"Fitting in" in a "stand out" culture: An examination of the interplay of collectivist and individualist cultural frameworks in the Australian university classroom

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Abstract

Australian university students originate from increasingly diverse cultural backgrounds most of which are defined as collectivist communities. As Australia is defined as a strongly individualist culture, understanding the interplay of the different values, beliefs and practices of either cultural framework is increasingly significant to Australian university teachers and learners. This paper examines cross-cultural perceptions about student motivations for study and perceptions about classroom behaviour (or non-behaviour) within the context of the collectivist/individualist dimension of cultural difference. Beneficial pedagogical principles and practices are identified for facilitating successful educational relationships and experiences for individualist/collectivist teachers and students. Collectivist students benefit significantly from personal relationships with their teachers especially in their first term of study. Teachers are better able to develop good relationships with their students if they can recognise culturally-different motivations for study as legitimate. In addition to a strong interpersonal relationship with their teacher, collectivist students benefit from appropriately designed collaborative mixed-culture group work activities. This paper aims to identify and justify pedagogical approaches related to teacher-learner relationships and group work that can enhance teaching and learning experiences in collectivist/individualist classrooms.

Keywords: international students, collectivist, individualist, group work

Introduction: Thinking of the university as a framework for intercultural education

Australian university students are from increasingly diverse cultural backgrounds as a consequence of continuing migration patterns (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2003) and also sustained increases in enrolments of international students over the last ten years (ABS, 2002). Central Queensland University (CQU) is one of the most attractive universities in Australia to international students with 50% of

CQU's currently enrolled students originating from over 100 countries (CQU International, 2005). Cultures differ across value systems, beliefs, rituals and social norms of practice, including educational practice. Cross cultural theorists have identified many useful culture-general frameworks for identifying and measuring cultural difference (see Hall's [1959] high-context/low-context continuum; and Stewart's [1972] cultural orientation continuum). One of the most influential dimensions of cultural difference identified in cross cultural studies, is Hofstede's (1984, 1986, 1991) dimension of collectivism/ individualism. As the majority of the world's population are collectivist (Goleman, n.d.), it is therefore not surprising that the large majority of CQU's international students originate from collectivist cultures including China, Pakistan, Thailand, South Korea, India, Taiwan. In contrast, Australia, along with the USA, is the most strongly individualistic culture on Hofstede's (1984, 1991) individualism index. The values, beliefs and behavioural norms associated with these distinct cultural "frameworks" define approaches to teaching and learning, just as they underscore all other aspects of social practice. Empirical studies in intercultural education indicate that the main areas of difference in student and teacher expectations across collectivist/individualist systems are classroom participation and student-teacher relationships (Ward, 2001). This paper examines: (1) the effects of the collectivist/individualist divide on teacher-learner relationships, including a consideration of individualist perceptions of international student motivation for study; and (2) classroom participation issues with a specific focus on the potential of guided collaborative group work. This paper identifies and justifies strategies for course design and classroom practices that may help collectivist/individualist teachers and learners negotiate their distinct teaching and learning preferences and expectations in an Australian university context.

Individualism and collectivism

People from individualist cultures, such as Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the USA and the UK, tend to privilege the importance of the individual over the group (Hofstede, 1984, 1991; Connor, in Mieko, 1997; Lustig & Koester, 2003). Children are encouraged to compete with their peers and are rewarded for individual initiative and expression, that is, for "standing out." On the other hand, in collectivist cultures children are rewarded for behaviour that contributes to group harmony and conforms to social tradition, that is, for "fitting in." In individualist cultures, children develop into successful adults by becoming independent; indeed Goleman (n.d.) claims that in individualist societies, "… since the purpose of education is for the child to become independent, they leave home as soon as they can," (p. 1). Collectivist international students may have sojourned far from their homes for the purpose of acquiring a qualification, but few have 'left' home in the same sense that an Australian student has. Collectivist students tend to live in 'extended family' structures of between two and four generations in which they can expect to live their entire lives (Lustig & Koester, 2003). Their study sojourn is generally financed by the family (USNews.com, 2005) and the entire project is seen as an investment in the families' social and economic well being rather than an individual achievement, the benefits of which will generally advantage only the members of a small "nuclear family" nest. As the study sojourn is a family investment for collectivist students, and as collectivist children conventionally respect and obey their parents, it is not surprising that collectivist parents influence the study decisions of their children more directly than Australian parents. This has been perceived as a motivational problem by individualist educators who have a strong conviction that students should select a field of study out of intrinsic interest and pursue the acquisition of knowledge for its own sake (Hofstede, 1986). Such

encultured perceptions about legitimate or illegitimate motivations for study can profoundly affect the teacher-learner relationship and justify further examination.

Perceptions about legitimate motivations for study

Hofstede (1986) applied the social values of the collectivist and individualist framework to the teaching and learning context and described collectivists as perceiving of "education as a way of gaining prestige in one's social environment and of joining a higher status group," (p. 320). The equivalent individualist value is described as perceiving "education as a way of improving one's economic worth and self respect based on ability and confidence," (p. 320). The distinction between these educational objectives appears somewhat problematic. If the concept of the 'self' and the role of the 'self' in relation to 'others' is qualitatively different for collectivists and individualists, then one assumes 'self respect' would involve self-judgments based on different criteria for successful 'selfhood.' It might also be assumed that a collectivist's sense of self respect would depend very heavily on their standing in an in-group, such as the family or work organisation. Gaining 'social prestige' is in that case, directly conducive to self respect for a collectivist. This prestige would no doubt be based to some extent on ability and confidence but also on non-individualist priorities, such as cooperation and respect for tradition. Hence, it could be argued that both collectivists and individualists undertake university study for outcomes that promote self-respect which is, importantly, engendered by culturally different criteria.

Hofstede's (1986) definitions suggest that individualist students possess more intrinsic motivation to study, that is, to pursue activities for the pleasure of the activity itself (Pintrich & Schunk, 1996). Such perceptions about culturally different study motivation tend to underscore anxiety about the practices of universities whose graduates go on to submit permanent residency applications on the basis of skill qualification. Skilled migration programs are designed and governed by the Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC) and exist to meet undersupplies of specialist skilled workers in the Australian workforce. Such migration programs benefit the Australian economy and community, so there is nothing wrong with skilled migration, or 'brain gain' migration (DIMIA [now DIAC], 2005), per se. Anxiety seems to be created for some stakeholders in the higher education sector precisely and only when the motivation to migrate is linked with the motivation to study at university. In recent interviews with media and government bodies, somewhat bemused CQU staff have been asked to defend the permanent residency application success rate of the University's graduates (see *Four Corners*, 2005 interview with CQU Vice Chancellor (27 June); Australian University Quality Agency (AUQA) audit interview 21 Sept, CQUSIC 2005). Sector discomfort with a student's decision to study in order to also migrate can be usefully explored from the perspective of individualist/collectivist educational values and beliefs.

Given that the motivation to migrate is most commonly based either on the desire for greater safety or on the desire for greater prosperity or "more butter" (Cleveland, 2003, p. 433), a collectivist's decision to study in order to then migrate for "more butter" is not inconsistent with an individualist's motivation to study for "economic improvement" (Hofstede, 1986). In addition to the pursuit of self-respect based on ability and confidence, individualists are also strongly extrinsically motivated to study in order to "improve (their) economic worth," (Hofstede, 1986, p. 320). Graduate employment and graduate starting salaries are widely recognised as an influential factor to Australian student decisions about which universities they study at and which programs they select. Indeed Australian

university success is partly measured against the graduate starting salaries that they are able to achieve (Good Universities Guide, 2005). Hence, the perception that enrolment in a university program for any reason other than the pleasure of learning is illegitimate, may be self-deceiving, individualist bias. As individualist motivations for learning include economic gain, it would seem unreasonable to condemn collectivists for holding similar motivations. As universities have no role in identifying skill shortage professions or in assessing permanent residency applications, and as university programs are endorsed (or not endorsed) as professionally adequate for migration by non-university professional bodies (for example, Certified Practicing Accountants and Australian Computer Society), it is difficult to see why university staff are asked to account for the success of their graduates in seeking permanent residency.

A tendency to see individualist and collectivist study motivations as conflicting or irreconcilable rather than different is not conducive to providing quality education to an international market. It is useful for Australian university teachers to objectively explore and understand the motivational nuances distinguishing collectivist and individualist students' decisions to study in order that they might create internationally relevant and inclusive teaching and learning contexts that accommodate and endorse culturally different learner motivations. Recognising student motivation as legitimate is fundamental to a functional teaching and learning relationship. Without such recognition, it is difficult to imagine how the centrally important relationship between collectivist students and their teachers can be developed.

Barriers to change

There is a significant school of thinking in studies of international education, commonly referred to as the "deficit model" which focuses on the limitations of international student as rote-learners, passive-learners, uncritical learners and linguistically unprepared (Ballard & Clanchy, 1991). More recent studies challenge many of these claims (see Paton, 2004; Volet & Renshaw, 1995, in Goleman, n.d.; Gay, 2003). One important observation, for example, is that memorisation strategies employed more frequently by Asian background students than Australian students, do not indicate surface learning for the former as they might for the latter (Chalmers & Volet, 1997; Wong, 2004). There is further research that identifies a general unwillingness or unpreparedness on the part of Australian university teachers to adapt their teaching for international students or culturally diverse students (Zifirdaus, 1991; Ward, 2001). Ziegahn (2001) describes such teachers as operating with "default teaching methods" and points out that, "as cultural beings, our teaching is always based on cultural values, regardless of our awareness of their influence," (n.p.). Despite these reports of a tendency for teachers to apply a "deficit" model approach to working with international students and reports of academic unwillingness to adapt, other recent studies record an increasing willingness and preparedness on the part of teachers with culturally diverse students to examine and diversify their teaching methods (McCallum, 2004; Owens, 2005). As the process of communicating across culture itself contributes to increased intercultural sensitivity and awareness, it is not surprising that teachers who are willing to adapt their methods and curriculum tend to have had more experience with culturally diverse students than those teachers who adopt an assimilationist view (Owens; McCallum). This paper identifies strategies for developing effective teaching and learning relationships between collectivist/individualist participants on the assumption that teachers are willing to recognize the encultured nature of their teaching methods, and review these

methods to accommodate culturally different motivations and expectations of international students.

Teacher-learner relationships

The quality of the teacher-learner relationship has been identified as one of the most important elements affecting the ability of collectivist students to "fit in" to individualist study frameworks (McCallum, 2004, Halagao, 2004). The dimension of individualism/collectivism is strongly associated with another of Hofstede's (1984, 1991) cultural dimensions: power distance tolerance (Ward, 2001). There is a pattern of high tolerance for unequal social divisions of power and wealth in countries with collectivist values, such as Indonesia, India and Thailand, and a pattern of low tolerance of power distance in individualist cultures, such as Australia. An important teaching and learning conviction of high power distance (HPD) cultures is that teachers have "a personal wisdom which is transferred to a student in their relationship with a particular teacher (guru)," (Hofstede, 1986, p. 320). The student/teacher relationship is considered to be integral to the collectivist/HPD process of education. It is therefore considered useful to explore how this relationship can be structured to promote mutually beneficial outcomes for teachers and learners with distinct collectivist/HPD or individualist/LPD educational values and expectations.

Power distance tolerance comes dramatically into play in the teacher-learner relationship. The teacher-learner relationship is quite formal in collectivist/HPD cultures, whereas teachers in Australia are usually known to students by their first name and frequently socialise with their students. In Asian countries, lectures tend to be longer than in Australian universities, up to three or four hours (Wong, 2004, p. 158) and the lecturer proceeds to deliver all the information required about the topic in this extended time without interruption. In some Asian countries, Vietnam, for example, there are no tutorials, only lectures. Despite this apparent remoteness of the collectivist/HPD teacher, there is generally more opportunity for Asian students to seek one-to-one consultation with their teachers than there is at an Australian university (Wong). The fact that the teacher-learner relationship is more formal for collectivist students, does not mean that the teacher and learner do not regularly interact on a one-to-one basis. In fact, the tendency for collectivist/HPD students to find public discussion threatening compels them to seek and engage in one to one discussion with teachers and other students more often than individualist students (Biggs, 1996, in Wong). Collectivists value formal rather than informal classroom interactions; they are more strongly motivated to respect teachers:

> It is not difficult to see that these differences in cultural values can lead to misperceptions across cultural groups. From one perspective, quiet but attentive collectivist students may be perceived as uninterested or withdrawn by individualist teachers. From another viewpoint, the relatively frequent interruptions to lectures by individualist students may be seen as rude and unmannered by their collectivist classmates. (Ward, 2001, n.p.)

The respectful silence of collectivist students in classrooms should not be interpreted as an unwillingness to communicate with the teacher. Indeed, it may signal an expectation that out of class teacher-learner interaction will take place and will compensate.

Establishing a personal connection with the teacher is important to collectivist student (Halagao, 2004). It has been recently argued that this personal connection is important to *all* students as even the process of 'self-directed learning', based on

thoroughly individualist values, is heavily implicated with mentoring and coaching (Grow, 1994, in Ziegahn, 2001). Nah (2000) has pointed out that, "autonomy in learning does not preclude a valuing of interdependence, depending on the learning context," (in Ziegahn, 2001, n.p.). So, efforts by teachers to create personal connections with their students can benefit all students, but are particularly important for collectivist/HPD students in individualist learning environments.

Collectivist/HPD students are taught that the right to speak in public is heavily socially constrained by age, group seniority and gender (Zieghan, 2001). In support of the all-important collectivist objective of maintaining social harmony, many collectivist culture groups avoid saying 'no' (Goleman, n.d.). Instead, they may say, 'you may be right', or 'I will think about it'. Students from collectivist/HPD cultures would consider saying 'no' to a teacher as grave disrespect, and to admit 'I don't understand' is equivalent to saying both 'no' but also 'you have not explained this adequately,' (Goleman, p. 10). For individualist teachers aiming to generate their students' oral and written critical engagement with academic topics, this is a problem that needs to be addressed.

Given that collectivist/HPD students are strongly intimidated by public speaking contexts it is important to create small classes and/or time to consult in one to one scenarios, particularly in first year courses. Students surveyed at CQU frequently identify 'smaller classes' as one of the features of the university that they most appreciate (Campus Management Services Quality Division, 2005). Meeting the challenge of creating more opportunity for one-to-one teacher-learner consultation is the responsibility of the educational institution as much as the individual teacher. Asian teachers typically have lighter teaching loads to Australian teachers (Wong, 2004). University management groups and course designers need to address ways in which to build this interpersonal time into their first year programs.

One very important strategy working successfully at many universities with high numbers of international students, including CQU, is a Learning Skills Unit. Staff in these 'Units' are able to devote time to one on one study support sessions with international students, and thereby meet the collectivist need for guided learning and simultaneously, go some way in compensating for the limited availability of Australian teachers. Knowing the students names and backgrounds (McCallum, 2004; Halagao, 2004) and establishing a personal connection with students are widely considered to be key factors to enhancing the learning of students from diverse cultures (Zeigahn, 2001). This can be facilitated in face-to-face instruction and also through computer mediated learning media. It has been pointed out that the computer mediated environment may in fact be more relaxing and generate greater openness for students from ESL backgrounds as it is relief from real-time compressed communication (Ziegahn). "Getting to know you" exercises, teacher-learner and learner-learner sharing of autobiographical information and explicit incorporation of different cultural understandings, beliefs and values in learner activities promotes learners' sense of self esteem, involvement and confidence (McCallum, 2004). Studies have indicated that more guided learning is an expectation of collectivist students but that adaptation to the individualist educational context is usually successful by the end of the first semester or first year of study (Ward, 2001). Hence, Australian educational designers and teachers of first year courses, in particular, need to build in guided instruction delivered in one to one or small group contexts to facilitate collectivist adaptation to an individualist study framework.

Establishing personal connection between teachers and learners engenders trust and on this basis, a teacher may gradually develop a learner's confidence to "fit in" in a

"stand out" educational culture. That is, to ask questions in class, an undertaking that collectivist students have traditionally been forbidden to do and find difficult to suddenly perform (Gay, 2003). Collectivist students are also reluctant to produce arguments, preferring to build consensus (Connor, in Mieko, 1997). The skills of argument according to the Socratic method, that is to state single claims, without deviating, supported by credible evidence and link claims through rhetorical persuasion to establish a conviction in the reader, are naturally, not familiar to learners from other cultures. In China, for example, knowledge acquisition "involves incorporating anomalies rather than adversarial argument," (Egege & Kutieleh, 2004, p. 81). Digression is a legitimate feature of both German and Japanese academic writing (Kreutz & Clyne, 1987; Connor in Mieko) but it is an academic weakness according to Australian teachers of international students (Gay). If teachers want their international students to practise wWstern methods of argument, then they need to identify ways to make these methods explicit and to create opportunities for students to rehearse such argument in low risk activities and contexts. That means teaching not only about the specific topic of the course but also about expectations about *how* the topic is learned and how this learning is demonstrated.

Many studies report that Australian teachers with international students perceive these students to lack critical thinking skills (Ward, 2003; Paton 2004; Vandermensbrugghe, 2004). As critical thinking is generally defined by two core activities: questioning/challenging and arguing (logically), both of which are anti-collectivist activities, it is incumbent on teachers to introduce these skills to students early in study programs. Atkinson argues ((1997) in Vandermensbrugghe, 2004) that critical thinking is "essentially embedded in Western culture … (and) can only be valued by cultures that see individuals as primary units, and who favour the idea of individual conflict and dissension rather than consensus and individual thought," (p. 420). Paton (2004) disputes the claim that critical thinking is incompatible with Asian attitudes citing examples from Chinese historical texts that demonstrate a "propensity for critical thinking in Chinese culture for at least the last thousand years" (p. 3). Vandermensbrugghe (2004) argues that it is the very embeddedness of critical thinking in Western academic process that makes it both difficult to teach and to learn to emulate. Educational theorists, such as, Egege and Kutieleh (2004), Paris (2002) and Paton (2004) offer useful teaching strategies and activities that have been successful in clarifying and justifying critical thinking processes for non-Western students. One teaching activity that has multiple potential benefits in collectivist/individualist classrooms is collaborative group work.

Group work

Surely, no achievement could be considered more important to a collectivist than being considered a valuable group member. Collaborative group learning, an increasingly popular method to classroom activity and also course assessment, is defined as emphasising, "the process of listening to and respecting others, understanding alternative views, challenging and questioning other, negotiating ideas, and caring for group participants," (Imell & Tisdell, 1996, in Ziegahn, 2001, n.p.). *Culturally diverse* group work extends the potential for group members to learn not only about the specific topic domain, but also to learn about other cultures and other languages, yet students of all backgrounds tend to resist forming cross-cultural groups (Ward, 2001); that is, they resist initially. Once learners have been able to experience same culture groups and mixed culture groups, they are able to identify benefits to the cultural mix (Ward). These benefits are also recognized by researchers in international education:

First, there is strong evidence that cooperative learning in culturally mixed groups produces higher levels of academic achievement across ability groups (Lucker, Rosenfield, Sikes, & Aronson, 1976; Slavin & Oickle, 1981). Secondly, cooperative groups enhance cross-ethnic friendships (Wiegel, Wiser, & Cook, 1975; Cooper, Johnson, Johnson, & Wilderson, 1980). In addition, Warring, Johnson, Maruyama, and Johnson's (1985) research found that relationships formed under cooperative learning conditions extended to other social activities.. (Ward, n.p).

In addition to these benefits, collectivist students who are reluctant to speak in public may feel more comfortable speaking publicly when they are allowed to choose their own groups and when they are presenting the opinion of a small group to a larger one (Goleman, n.d.). In this way, group work activities that are gradually more diverse and more challenging can promote the collectivist's confidence and ability to express and support opinions and thereby engage in the critical process so embedded in the Australian curriculum.

Given that mixed culture group work holds benefits for all students, and particularly collectivist students in individualist study contexts, and that all students resist it, the challenge for the teacher is how to design and sequence group work activities into the curriculum so that culturally diverse learners can experience the comparative benefits for themselves in non-threatening contexts. In order to facilitate this, teachers can do several things: allow students to self-select group membership in early term activity, and then teacher-select and/or random select group members in order that students gradually build confidence and skills in expressing and defending their ideas in increasingly diverse and challenging group contexts. Remembering collectivist students expect guided study activity, it is important for teachers to work with novice student groups to establish explicit and agreed codes of conduct emphasising cooperation, participation and equal responsibility in achieving a common goal (Sharan, 1994, in Ward, 2001).

One of the fundamental challenges to collectivist/individualist group collaboration is the way in which achievement or success is measured in relation to the individual or the group. The harmony of the group, or an individual's sense of being valued by a group, may take precedence for a collectivist over the individualist's competitive need for the group outcome to be distinguished from the other groups. This can and often does lead to in-group conflict which can have negative academic outcomes. Whereas a 'weaker' group member may attract support and compensatory work, or at least understanding and tolerance from their collectivist colleagues, they might expect direct criticism and expulsion from a strong individualist who is driven by the need to compete. Teachers regularly report such problems in relation to mixed culture group work. The following examples are from recent research conducted at CQU:

> Chinese students complain to teachers that their Russian member is rude, arrogant and bossy.

> Russian student complains Chinese students are sending him quotes from books with no critical analysis or established links with the academic task.

> Australian student complains that it is unacceptable for them to be individually disadvantaged by the performance of other group members.

> An indigenous Australian student prefers to remain in a group that is destined to fail the assignment rather than abandon their group. (Owens, 2005)

There is a tendency for individualist group members to see collectivists as withdrawn or uninterested and for collectivists to see individualists as rude, unmannered and egotistical (Ward, 2001). Collectivists are observed to be modest in self-presentation and this has potentially negative implications for them both in the Australian university and the Australian workforce (Connor, in Mieko, 1997; Owens, 2005) where the ability to convince others of the value of individual knowledge, skills and attributes is vital to achieving good grades or good jobs. It is important that learners are given the opportunity to encounter and learn to understand culturally different values and behaviours in non-assessed, group contexts before they are formally assessed for their ability to accept and negotiate these differences. Hence, group work is a potentially valuable method of teaching and learning that can exploit the collectivist's implicit goal to be a valued member of an in-group, with the important caveat that their introduction to group work is initially low risk, teacher guided, non-assessable, small group and self-selected.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has examined some of the key effects of collectivist and individualist cultural frameworks in Australian university classrooms. Teacher perceptions of student motivation for study, teacher-learner relationships and collaborative group work were identified as important elements for consideration when negotiating the collectivist/individualist divide between teachers and learners. It has been argued that collectivist/individualist motivations for university study are different but not irreconcilable and that these culturally different motivations need to be recognised as legitimate in Australian university classrooms in order to promote successful teacher-learner relationships. It has been observed that collectivist students, particularly in their first term at Australian university, expect and benefit from personal relationships with their teachers. Appropriately designed and sequenced group work activities have been argued to hold great potential for assisting collectivist students to adjust to the critical thinking model of the Australian university curriculum.

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