are both volatile and dynamic. But a steady progression along the intellectual continuum is less often a characteristic of their educational systems.

We can recognise the pervasive influence of this conserving attitude in the students' own approaches to learning when they first attend courses in Australia. For example, many Asian students are reluctant to question openly the authority of the teacher or the textbook, even when there is apparent conflict. One student summed up this attitude in the poignant complaint: "In the lecture my lecturer gave me one explanation for this event, but in the two articles I have just read there are two more different explanations. How can this be? How can I know which is correct?" And if these students do raise questions, they are more often requests for clarification of fact or meaning ("What?" questions) rather than probing further analytical or speculative directions. For example, a common complaint among supervisors of overseas science post-graduates is that while these students are excellent members of a research team under direction and authority, they are lost when asked to work independently and develop their own research focus. These students, on the other hand, complain that they are abandoned without any direction from the very teachers whose job it is to supervise their work.

Another example of this clash in cultural expectations of the behaviour of a good student can be seen in the problems that followed the introduction of multiple-choice exams in the Peoples Republic of China. The Chinese Director of the Beijing Institute of Foreign Languages, which prepares all government-sponsored postgraduate students often did poorly on such exams because they would only mark those answers they were absolutely certain were correct, and they would not guess among possibly correct answers. This, he explained, was because Chinese students consider it improper to guess: a good student should know the correct answer, and if he does not know it, then he should remain silent and be ashamed. Such an attitude makes the demand, in another educational tradition, for theorizing and speculative thinking a double challenge.

## **Misunderstanding : a Japanese example**

One final example may show how a clash between two approaches to the role of academic discussion can lead to serious misconceptions about the nature of the task being attempted and the basis on which this work is evaluated. A Japanese undergraduate, with very poor English and an equally poor record in his academic studies in Australia, brought along an essay in which he was required to compare and contrast two opposing interpretations of an historical event, each held by a respected historian. His approach to this task was to provide a detailed description of the educational and social background of each scholar, showing their claims to scholarly distinction and ending with a summary of their separate views on the issue. There was no attempt to contrast the two interpretations, much less to evaluate them and reach some conclusion about their validity. When it was suggested to the student that the lecturer would clearly expect such a critical evaluation, he was most surprised. In Japan, he explained, it would be totally inappropriate for a student to tell his reader (his lecturer, especially) what he ought to think. It was, instead, the student's task to present the views of both scholars in such a way that a harmonious understanding of both could be reached, so that the merits of both could be fully appreciated.

Now this student was working within a perfectly valid set of cultural norms; but they would not be recognized as such by the Australian lecturer working within the western expectations of historical analysis. However after working with this student on different approaches to learning (as outlined in the diagram) and on the implications these have for the expectations implicit in the wording of assignments, he was able to adapt his intellectual strategies very competently to meet these new, and now recognizable, demands. Even though his command of written English remained lamentable right to the end of his course, he now managed to get Credits in place of Fails because, as his lecturers commented, "Although his English is weak, I can't penalize him too heavily for this when he is clearly thinking well." That is, his writing now displayed the signs of intellectual analysis that the lecturers, from their own cultural perspective, recognized as "good thinking".

It is clear, then, that there is ample room for misconceptions to raise when staff and students come from different intellectual backgrounds. The problem for the students is not merely the difficulty of making adjustments but of actually recognizing that these are necessary. This problem is compounded by the tendency of teachers to attribute all difficulties to weakness in language - a view

which most students readily share. Yet, as we know well, although language and thought are intimately related, the student's problems can often lie deeper than their uncertain control of academic discourse structures.

### **Range of expectations about university education**

It may be useful, at this point, to consider in more detail another area of potential misconceptions which is delineated in our diagram: the different sets of expectations, seldom implicitly stated, which Australian staff and overseas students each hold about the roles of teachers and students (and, hence, of teaching and learning) in the university context. Australian expectations of good undergraduate students are that they will become increasingly independent learners, they will develop the skills of critical analysis and reasoned argument, and they will handle both empirical evidence and theoretical inquiry productively. (I am not suggesting that these expectations are invariably met, but they provide an ideal model towards which Australian teachers are manoeuvring their students.) The good teacher, in this context, is an initiator of ideas and approaches, a source of intellectual inspiration and guidance, but also a mentor who keeps out of the way except when needed. And good teaching is that which motivates students to follow up ideas presented in lectures in an attempt to understand them more fully and maybe develop them further.

The expectations of overseas students, however, are likely to be very different. Asian expectations of good students are that they be dutiful, industrious and obedient. The good teacher is, above all, wise and will offer moral guidance as well as learning to his students, and is always "right" - so adherence to the teacher's word is a guarantee of success within the conserving tradition. Good teaching consists of teaching *all* that is necessary for the students to know and *only* that which is necessary, as defined by the syllabus, the textbook and the examination paper. A corollary of this view is that if a student has worked diligently but fails the exam, then this must be the fault of the teacher who has either taught incorrectly or deliberately set an unfair exam.

So once again between these two sets of quite reasonable expectations, according to those that hold them, there is more fertile ground for mutual misconceptions. In one tradition learning is assumed to be an increasingly independent activity, developed through questioning and argument and leading to rational conclusions based on the critical analysis of appropriate evidence. In

the other, learning consists of accurate reproduction of material that is presented formally, and the display of a wide knowledge of the authoritative texts.

### **Shifting to postgraduate studies**

The adjustments required of overseas postgraduate students who have completed their undergraduate work in their own countries can be even more drastic and traumatic, as their previous educational experience is likely to have been inappropriate, from an Australian academic viewpoint, for an even longer formative period. Moreover these students are older, much more highly selected, and more confident of their academic achievements. Yet they may have relatively little experience in the analytical and speculative approaches to learning. However the Australian staff who supervise these postgraduates tend to take it for granted that they have already made this transition with confidence and success. So when a supervisor greets a new overseas postgraduate student with the routine instructions: "You'll probably need to catch up on the latest research, so go and spend the next four weeks in the library reading recent articles in the field. And then come back and tell me what you've found out.", he assumes his student will return with a critical understanding of the key research issues and have begun to identify a potential area for his own research. The student, however, is more likely to read only three or four articles (often randomly discovered within an unfamiliar library system) but will have studied these exhaustively - with copious notes, summarizing, and use of dictionaries - so that he "knows" them thoroughly. He could probably reproduce them almost verbatim. He is less likely to have adopted a critical approach, must less synthesized the implications of what he has read into the basis for a new point of departure. So, after this four weeks of intensive work, the supervisor will be frustrated at the student's lack of progress and independent thinking; and the student will be confused and discouraged by his supervisor's reactions. Yet the basic problem often lies, unspoken, in the misconceptions each holds about what the other expects.

Indeed all postgraduates face adjustment problems when they move into the rarified sub-culture of academic research. Most of them have difficulty negotiating the relationship between supervisor and student; handling seminar presentations and participation, accepting independent responsibility for productive library research and experimental design, and, always, writing the final thesis. Such problems are, however, magnified for overseas students

grounded in very different cultural expectations about the nature of advanced scholarship.

### **Plagiarism : a clash of cultural traditions**

We can focus the implications of many of the differences that have been discussed here by examining the vexed and very vexing issue of plagiarism in relation to the work of students from overseas backgrounds. Plagiarism is presented as the greatest sin in Australian academic life; it is also the bugbear of those who teach and those who learn in first year courses, when the art of referencing sources has to be acquired. It is a sin peculiar to Western academic culture, and apparently as difficult to eradicate as the AIDS virus. It requires of students a pedantic expertise in the minutiae of referencing formats and in the skilled use of other people's thoughts but not their original and precise wording of those ideas. It is, also, a fairly recent appendage of Western scholarly traditions. For first year Australian students, reared on years of copying from their notes or the textbook - or, at best, from *Time* magazine and a couple of encyclopaedias for a "project" - the dangers of plagiarism are compounded by their sudden mysterious appearance on the educational horizon. However these students can usually grasp the concept of "ownership" of ideas, and they gradually master the conventions of referencing.

Into this quagmire stumble the overseas students, coming from cultures in which the repetition of the words of authorities is the acme of scholarship, and where giving precise references to sources would be considered inelegant and even an insult to the presumed knowledge of the well-educated reader. Furthermore, these students are struggling to write in a language not their own and are faced with the demand to express complex ideas in words that are not those of their sources. For these students the risk of plagiarizing takes on paralysing dimensions. If they do, inadvertently or in despair, commit the ultimate sin and verge on plagiarism, they are furthermore astonished by the angry response and accusations of immorality that this evokes from their lecturer, a fury they neither anticipated nor understand. Once again, misconceptions bar the way to enlightenment. Such students require much more careful explanations and more specific practice in the western conventions of referring to sources than do most Australian students, because there are both cultural and linguistic factors which reinforce their inappropriate use of sources.

## **Academic staff adjustments**

The title of this paper is "Mutual Misconceptions" because the misunderstandings, as we have seen, can arise both among students and staff. Although it is the students who have to make most of the adjustments to meet the gradually perceived demands of this new university culture, there is also a role for the academic teacher in nurturing these shifts. It is much more difficult, and often not appropriate, for the lecturers themselves to shift towards the intellectual traditions of their foreign students - partly because they may only have a few such students in a large class, and partly because these students have chosen to come to Australia in order to become fluent in the Western academic tradition.

In most cases, however, the teachers themselves are largely unaware of their own cultural blinkers, and they find it intriguing to recognize objectively the intellectual continuum, as outlined in the model, within which they are operating and which they have blithely assumed to be universal. The model helps them to interpret the previous inexplicable behaviour of their overseas students in a more constructive light; it also helps them to recognize their own intellectual assumptions. They are then in a position to take at least minimal steps in assisting these students to bridge the gaps, whereas previously they had tended to treat most overseas students as slightly defective Australian students - a manifestly inappropriate (and unproductive) response to the real needs of very intelligent and hardworking overseas students thrust into a bewildering new educational system.

The model can also alert the teachers to the relevance of their students' previous educational experiences, not just in terms of relative deprivation of resources but also through recognition of the strength of their intellectual traditions. It can help them avoid misinterpreting the behaviour of these students: for example, the silence of overseas students in tutorials, their reluctance to ask questions and inappropriateness of many of the questions they do volunteer, their apparent dependence on their teachers and the printed word, their high levels of exam anxiety, their deference to anyone in authority. If academic staff can find an intellectual basis, such as is suggested in the continuum of the model, for interpreting the behaviour of their overseas students, then they are more likely to work constructively to assist those students than if there is merely an appeal to their good nature or "duty" to help deprived foreign students.

## **Mutual misconceptions and solutions**

To sum up, many problems in student learning arise because the teachers and the students are, without realizing it, approaching their tasks from different premises and with different expectations. This situation of mutual misconception is particularly likely to arise in the case of students coming from foreign cultures. Such students do not expect to have serious problems in their studies because they are highly motivated, carefully selected, and already extremely successful students in their own education systems. When, in the Australian setting, they are suddenly faced with criticism, and even failure, their tendency is to revert even more intensively to those study habits which have served them so well in the past: usually this means working longer hours and memorizing even more thoroughly. Yet it is very often the case that their problems lie in the inappropriateness of these very study habits: it is not more study hours that are required but a change in the style of learning, change from a basically conserving approach to a more analytical attitude. It is not suggested that these students are incapable of developing a critical and reasoned argument; their problem, rather, is that this style of learning has not been encouraged in their previous education or even in the culture of their society. Therefore their problems must be accurately recognized by university staff, and they must be shown, explicitly and carefully, the new rules of the academic game. They are usually very quick, ready and apt learners.

It would be a serious misconception indeed to infer from the problems that overseas students face in shifting to new study approaches that certain cultures are incapable of abstract and speculative thought, or that some societies lack the ability to develop reasoned arguments. We must return to the premise on which our model is based, that the continuum stretches through all cultural attitudes to knowledge and varies with both individual and situational responses. Philosophy, mathematics, poetry, engineering and art know no boundaries - and may develop outside the walls of formal education systems. Yet it is the role of educational institutions to promote and develop in students their capacities for the highest and most creative forms of thinking; and it is here that international universities play a central and complex role, bringing together students from a diversity of cultural backgrounds and directing their intellectual energies along paths that are most likely to produce success.

Ultimately our overseas students return home as successful and accomplished scholars. They become fluent in two approaches to knowledge and are probably

more versatile in their scholarship than some of their Australian teachers. It was a Thai postgraduate who commented, at the end of a semester during which she moved from academic failure and near collapse to a very competent level of achievement: "It is not so hard once you know what is expected of you. But it is still frightening at times to have to be so independent - and so impolite by raising questions all the time. It does not seem civilized, I suppose."

### Related Reading

Ballard, and J. Clanchy (1988) *Studying in Australia*, Melbourne, Longman Cheshire,.

Kaplan, (1966) 'Cultural thought patterns in intercultural education', *Language Learning*, 16, pp.1-20.

Nakamura, (1960) *The ways of Thinking of Eastern Peoples*, Tokyo, Japan National Commission for UNESCO.

Marton, F., Hounsell, D., and Entwistle, N. (eds), (1984) *The Experience of Learning*, Edinburgh, Scottish Academic Press,.