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# Are students using the ‘wrong’ style of learning?

*A multicultural scrutiny for helping teachers  
to appreciate differences*

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**ABSTRACT** The literature on learning styles suggests that although the behaviour of some students may appear different from what is defined as a ‘high-quality learning process’, their conduct does not demonstrate an ‘inferior’ approach to learning. Furthermore, existing and emerging academic literature that associates learning theories with the studies of cultural concerns suggests alternative interpretations that may help to develop a richer multicultural learning and teaching approach within Western higher education institutions (HE). This article brings together elements of the theory on learning styles and some elements of multicultural management theory to introduce interpretations that may apply to the emerging UK multicultural universities. It considers the importance of memorization as a tool for learning, and reveals how motivation, communication and collaborative patterns could work differently in different cultures. The comparison between best known Western learning theory and Confucian principles is expected to increase academics’ awareness of international students’ background. The discussion helps to understand some of the students’ pragmatic reactions to the challenges prompted by their studies in foreign countries.

**KEYWORDS:** collaborative learning, learning styles, memorization, metacognition, motivation, multicultural learning, passiveness

## Introduction

The rapid internationalization of the universities in countries like the UK have made evident that programmes in Higher Education need to

adjust to support students' involvement in academic life. As Ryan and Carroll (2005) note, 'Home students also find the transition to higher education taxing, until they become accustomed to academic language and conventions, independent learning and class participation. ... However, international students must deal with all these things and more' (2005: 5). The challenge is evident to all participants in the educational system. However, it is not yet apparent how the learning experience of the increasing numbers of international students within British institutions differs from their previous one, and how this previous experience may be misinterpreted in their new environment. If motivations in society and its vision of welfare are 'context-dependent' attitudes, the pace and process of the learning as well as the experience may vary across cultures. The context in which individuals learn, work and live has an important influence on creating and modifying the individual's expectations and learning, management strategies and styles. Religion, ideology and social patterns, for example, Socratic, Confucian, Islamic, etc. have to be considered for a successful understanding of different cultural configurations and their evolution.

As will be discussed in this article, cultural factors, values and manners should be analysed in order to understand and enhance the behaviour of students and teachers during the learning process. The article intends to make a contribution regarding the interpretation of alternative approaches to learning that could be useful in dealing with international students in the UK. References to students from the Confucian Heritage Culture (CHC) and other cultures are made throughout to help with the examination. Most crucially, the article will infer the need for a change in teaching and assessment approaches that could help students to become 'high-quality learners' within a cross-cultural vision of learning.

## **Learning**

The theoretical discussion about learning styles normally emphasises four traits: critical thinking/memorization; internal/external motivation; active/passive involvement; and the role of the individual/group learner. A 'high-quality learner' is normally defined as an individual with self-motivation for attaining and acting on knowledge, and who is able to expand this knowledge via his analytical approach. However, this 'Socratic' conception of the learner should be contrasted with the interpretation offered by some of the best well-known learning and cross-cultural theories (Tweed and Lehman, 2002). The analysis of the learning process in different cultures highlights that both a learner's previous experience

and the context in which learning takes place significantly condition the development of their preferred styles as a long-term structured behaviour, and their chosen learning strategies as a tactical response. Is it possible, then, that according to the cultural framework used, memorization, external motivation, passiveness and collaborative learning cannot be easily discarded as an 'inferior' approach to learning? These four traits, and their impact on communication and learning styles used, especially by international students, are now explored.

## **Memorization and the holistic approach to learning**

In any process of memorization individuals need to separate and categorize information, creating association and relationships with previous concepts and ideas that allow the process of storage and later retrieval of information (Broadbent, 1966; Ausubel, 1968; Lindsay and Norman, 1972). The inclination to use memory as a favourite tool for learning may be related to a set of different factors comprising: previous learning and educational experience which hinders the development of analytical skills; the lack of confidence in the learner's own abilities, due to deficient knowledge or understanding, and aggravated by the student's anxiety to perform well; or, having a different learning routine, due to personal abilities or more crucially, due to different interpretations of the learning process and objectives, as dictated by different cultures.

Some students struggle to connect their curricula, case studies and other references with their previous learning and their expectations of future career development (McMillen et al., 1997; Elkin et al., 2005; Luxon and Robinson, 2006). This basic disassociation to the background of the learner may restrict their ability to find meaning and connectivity for the new knowledge, as expected by Ausubel, 1968 (similarly, 'cognitive dissonance' in Ryan and Hellmundt, 2005: 14). It is evident in the recent literature that international students tend to feel overwhelmed and anxious in a learning environment and teaching style that disregard and greatly deviate from their previous learning experience, and which may in some cases, contradict and threaten their existing cognitive framework. For example, students showing a 'serialist' approach rather than a 'holistic' one, or whose only experience is on a strict 'teacher-centred' rather than student-centred learning system, may become very confused by a lack of sequence in participative lectures, brainteaser discussions, self-directed learning, disseminated reading, and ambiguity of teacher's answers to students questions (Entwistle, 1988; Turner, 2006). These learners have problems discovering what is required from the tasks ahead, and what

the expectations from their teachers are as regards their study methodology, substituting 'understanding' for 'memorizing'.

Students may also use memory when they feel unable to employ the specialist language required by written academic assignments, or they may not understand the subject under study (Kirby et al., 1996). Difficulties in the command of the English language in the discipline and in the writing style of academic material imply that the weakest students may turn to copying and memorizing well-known passages of textbooks and lecturer's notes that express the required ideas in a flawless English style.

Given that 'students whose second language is English can take a third to two times longer to read as first language students' (McLean and Ransom, 2005: 55; Schmitt, 2005), memorization may not in all cases be directly equivalent to rote-learning. Biggs and Moore (1993) say that 'rehearsal is also used when the learner wants to make sure that learning is verbatim, or 100% accurate. It is applied to the actual words used, without reference to their meaning' (1993: 215). They also comment that:

students using the surface approach may well show metacognitive skills. For example, a student might deliberately rote-learn aspects of a solution that she cannot understand, confident that she can work the rest around that. Or he may know the teacher will be impressed if the Shakespeare paper is littered with copious quotations from the set play . . . ' (Biggs and Moore, 1993: 311)

Therefore, not all memorization can be identified as 'superficial' or lacking in understanding. Even the 'deep' approach to learning or the assimilation of new knowledge may imply the use of techniques for connecting, storing and retrieving 'relevant' data and concepts that are placed in the memory of the learner ('relevance' could be 'culturally defined'), according to Marton et al. (1996: 54).

The use of different learning styles and strategies may develop from the demands made on the student and the circumstances in which they are carrying out their cognitive activity. 'Work by Ramsden on the effect of different contexts of learning shows how students adapt their learning strategies to the perceived demands of lecturers and departments', says Entwistle (1988: 107), who proposes that it is possible to move rote and serialist learners towards a comprehensive and reflective view of any subject. The serialist approach is recognized as a problem only when it becomes a 'pathology of improvidence', that is, developing basic surface skills, whilst failing to relate the parts to the whole for a full understanding of the topic (Entwistle, 1988: 92). The consideration of cultural differences further suggests that contrary to the prevalent view of most traditional Western academics, the use of memory and the segmented and

'spiral' process of thinking and communicating used by some cultures may assist some students in attaining meaningful knowledge.

## Memory

Academics in different institutions in Western countries have noticed that some students, particularly those from East Asia (that is, China, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Thailand, Korea, Vietnam) and South Asia (that is, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka), have a clear tendency to use memorization as one of their main tools for learning (Tang and Biggs, 1996; Wing-On, 1996; Biggs and Watkins, 1996; Pratt et al., 1999; Ramburuth, 2000; Dooley, 2001; Kennedy, 2002; Tweed and Lehman, 2002; Townsend and Cairns, 2003; Bliss, 2005; Littrell, 2005; Nilsen, 2005; Cathcart et al., 2006; Turner, 2006). This tendency is common to business studies and also to mathematics education (Zhang, 1998). The importance of memorization is more pronounced within CHC because knowledge and truth are taken as a collective reality contained in books or intrinsically imbedded in senior figures whose role is to transmit knowledge (Wing On, 1996: 30; Pratt et al., 1999: 15/25; Tweed and Lehman, 2002: 6). If knowledge is seen as external to the learning process, and senior citizens and institutions represent the highest level of wisdom, it makes sense that apprentices and junior positions in different Asian countries are expected to learn directly and conscientiously from their seniors if they want to progress into higher levels of wisdom. Consequently, the ability to remember and to summon up vast amount of information is seen as highly valuable and desirable because reproducing and emulating ideas and patterns is required for achieving a deeper understanding.

Pratt (Pratt et al., 1999: 10/25 and 16/25) emphasizes that the rationale behind each stage in the process of CHC learning is to progress from memorization to understanding; next, to application and finally to critical thinking. As attempting to reach a deep understanding of the totality cannot be achieved without the initial step of memorization and repetition of ideas. A profound holistic learning cannot be reached without deciphering detail and appreciating each component of knowledge, step-by-step. This process has been described by Kennedy (2002: 432) as 'concrete-sequential cognitive style' (from Berry-Stock, 1995). Also Tweed and Lehman (2002), after using Biggs' Study Process Questionnaire (SPQ), conclude that this Confucian vision makes learning 'absorptive, respectful and effortful' (2002: 7, 9). 'It seems that "Chinese learning styles" are more subtle and complex than they appear to be in some (Western) misinterpretations of them' (Kennedy, 2002: 434). Having a 'different order of learning'

means that whereas the Western cultures concerned with the 'process of learning' focus on the examination of ideas as a base for developing skills, in East Asia the development of skills precedes the exploration of ideas (Biggs and Watkins, 1996: 55). The 'spiral logic' way of thinking and studying of the Confucian-based cultures (Gudykunst and Ting-Toomey, 1988: 68–70) may recapture a direct association to the 'serialist' approach described by Pask (referred to by Daniel, 1975: 88, 191), and to the process of 'memorisation with understanding' described by Marton et al. (1996: 54).

## Thinking and communicating

'Western writing is generally deductive, linear and logical'; 'critical writing involves questioning received knowledge . . . ' (Carroll, 2005a: 30; McLean and Ransom, 2005: 55–59). Entwistle (1988: 92) alleges that:

serialists work their way step-by-step through either the abstract topics or the 'real world' topics, bringing them together only when forced to do so to achieve overall understanding of the main topic. . . . The serialists apparently put much more emphasis on the separate topics and the logical sequences connecting them, forming an overall picture of what is being learned only rather late in the process . . .

The behaviour of East-Asian undergraduate and postgraduate students shows that the progression in the sequences of this learning process is more evident among postgraduate than among undergraduate students (Salili, 1996; Watkins, 1996a, 1996b; Ramburuth, 2000: 9).

The way that students read, write and communicate also has a direct connection with their style of thinking and learning (Entwistle, 1988: 264; Johnson and Yau So Ngor, 1996). Differences in writing and other differences in communication styles have been examined (Gudykunst and Ting-Toomey, 1988; Gudykunst, 2004). Chinese writing style has been described as 'poetic ambiguity' in which metaphors, affective prose, long sentences and spiral discourse intend to convey a message without disclosing it directly and openly at the beginning of an essay. Gudykunst (2004) explains how different degrees of indirect, descriptive and decorated language is used by Asian, Latin, African and Arab cultures in their conversation and written work. Biggs and Watkins (1996), Tweed and Lehman (2002), Bliss (2005), Littrell (2005), Turner (2006) and McLean and Ransom (2005: 57), citing Clyne (1980), also describe other styles as 'digressive' (employed by romance languages), 'parallel' (used by Middle Eastern languages) and 'variable of parallel' (Russian and German). Jin and Cortazzi (2006) assessed the different meanings and the importance of

metaphors in different cultures and found that students from China, Hong Kong, Japan, Lebanon and Turkey all use metaphors to describe their thinking and feelings while US students make very little use of them. This research also shows that metaphors may have very different meanings depending on the culture that uses them, confirming the assertion that the use of English wording does not necessarily comprise the same meaning for the writer or speaker that is reflected in the reader or listener's interpretation (Dunn and Wallace, 2004: 294; Carroll, 2005b).

## **Motivation and cross-cultural learning style**

How do students who aim at learning something about an outside 'reality' manage in an educational system which to a large extent is governed by an artificial internal situation made up of examinations and pass-rate requirements? (Marton, 1975: 13)

Cheating is a culturally determined concept, but copying the work of other students is a strategy used by both strong and weak students world-wide and is universally motivated by a wish to get the best mark in the shortest time. (McLean and Ransom, 2005: 59)

The numerous learning-related theories that explain the fear of failing become vital to understanding student's motivation for learning. According to the literature, for years Western-style universities have been trying to move their emphasis from exams and grades towards a self-motivated, deep, critical, experiential, life-long learning. In practice, comparisons among students and universities are mainly based on the publication of grades and quantitative data that has no evident way of comparing real progress in the students' achievement (Marslow, 1973: 161; Kennedy, 2002: 439; Turner, 2006). It seems clear that the importance of scores and exam results (external motivation) as a proof of the realization of learning is still of primary significance to Western and non-Western higher education institutions. The design of courses also has a crucial importance in what the students do and the learning approaches that they use and develop (Biggs, 1999; Watkins, 1996).

In order to cope with overwhelming curricula, the students probably have to abandon their ambitions to understand what they read about and instead direct efforts towards passing the examinations . . . (which reflect) the view that knowledge is a quantity, and that the higher the level of the educational system, the more pieces of knowledge should be taught per time unit. (Dahlgren, 1978, quoted by Entwistle, 1988: 81)

Students with high fear of failure scores tended to be better at rote learning than comprehension tests when under time pressure. While they work more



slowly, they also put more effort into the tasks and persist longer in trying to solve difficult or uncongenial problems. In academic work such effort and persistence seem to bring their reward: in spite of their poor self-image fear of failure students in the Lancaster study . . . had above average levels of achievement. (Entwistle, 1988: 197)

It seems evident that any student may adopt survival strategies as a reaction to the 'fear of failure', happy to be able to cope with the situation at hand and without being able to enhance their 'deep' knowledge on the subject, inducing little self-evaluation and knowledge. These strategies, rather than encouraging new ideas and deeper learning ('experiential confrontations' in Rogers, 1969), cause learning's 'delay, deflection or rejection' (Perry, 1970 in Entwistle, 1988: 72). The investigations carried out outside the main Western countries show additional pressures on the students. These cultures may possess a higher level of reliance on inner-groups and family commitments in which the students, and their families, base their entire personal, professional and social realization directly on exam scores and on gaining academic degrees in specific institutions and countries (especially in East Asia, the Middle East and Africa).

Western ways of categorizing motivation – extrinsic, intrinsic, and achievement – do not travel well, at least not to the Orient. . . . The Chinese learner may see things more pragmatically. . . . Neither is the CHC concept of achievement motivation identical to Western concepts . . . in Asia, standards of excellence and of what constitutes success may be determined both by the individual and by 'significant others, the family, the group, or the society as a whole'. (Yang, 1986: 114, quoted in Biggs and Watkins, 1996: 273–4)

In some cases, the 'network of mutual obligations' and 'face losing' affect more than one generation of the student's relatives. These relatives could be making considerable financial contributions to help the student to get through HE education, especially to go abroad. In many cases the student is still expected to reciprocate by sustaining the family financially once they attain a degree (Gudykunst and Ting-Toomey, 1988: 69; Biggs and Watkins, 1996; Kennedy, 2002: 432). Relatively high levels of family responsibility and 'fear of failure' may prompt students (both local and international) to adopt an approach that focuses on 'surface' (usually identified with rote-learning), 'achieving' (using resources to attain performance), and 'low-risk' (considered safe) strategies of learning for coping with their studies (Biggs, 1987; Entwistle, 1988; Biggs and Moore, 1993; Watkins, 1996a). What typifies the international learners, when living in a foreign country, is that due to the substantial and generalized differences extending to all spheres of their lives, the pressure to survive may overwhelm the internal need for deep learning (Pratt et al., 1999; Tweed and Lehman, 2002).

## **Passiveness and lack of participation versus active critical analysis, and consensus versus confrontation**

The interpretation of learners, particularly coming from East Asia, as 'passive', 'obedient' and 'non-critical', could be a misunderstanding of other factors, including cultural and communication difficulties. Lack of confidence and poor language skills are a primary limitation on the articulation of questions and answers in an open setting such as a classroom or a public discussion. These problems are exacerbated by (a) the existence of a different model of communication and (b) the lack of socialization with students from other cultures within and outside the typical class-related environment.

## **Different communication systems**

Western academic styles privilege questioning as proof of attention during lessons and as a means for obtaining knowledge and understanding. What is perceived as a lack of analysis and lack of participation in debates may reflect the Confucian belief that questions should be asked from 'what one knows', that is, an 'immersed reflection concerning the known' (Dunn and Wallace, 2004: 295; Turner, 2006: 6–7). Obviously, for most CHC students being critical before 'absorbing' the content of a topic could be a rather confusing and premature pursuit.

Traditional Confucians also recognize that being silent or using few words and inner communication to express oneself (using non-verbal communication) is a valuable demonstration of insight wisdom and an illustration of respect for others' time and knowledge (Gudykunst and Ting-Toomey, 1988: 113, 163; Gudykunst, 2004; McLean and Ransom, 2005; Ryan, 2005). Therefore, talking and saying everything that is in one's mind, being explicit about problems or situations, talking in a loud voice and asking unnecessary questions are in CHC deemed as bad-manners and a lack of respect. Conversely, Latin American and Arab cultures seem to appreciate longer, simultaneous and lively conversations, even among newly-met members of a community or group. The CHC culture, among others, uses unspoken agreements and conventions as a manifestation of respect, 'face', and deep social harmony. These involve avoiding the open expression of conflicting opinions, particularly to people who do not belong to the inner group of personal relationships (Hofstede, 1984; Gudykunst and Ting-Toomey, 1988; Pratt et al., 1999; Tweed and Lehman, 2002).

Relative passiveness could also be explained by a preference for step-by-step processes in which instructions are given in detail (either by

convention or by explanation, as in the 'serial' approach described earlier). 'Brain-storming' sessions, open debates, or 'student-led' activities are difficult and perceived as chaotic to an untrained 'serial learner' (Collins and Lim, 2004). When, in addition to having little input or limited referential frameworks, decisions are to be negotiated after extended debate, less vigorous members belonging to traditional high-context societies may be left out. Aggressive leaders and participants that personify the Western styles of bargaining may disregard their contributions (Hall, 1976: 79 quoted by Gudykunst and Ting-Toomey, 1988: 43; McMillen et al., 1997: 212; Cathcart et al., 2006: 18). International students may be more participative when 'safe environments' are provided for them. These settings should include the opportunity to interact without 'losing face' and where emphasis on the achievement of a learning experience is as important as the final result (Ryan and Hellmundt, 2005; Littlewood, 2006; Luxon and Robinson, 2006).

### **Creating an appropriate environment will help the learning experience**

As discussed previously, opting for a 'reproducing approach', that is, 'accommodation' or 'assimilation', may involve rote learning and extremes of plagiarism/copying and may produce alienation from the learning environment. In this case the learner imposes the new conditions on their behaviour, framework or values with a lack of awareness regarding existing cultural differences (Hofstede, 1984: 260; Entwistle, 1988: 197, 264). It is accepted within Western learning theory that enthusiastic rote-learners would be able to develop more complex structures of thinking, expanding into the higher analytical and innovative cognitive abilities described by Kolb as 'intelligent adaptation'. An '(intelligent) adaptation' or 'acculturation' appears as equivalent to the 'cultural transposition' explained by Hofstede (1984) and Kolb (1984: 21, 23). 'Acculturation' happens on the basis of an understanding of what is required in different environments and for different tasks. 'Acculturation' is referred to in this article as the integrative process of awareness towards one's own culture and others' cultures. Hence, it requires interaction between the learner's existing cognitive framework and his new environment.

Motivation for learning in a multicultural environment must involve tolerance and self-confidence concerning the use of alternative unfamiliar approaches by themselves and others. A student confronted with conflicting demands from subjects, staff and institutions in an alien culture will need to learn how to employ diverse abilities, knowledge, and behaviour and to identify and cope with conflicts in their original set of values and

interpretations (Hughes-Wiener, 1986; McMillen et al., 1997; Goodall in Warner and Joint, 2002; Kennedy, 2002). This interactive adjustment is clearly comprehended by the notion of 'metacognition', and could be articulated in the practical cost-effective approach of an 'achieving learner', as specified by Marton and Saljo (1976) and Biggs (1979, quoted by Reynolds, 1997: 119). The level of difficulty in understanding differences, developing alternative learning approaches and multicultural abilities may vary depending on the characteristics of the original culture, depending on the learner's personality, stage of intellectual development, and on their interpretation of the assignment at hand (Perry, 1970, quoted by Entwistle, 1988: 72).

This awareness allows students (and lecturers) to attentively operate and participate in the multicultural environment that typifies our new multicultural university classrooms (Tweed and Lehman, 2002, quoting Berry and Sam, 1997). Hofstede (1984: 260) explains that cultures showing low Power Distance (PDI), low Uncertainty Avoidance (UAI), high Individualism (IND) and Masculinity (MAS) usually face fewer difficulties in adapting to cultures located in the opposite dimensions than cultures which show high PDI, high UAI, low IND and low MAS. Subsequently, the process of acculturation is probably more difficult to accomplish for those students belonging to societies with little tolerance towards uncertainty and disagreement and where public image is of great value, as is characteristic in East Asia.

It seems obvious as a result of these factors that altering or complementing culturally established strategies and styles brought by the students may require a favourable cognitive environment, academic assistance, and time to remodel the student's vision of the learning experience so they can interact within the divergent environment using a new richer approach. The acculturation process demands a 'transitional period' (Turner, 2006), also referred to in the management of international human resources, that is, in training for expatriate business managers, as 'phases of adjustment' (Selmer et al., 1998).

The problem of acculturation also brings to mind frequent observations regarding excessive study loads, shortage of time for developing academic assignments, lack of sympathetic lecturers, shortages of local students within the classroom and in the residence halls, and other factors that constrain higher education students, which may increase exponentially in the case of international students. Research by Ansari and Jackson (1995), Entwistle and Hounsell (1975: 190–191), Entwistle (1988: 200), Robotham (1999), Tweed and Lehman (2002), Peiris and St. John-Ives (2004), Errey and Wickens (2006), Sliwa and Grandy (2006) and Higgins (2006) suggests that creating a suitable environment in the classroom facilitates a receptive guidance by understanding teachers and local students. Some students may not be able to go through this adjustment period without assistance

(Carroll, 2005a). Collins and Lim (2004) emphasize that the lack of socialization and interaction with native students and the added pressure of part-time jobs as specific obstacles faced by international students (Reynolds, 1997). Dealing with these issues can make it possible for many students to attain increasing levels of acculturation and deep learning.

## **Groups and learning behaviour**

Depending on the culture, the emphasis on collective goals creates diversity in how inner and outer groups are established and approached. The importance of membership in an inner group, for example, family, workplace, society, and the positioning of its members is regarded and defended in all cultures (inclusive of many Western cultures). The prominence, flexibility and role of the groups vary from culture to culture (Hofstede, 1984: 167; Gudykunst and Ting-Toomey, 1988: 58–59; Gudykunst, 2004: 65) and the tendency is accentuated when students move abroad (Biggs and Watkins, 1996), hence international students' preference for working and living within their own cultural groups (McLean and Ransom, 2005). Culture also creates disparity in the weight assigned to individuals within it. In the West, group work is normally a place of confrontation and search for solutions, where individual opinions may prevail by the action of leaders and the creation of competitive consensus. The role of the individual is core in and outside the group. This manifests in the distribution of roles and responsibilities between teacher and students, as well as between bosses and their employees, governments and citizens, etc. (Hofstede, 1984; Gudykunst and Ting-Toomey, 1998).

Collectivist or high-context societies may fail to differentiate between what is expected to be individual work, what should be the result of group activities, and the way that individuals are expected to arrive to agreements within the inner-group(s). In a collectivist culture, breaking into or out from 'inner groups' requires the development of new associations based on confidence between the members. Reciprocity and equality tend to be established as obligatory, long-term and matching within the inner group but not the outer group. Therefore, the process of grouping and re-grouping students has a tendency to be more difficult in collectivist than in individualistic cultures. Under the Confucian tradition, for example, students and teachers (as well as employees and employers) are part of the same social structure and are expected to work together in order to increase their common welfare. Both parties have different but complementary responsibilities to one another and both are expected to take care of one another's needs and progression. In CHC, guidance and assessment must be done by senior ranks, for example the teacher. They are expected to offer junior positions,

for example, the student, a detailed guide on how to improve and amend mistakes and support their permanent development. The teacher is a synthesis of a close cognitive, moral, and emotional association that 'assumes responsibility', 'holds the student's hand' and 'demonstrates heart' (Biggs, 1996: 56; Pratt et al., 2002: 8, 10, 20/25).

If Asian students are predominantly oriented towards 'inner-group' collaborative work, it is easier to understand why in some Asian countries collaborative learning may comprehend participation in the academic work inside as well as outside the classroom. Operating in a system of 'spontaneous collaboration' (Biggs, 1996: 60–61; Tang, 1996) it is expected that a 'superior' figure, or the most capable member(s) of a group, will take direct responsibility for the learning and representation of the weaker members in lectures and seminars, for example, speaking on behalf of others; study, for example, translating and explaining concepts; in helping with the solution and 'collective writing' of assignments and exams (Tang, 1996); or providing materials to be used by others, for example, copying essays or dissertations. This 'communal ownership of knowledge' is adopted by Chinese academic practices (Carroll, 2005a; Gu and Brooks, 2006). This 'collaborative' or 'group-dependent' learning approach has been observed in Confucian cultures, but also in mixed US citizens from African, Asian and Latin American backgrounds, involving active support and cooperative work in the achievement of tasks by the group, rather than by the isolated individual (Montgomery and Groat, 2006: 2 and 6/11, allude to both the research by Banks, 1988; and by Grasha, 1996).

The collaborative and paternalistic practices expected among group members may be misinterpreted and rejected in some Western cultures: (a) some students dislike challenging each other directly; (b) some students impose their viewpoints and acknowledge this imposition as a personal achievement, while students from other cultures expect that all decisions should be taken by unanimous consensus rather than majority vote; (c) stronger (usually local) students may feel pressurized and resentful for having to cover for and to guide the weakest (usually international) members; and (d) Westerners favour individual benefit based on contribution rather than group-based reward. The predetermined requirement for harmonious consensus and 'face saving' within and outside the inner group, together with the limited knowledge attributed to some fellow students, may cause anxiety among team members, particularly when final examination marks are at risk.

## Conclusions and recommendations

The prescription derived from learning theories appears insufficient for helping the foreign students who are flooding into universities in the

USA, Europe, Australia and other countries. There is not a 'right', single and clear way to learn that may apply to everybody and all circumstances. The theories examined in this article seem to support the view that international students learning in a foreign language and under Western standards (particularly abroad) may develop highly sophisticated metacognition and accommodative techniques to survive and succeed within and outside of their university classrooms. However, the teaching and assessment methods within Western universities, aggravated by short periods of cultural transition, seem to have hindered the international students' use of advanced learning strategies and their overall process of acculturation.

The theory of cultural diversity has demonstrated that the cultural framework has a direct influence in the manner in which learning activities are executed and beyond the academic environment. This vision promotes a model of learning styles in isolation from contextual factors, which in turn imposes an interpretation on students' attitudes and achievements.

Employing cross-cultural communication and management theories to complement the models of learning styles brings in new meanings to the observed practices of international students in Western universities:

- (1) Rehearsing and repeating is a necessary basic step in the process of thinking, particularly in the Confucian tradition. Understanding is just a step in the process of knowledge, showing the way for application, modification of the reality and higher knowledge. For these cultures, learning is conceived as a continuous effortful progression in which the learner has the obligation to command the basic levels of knowledge before being analytical or critical.
- (2) Western-educated teachers, having the responsibility of transmitting and guiding the activities of the students, may not be aware of the level of influence and affective responsibility (in the cognitive and moral grounds) that is assigned to them within non-English speaking cultures.
- (3) The mental and social patterns used in perception, gathering, storing, retrieving, using, and communicating information within non-Western cultures may give more emphasis to non-verbal 'contextual' expressions. Some of these cultures are traditionally reliant on visual contextual means, involving graphic, sensorial and rhetorical characters and associations.
- (4) In cultures where harmony, cooperation, 'appreciative and synthetic thinking', and public self-image are a priority, the value of 'critical thinking' and cross-examination may be less relevant tools for learning.
- (5) International students may have to 'accommodate' or 'assimilate' to cope with their academic requirements in very short periods of time. However, this assimilation may not help them to develop self-awareness,

or to produce a multicultural learning experience that could be useful for their future.

- (6) International students, as in the case of local students, may be able to develop and use different strategies within their learning process.
- (7) Learning in groups and using experiential approaches may have completely different meanings and expectations in various cultures.

It seems apparent that different cultures may face difficulties in following the established phases of an 'active learning cycle' or taking part in 'experiential learning events' that do not coincide with their vision of the world and their economic and professional realities. The attention to cultural diversity and its influence on learning styles is a step forward from the traditional proposals that insist in correcting others' cultures and behaviour, either by imposing or transposing on them 'generally accepted' Western standards. The referred literature on cultural diversity suggests that there is no intrinsic 'superiority' of any learning or management model or culture. Each style offers advantages and disadvantages to its users depending on the circumstances they encounter.

Understanding the dynamic of cross-cultural relationships and helping international learners to design their own stages of cultural integration or acculturation may require the education of teachers, students and institutions on a variety of cultural and internationalization issues. The discussion may require the consideration of theoretical and practical implications of the internationalization of HE and developing cross-cultural awareness. Preparation should also recognize particular cultural commonalities, the empathy that could emerge through associations between specific groups, and the possibility of creating a culturally adjusted behaviour that matches the standards of the academic institutions in the Western system.

Within specific programmes, the model of multicultural education may require the reconsideration of curriculum content, teaching styles and assessment policies. Teaching and learning practices may also need to focus on what each culture contributes to the learning process and to the knowledge within specific subjects. The delivery of learning activities could consequently encourage students' appreciation and employment of multi-cultural awareness within groups at the university and in preparation for their future careers.

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