

The adaptation of Chinese international students to online flexible learning: two case studies

Rainbow Tsai-Hung Chen^{a*}, Sue Bennett^a and Karl Maton^b

^aFaculty of Education, University of Wollongong, Australia; ^bDepartment of Sociology and Social Policy, University of Sydney, Australia

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The cross-cultural experiences of Chinese international students in Western countries have been subject to intensive research, but only a very small number of studies have considered how these students adapt to learning in an online flexible delivery environment. Guided by Berry's acculturation framework (1980, 2005), the investigation discussed in this article aimed to address this gap by exploring the adaptation processes of Chinese international students to online learning at an Australian university. This article reports on the challenges perceived by two students from Mainland China, their coping strategies, changes in their opinions of online learning, and their respective patterns of adaptation. By presenting two indicative case studies drawn from a wider study, this article aims to demonstrate the use of Berry's concepts as a means to frame such studies.

Keywords: acculturation; adaptation; Chinese; e-learning; higher education; online

Introduction

The past five years have seen a significant influx of Chinese international students into Australian universities. Currently, about one-quarter of international students enrolling in Australian higher education are from Mainland China (Australian Education International, 2007). While contributing substantially to university revenue and the experience of multiculturalism on university campuses, these students bring with them expectations and educational needs different to those of local Australian students. Chinese students have long been found to demonstrate an inclination towards conformity, passivity, and dependence on authority figures (Ballard & Clanchy, 1984, 1991; Turner, 2006). These dispositions are often perceived as the antithesis of the characteristics viewed as desirable in Western education, such as a capacity for independent learning and critical thinking (Ballantyne, Bain, & Packer, 1999; Ramsden, 2003). It is thus foreseeable that Chinese learners may find adapting to a Western learning environment difficult – they may experience an educational culture clash.

In addition to the challenges resulting from the different emphases in these two learning cultures, the proliferation of online instruction in Western countries is placing many Chinese international students in an even more *foreign* learning context: studying online while being on campus in Australia. A 2002 survey by Bell, Bush, Nicholson, O'Brien, and Tran indicated that more than half of Australian universities offered fully online courses, and that among all university subjects, 40% were Web-supplemented, 12.5% were Web-dependent, and 1.4% were fully online. While more recent data is not readily

*Corresponding author. Email: thc685@uow.edu.au

available, these percentages would likely have risen given further recent movements towards online learning.

There is a small but growing literature on Chinese international students' online learning experiences in Western countries (e.g., Ku & Lohr, 2003; Tu, 2001; Wang & Reeves, 2007), but thus far investigations have been confined to students' perceptions and attitudes without considering how these may change during their course of study. The research discussed in this article attempts to help address this gap in the literature by examining the processes of Chinese students' adaptations to online learning at an Australian university. The focus is on flexible learning, the type of learning delivered mainly through online technologies with no or very few optional face-to-face meetings. The main questions guiding this research are: how do these students perceive this mode of learning and how do they cope with it? This article explores these questions by, firstly briefly critiquing some of the stereotyped notions of the Chinese learner and critically reviewing a selection of recent research into Chinese international students' online learning experiences at Western universities. Secondly, we introduce the acculturation theory used to guide the research and explain the rationale for its use. Finally, we examine how the theoretical concepts are reflected in case studies of two Chinese international students.

Our changing understanding of Chinese learners

In commencing discussion of the widely held conceptions of Chinese learners, it is worthwhile noting that while these conceptions shed some light on the background of these learners, they are not the focus of this study. The widespread image of the Chinese learner to Australian academics in the 1980s was one of a rote learner with high achievement motives, but one who rarely questioned authority figures or written texts and showed little interest in participating in class discussions (Ballard & Clanchy, 1984; Bradley & Bradley, 1984; Samuelowicz, 1987). This stereotype has subsequently been challenged. Watkins and Biggs' seminal book *The Chinese Learner: Cultural, Psychological, and Contextual Influences* (1996) expounds the so-called 'paradox of the Chinese learner' (Biggs & Watkins, 1996, p. 269) by investigating the influence of cultural factors on approaches to learning in Chinese societies. The 'paradox' refers to the apparent contradiction between Chinese students' surface approach to learning and their internationally acknowledged high academic achievement (Biggs, 1996; Watkins & Biggs, 2001). Specifically, Watkins and Biggs asked, how is it possible that Chinese students can outperform Western learners if they tend to learn through memorisation? Numerous empirical studies have examined this 'paradox,' and Chinese learners are now portrayed as learners who view memorisation as an integral part of understanding (Dahlin & Watkins, 2000; Marton, Dall'Alba, & Tse, 1996; Sachs & Chan, 2003), are oriented towards deep learning (Biggs, 1996; Kember, 2000; Watkins, 1996), and prefer tutorials to studying alone (Volet & Renshaw, 1996).

Care should be taken in interpreting the findings of the aforementioned paradox. Firstly, the memorisation–understanding paradox indeed challenges the labelling of Chinese students as rote learners. However, the way Chinese learners seek to understand sets them apart from their Western counterparts; that is, it would seem likely that Chinese learners are acculturated to *listen* to understand, while Western learners are encouraged to *question* to understand. The students in Cortazzi and Jin's study (2001) defended themselves against accusations that they were passive learners by asserting that their minds were active when listening to the teacher. Such an argument, however, can be difficult to reconcile with the

Western conception of an active learner. Gow, Balla, Kember, and Hau (1996), for example, have thrown into doubt the effectiveness of this 'relatively passive form of learning' in developing qualities like 'critical thinking, novel problem-solving, and independent learning' (p. 122).

Secondly, Chinese learners' preference for a deep approach to learning does not guarantee their easy adoption of this approach. Didactic teaching and passive learning are still the norm in the Chinese education system (Cortazzi & Jin, 2001; Kember, 2001). To manage the large size of classes, tightly structured courses and assignments with prescribed correct answers are common practices (Kember, 2000). These practices also stem from the standardised external examinations that occur in these settings. Therefore, despite their self-reported orientation to deep learning, in reality Chinese learners are constantly exposed to a teaching environment that is associated with a surface approach to learning.

Lastly, Chinese learners' predilection for tutorials (Volet & Renshaw, 1996) and their spontaneous collaboration outside the tertiary classroom (Tang, 1996) should not be confused with the Western notion of collaborative learning. The former may tend to relate to seeking one another's cue perceptions when the cues to solving or conducting a task provided in class are insufficiently perceived by the individual learners (Biggs, 1996). In contrast, the latter is intended for the collaborative construction of knowledge.

The problem with starting from these conceptions, both as the basis for exploration and for the purposes of critique, is that they each attempt to understand Chinese learners through a single prism: either through Western ideas of education or through Chinese conceptions. Instead, the focus of this study is on what happens when these educational beliefs and practices come into contact with one another, specifically when Chinese student sojourners come to Western universities. This enables us to understand each and then understand how they relate, rather than trying to understand both from the viewpoint of one or the other.

It is worth briefly mentioning an argument to which we shall return: namely, that globalisation is creating hybridised educational cultures. It is claimed that increasingly globalised flows of ideas and people are leading to a merging of cultures to become *glocal* as cultural products are recontextualised in local settings (e.g., Jameson & Miyoshi, 1998; Tomlinson, 1999). These arguments arise in educational debates as claims that globalisation is eroding national and cultural differences in educational practices (e.g., Burbules & Torres, 2000; Stromquist & Monkman, 2000). These arguments highlight the significance of our focus: the coming together of different traditions of practices and beliefs. However, whilst highlighting issues of significance, such claims by themselves would negate the necessity of exploring the difficulties faced by Chinese students when studying in the West; that is, they imply that because of hybridisation there should be no problem of acculturation to investigate. Rather than assuming hybridised identities and practices, in this research we aimed to critically explore what happens when Chinese students study online in an Australian university.

Chinese students studying online in the West

Research into the attitudes of Chinese students towards online learning has concluded that many of their attitudes do not differ greatly from those of their Western counterparts. Most students appreciate the temporal and spatial flexibility afforded by online learning but see the lack of interaction and immediate feedback as impediments to effective learning. Nonetheless, specific benefits and challenges of online learning for Chinese learners, primarily

resulting from the largely text-based and asynchronous nature of the communication medium, have also been identified. These include higher levels of participation (Thompson & Ku, 2005; Yildiz & Bichelmeyer, 2003) and more confidence and greater assertiveness of Chinese students in stating their views than in a face-to-face environment (Ku & Lohr, 2003). In terms of challenges, Tu's ethnographic study (2001) at an American university best sums up the obstacles that studies have suggested may contribute to Chinese students' low social presence online. These include Chinese students' perception of computer-mediated communication as a formal, written discussion form, therefore requiring repeated editing to produce acceptable contributions; 'cold and unfriendly' postings focusing exclusively on the task without an interpersonal dimension (Tu, 2001, p. 55); reservations about disagreeing with people they are not familiar with; feelings of being ignored by other students during synchronous discussions; and anxieties about sharing personal opinions online. Some of these barriers, Tu contended, may be related to the Chinese face-saving culture, which stresses the importance of maintaining a positive image for oneself and others.

Smith, Coldwell, Smith, and Murphy (2005) compared Chinese and Australian students' attitudes and learning behaviours when undertaking online problem-solving discussions at an Australian university. The questionnaire and computer conferencing data from this study shows that the two student groups demonstrated similarities in their willingness to self-manage learning, but that the Australian students exhibited a significantly higher level of comfort with online learning than the Chinese students. The Chinese cohort was also found to be less willing to utilise the Internet to search for learning materials or to communicate with others, and they contributed fewer messages online of an intellectual nature. The researchers suggest that these phenomena stemmed from a lack of instructor guidance, language barriers and, consistent with Tu's supposition (2001), Chinese students' need to develop and maintain face.

Limitations of existing research in this area are, firstly, that it has tended to examine the learning experiences of students who were drawn from the same class and, secondly, that in most cases student participation in online discussions was compulsory. Both these particular conditions may help shape participants' perceptions of their experiences. For example, students' opinions of the learning mode may be affected by the activities implemented in their particular subject and it is highly likely that compulsory participation encourages greater involvement. Most importantly, as stated above, these studies have not taken account of potential changes in students' attitudes or learning behaviours, and therefore risk treating cultural influences as static and students as fixed entities. To direct attention towards these issues, this study explored Chinese students' adaptation experiences by drawing on Berry's acculturation framework (1980, 2005).

Acculturation theory

Currently the most frequently used definition of acculturation is that of the anthropologists Redfield, Linton, and Herskovits (1936); that is, acculturation refers to 'those phenomena which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact, with subsequent changes in the original cultural patterns of either or both groups' (p. 149). While this definition addresses acculturation at the group level, acculturation at the individual level has received considerable attention, which has come to be known as 'psychological acculturation' (Graves, 1967, p. 337). This refers to the changes in individual members of an acculturating group, and it is this facet of the acculturation phenomenon that forms the focus of the present investigation.

Framework for understanding acculturation

There is an extensive, cross-disciplinary literature drawing on acculturation theories. One of the most influential contributions to this literature is Berry's acculturation framework (1980, 2005), which he developed from anthropological research he began in the late 1960s. As illustrated in Figure 1, Berry's framework conceptualises acculturation at the group and individual levels. From this perspective, to understand acculturation at the cultural/group level (shown on the left of the figure), one must investigate key features of the 'heritage' culture (culture A) and the 'host' culture (culture B), the nature of their contact relationships, as well as the changes as a consequence of the contact to both cultures. The dynamic interplay among all these components is then held to affect acculturation at the psychological/individual level (shown on the right of the figure). Early acculturation outcomes are described as 'behavioural shifts' and 'acculturative stress.' The former refers to the behavioural adjustments individuals make in order to cope with the new environment, which are, according to Berry, usually achieved without too much difficulty. Acculturative stress, however, results from the psychological conflicts between the desires to maintain one's original culture and to participate in the host culture. The strategies individuals seek to deal with acculturative stress eventually lead to two types of longer-term outcomes: psychological and socio-cultural adaptations. Psychological adaptation refers to 'feelings of well-being or satisfaction during cross-cultural transitions,' whereas socio-cultural adaptation refers to 'the ability to "fit in" or "execute effective interactions in a new cultural milieu"' (Ward, 2001, p. 414).

It should be noted that while the heritage and host cultures in this framework encompass *culture* at all levels, as the present study mainly concerns students' adaptation to their learning environments, the level of *culture* this study focuses on is educational culture. Specifically, we investigated what happens (*contact*) when students from the Chinese educational culture (culture A) study online in an Australian educational context (culture B). Given claims that globalising educational markets are creating hybridised practices, beliefs,

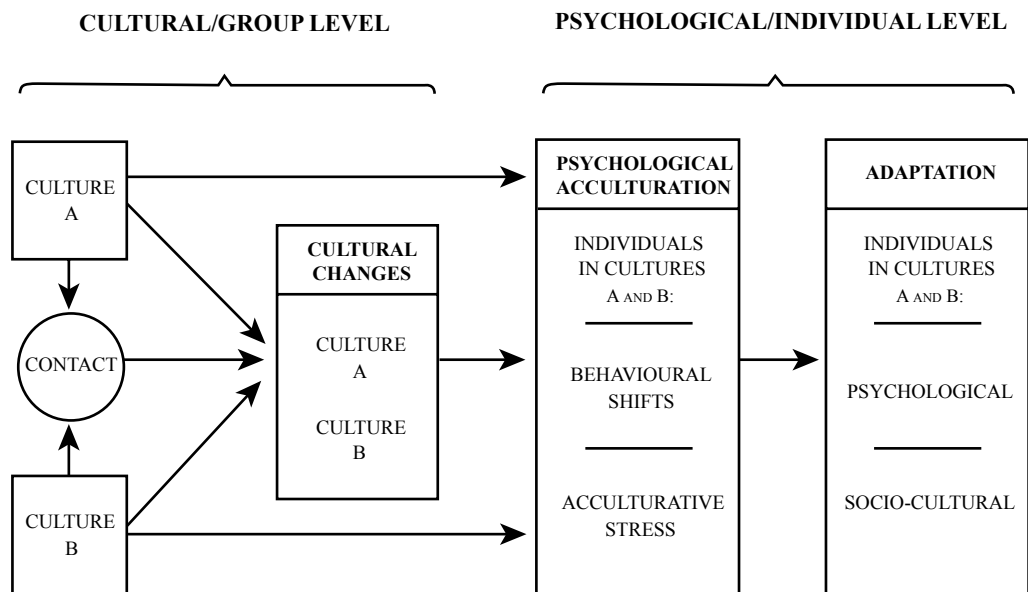


Figure 1. A general framework for understanding acculturation (Berry, 2005, p. 703).

and identities, it is important to note that by identifying heritage and host cultures we are not thereby suggesting that these cultures are hermetically sealed and internally homogeneous. Making the distinction does not necessarily entail any claims about relations within or between cultures. Neither does it lock one into a binary logic of polar opposites. Rather, one can understand Berry's work as making an *analytical* distinction between these two cultures as the first step towards enabling *empirical* research into their complexities and interactions. Whether cultures are hybridised is an empirical question. Such a step enables claims over hybridity to be explored in substantive studies rather than simply asserted; for example, if culture A and culture B are empirically hybridised such that one cannot legitimately talk of two cultures, this becomes apparent in research, but making the distinction for the purposes of analysis enables the research in the first place.

Framework of acculturation strategies

Berry challenged the unidimensional perspective, which views acculturation as a linear process with assimilation being the ultimate outcome. His framework of acculturation strategies proposed underlying dimensions based on two central issues facing acculturating groups and individuals: cultural maintenance (the extent to which one wishes to maintain one's cultural identity and behaviours) and inter-group contact (the extent to which one wishes to be involved in the larger society). The orientations towards these two issues are held to determine one's resulting acculturation attitudes and strategies (see Figure 2). When one wishes to fully participate in the larger society while willing to relinquish one's cultural identity, *assimilation* occurs. In contrast, *separation* results from one's desire to retain one's cultural identity while showing limited interest in engendering relationships with other cultural groups. The *marginalisation* strategy results from not wanting to have connections with either one's heritage culture or the host society. Finally, *integration* is the outcome of valuing both one's heritage cultural identity and relationships with other groups. Though each of these strategies is, in Berry's framework, mirrored by acculturation strategies of the larger host society (see right of Figure 2), our focus here is on individual acculturation.

It should be emphasised that Berry (2003) proclaimed that these strategies represent a *space* or position along the continua of the two axes, rather than four distinct *types* or *categories* of strategy. We now look at how this framework helps to conceptualise Chinese international students' online learning experience in Australia.

Research design

This article reports on case studies of two Chinese international students in their adaptation to online learning in Australia. These case studies have been selected from a larger research project (Chen, Bennett, & Maton, 2007) because they represent a striking contrast to one another in terms of their learning approaches. The cases illustrate the repertoire of perceptions, challenges, learning behaviours, and coping strategies that emerge from the adaptation processes exhibited by participants in the larger study.

The mainly qualitative data collected for the project was gathered over a period of one year through focus groups, semi-structured interviews, a study process questionnaire (Biggs, 1987), and document review. Based on the theoretical framework from Figure 1, data about the Chinese educational culture (culture A) was gathered through focus groups with Chinese learners from faculties with a high percentage of Chinese students. Australian educational culture (culture B) was ascertained through interviews with teachers of online subjects and teachers of international students. Unlike past studies (e.g., Ku & Lohr, 2003;

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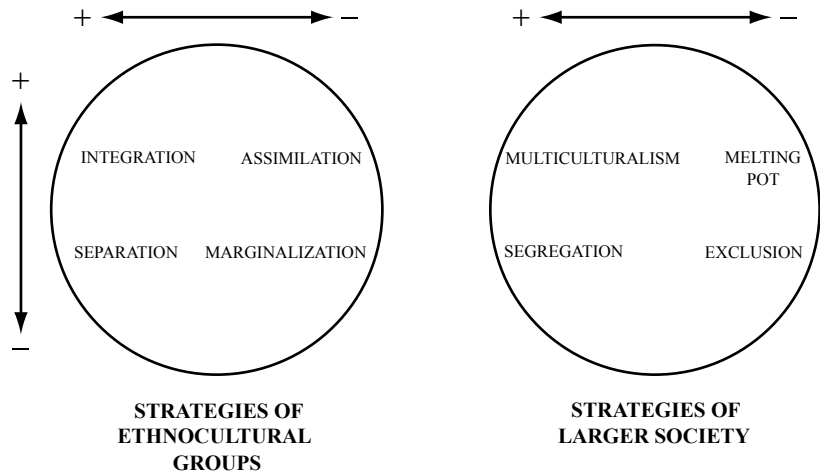


Figure 2. Acculturation strategies in ethno-cultural groups and the larger society (Berry, 2005, p. 705).

Smith et al., 2005; Wang & Reeves, 2007), students chosen for the case studies were taking different subjects online or had previous experience studying online at the university. The study was guided by the following research questions:

- How do Chinese international students perceive their online learning environments?
- How do the students adapt to these environments?
- How do the students' perceptions and the strategies they use to cope with these environments change over time?

Participants and setting

Both participants, Vivian and Jennifer (pseudonyms), were English teachers at secondary schools in Mainland China. Typically, becoming an English teacher in China requires a bachelor's degree in English and the passing of a standardised national English language test for English majors. Therefore, both students came to Australia equipped with more advanced language skills than many other Chinese learners. Vivian, aged 25, had been in Australia for one year prior to her participation in this study. Jennifer, aged 24, had been in Australia for seven months. Both were master's students in the Faculty of Education, studying in different specialisations. Despite being on-campus students, both were enrolled in subjects that were delivered flexibly online; that is, subjects which had either no face-to-face meetings or a few, optional face-to-face classes. This study focused on the students' experiences of this form of flexible learning in which all or the majority of learning was facilitated using online technologies. Neither had experience with online learning prior to their participation in this research and both had completed one semester of face-to-face learning. Vivian was enrolled in three online subjects and Jennifer in one. All four of these subjects used a learning management system to deliver subject information, class activities, and assignments.

Students in these subjects were encouraged to discuss issues and communicate with the instructors and their fellow students using the discussion forums provided. Participation was generally voluntary except for one of Vivian's subjects and one activity in Jennifer's subject. Each subject also offered a small number of face-to-face sessions during the semester.

Learning environment

To contextualise these two case studies, findings from the interviews with teachers of online subjects in the Faculty of Education from the larger project (Chen et al., 2007) were analysed. The teachers described their teaching approaches as generally constructivist and student-centred. They advocated empowering students by encouraging them to make decisions for their own learning and did not regard simply transmitting knowledge to students as a useful way to help them learn. And they facilitated students' knowledge construction by designing assessment tasks that required students to connect what they learned in class to their own real-life work practices. While emphasising that engaging in the tasks was significant for learning, the majority of the teachers acknowledged students' different learning preferences, so did not make online participation compulsory.

Data collection procedures and analysis methods

The participants were interviewed throughout the course of one semester (Vivian six times and Jennifer five), with each interview lasting approximately one and a half hours. They were asked to describe their class learning activities, the perceived benefits and challenges of these activities, ways in which they approached the tasks involved, and their evaluation of the learning outcome. The first author conducted the interviews in Chinese and translated them into English. The use of the participants' native language allowed them to express their views more fully than if the interviews had been conducted in English. Data was also collected from informal discussions and email correspondence with the participants.

All interviews were digitally recorded and analysed using NVivo 7 (QSR International Pty Ltd, 2007). The analysis started with a provisional list of codes derived from the research questions and from the theoretical underpinnings of the study. The data was then read closely to generate new codes with an inductive technique to account for emerging issues. The coding categories were continuously modified until overarching themes emerged.

Results

The results of the two case studies reflected some of the major components of Berry's framework (2005) for understanding acculturation.

Conceptions of knowledge and learning (culture A)

While both participants viewed knowledge as something to be obtained, they differed slightly in their approaches to gaining knowledge. For Vivian, it was only through thorough understanding of what was to be learned that she felt she could claim ownership of the knowledge:

In China, the teacher taught me something in class, and I learned it. I used the knowledge I had obtained to take the test they gave me afterwards. Now, the teacher has given me things, but I

don't feel these things have become mine. I still feel it's the teacher's knowledge because I don't understand it completely. (Vivian, interview 4)

She also said that the best way to learn was to listen to the lecture, think actively about it, and ask the teacher questions afterwards (Vivian, interview 1). On the other hand, Jennifer highlighted two elements in her learning process. One was the teacher screening knowledge for students:

There's so much knowledge, some good, some bad ... you can't tell the good from the bad knowledge ... The teacher has more knowledge, and they have the responsibility to deliver good knowledge to us, and we obtain it this way. (Jennifer, interview 4)

The other element comprised students actively interacting with the teacher:

You can agree or disagree with what the teacher says ... You can be very active because if you don't understand anything, you can ask right away ... I like this kind of interaction very much. The teacher answer questions, and during this process, they disseminate knowledge. So I absorb the knowledge actively. (Jennifer, interview 5)

In contrast to their conceptions of learning, both students stated that what they learned online was limited to the knowledge contained in the reading materials. Jennifer also described the knowledge disseminated by the teacher in face-to-face classes as 'subjective' knowledge because it included the teacher's perspectives and beliefs (Jennifer, interview 5), and the knowledge she acquired by reading on her own as 'objective' knowledge. She added it was the former type of knowledge that she was seeking.

Perceived challenges of learning online (contact)

Despite being in different online learning classes, the two students perceived similar challenges: a reduced amount of input from the teacher, an absence of direct interactions with the teacher and with fellow students, and a lack of enforcement of learning by the teacher. Each of these factors is elaborated below.

Reduced input from the teacher

The reduced quantity of input from the teacher was felt by both students to represent the greatest challenge of learning online. Vivian had anticipated this would happen before she started the classes, but Jennifer did not realise the decline in teacher input would become a problem for her until the second half of the semester. Vivian attributed her positive learning outcomes in the previous semester to the teachers' charismatic lectures and their input and feedback in class, and expressed her frustration when she felt these were lacking in online learning:

I feel that teachers do not teach in online classes. They raise a lot of questions for us to discuss. What do they teach us? They teach us nothing. They ask us to think, but what if I can't think of anything? I can sit there thinking all day, not sleeping at all, but I still can't think of anything. So I don't think they are teaching me. (Vivian, interview 3)

Vivian saw the discussions on the forum as unstructured and unfocused. She said everyone talked about their own situations and their opinions, and that without the teacher's comments, she didn't know 'whom to listen to.'

In contrast, Jennifer held a positive attitude in the first half of the semester. She thought the online class was a good opportunity for her to learn to study on her own, and was confident that she was capable of learning the subject through channels other than face-to-face classes. However, when reflecting on her learning experience at the end of the semester, her position had shifted dramatically. She now saw the process of reading on her own, one devoid of the exchanging of ideas with the teacher, as ‘passive’ learning: ‘To put it negatively, it’s like cramming’ (Jennifer, interview 5).

Absence of teacher–student relationship

Both students noted that a good relationship with the teacher has a positive impact on their learning. They enjoyed chatting with teachers or asking them questions during class breaks or after class in a face-to-face context, activities that gave them a sense of developing relationships with their teachers. Neither student felt comfortable discussing academic issues in depth with teachers or making any request for their learning before having established such a personal relationship. Vivian had particular difficulties with one online subject, as she wanted to consult the teacher about aspects of that subject, but kept delaying it because the teacher was new to her. She said she couldn’t feel through the ‘emotionless’ online medium ‘what he is like, or whether he likes students to ask him questions or not’:

You can’t feel anything, their feelings, personalities, or the emotional relationship between you and the teacher. It’s all writing, emotionless writing. (Vivian, interview 4)

And Jennifer refrained from pursuing issues that interested her, which she normally did in face-to-face classes, because she also felt online technologies did not help her to ‘know’ the teacher:

Online, even if the teacher is very friendly, you don’t know them. This is the huge gap online that you can’t cross. (Jennifer, interview 5)

Absence of a learning community

Both students said that they did not feel a learning community was formed in their classes. Vivian, however, did not expect to interact with her classmates due to her feelings of inferiority to them. These feelings of inferiority stemmed mainly from her perceived lack of sufficient prior knowledge and work experience in the field. Therefore, she was reluctant to post messages for fear that she might reveal her ignorance about the issues:

I’m worried that people might think my opinions are ... childish because I feel I have less background knowledge than they do. About the same issue, I can probably only see the surface, while they are all thinking beyond the surface. (Vivian, interview 6)

This lack of a learning community had a greater impact on Jennifer, who insisted that not having a learning community was one of the greatest losses for online learners. According to her, a learning community benefited her intellectually and socially, and these two aspects were inseparable. She argued that in a face-to-face context a learning community would naturally develop because students interacted in class and during the breaks, but online learning focused entirely on learning the content, missing this social dimension. She believed that if all her subjects were taught online she would feel as if learning ‘in a vacuum’:

When I learn face-to-face, my learning is situated in a larger 'context,' larger culture, larger life, which is definitely more beneficial. All aspects of it mutually interact with, and benefit, one another. But if I study all my subjects online, it's still, insubstantial ... It doesn't bother me too much to do nothing but learn the content in this subject, but I'm thinking that if I had to learn in a vacuum like those who study all their subjects online, I don't think I'd like it. (Jennifer, interview 4)

That taking only one online subject did not bother her too much was, she explained, because her other face-to-face subjects could 'compensate for' this social deficiency (Jennifer, interview 4).

Jennifer also suggested the online medium was incapable of allowing this building of a learning community (as well as the building of a relationship with the teacher). She described online communication as 'superficial': 'You can't go deeper. There's no common ground for you to build your relationship on' (Jennifer, interview 5). Despite her sociable and outgoing personality, initiating conversations with her classmates online was, she said, 'weird' (Jennifer, interview 4). She also pointed out that the nature of self-paced learning was another obstacle to developing a sense of shared purpose and community: 'Everyone's schedule is different. Maybe I've started working on a certain assignment, but they haven't, so we can't discuss it' (Jennifer, interview 3).

No enforcement of learning

Irrespective of the marks they achieved, neither Vivian nor Jennifer considered their learning outcomes to be satisfactory. Jennifer blamed this on the lack of effectiveness of online learning, in particular, the ways she felt it failed to offer her an incentive to learn (Jennifer, interview 5). When asked what she thought could be done to improve her learning outcomes, she said the teacher could have taken a more active role to enforce learning, such as organising more required interactive activities and integrating assessment into online participation. However, having had experience with a subject that assessed student participation, Vivian had negative feelings about it, considering participation a burden rather than a learning opportunity. She admitted that she did not post messages because she genuinely had something to say, but rather because she simply wanted to get higher marks.

Online learning behaviours (behavioural shifts and acculturative stress)

Initially, both students said they would read every message online, but while Jennifer felt enthusiastic about the prospect of interacting with her classmates, Vivian was sceptical about the value of online discussions. The first time Jennifer logged on to the class, she invited her classmates to a weekly group chat, and she said she planned to log on twice a week to read and respond to messages. However, the plan for a weekly chat fell through and as the semester progressed Jennifer realised she was too busy to read messages or participate in discussions. For example, one assignment task required students to post their work on the forum and provide feedback for two of their classmates' work. Before posting her own work, Jennifer did not read her classmates' work that had been already posted online because she thought it was not necessarily exemplary work. To write the two comments, she quickly looked through the titles of the postings and selected two written by Australian classmates to respond to. She said she presumed there would be nothing in Asian students' postings that she could learn from (Jennifer, interview 3). In contrast, Vivian felt she had to read all the messages in case she missed anything important, but the great number of postings imposed a heavy reading load on her:

I'm going mad. This is all I can say to describe my feelings. It's chaos. Look at all the stuff people posted online! I'm going mad. It's too horrible ... Every morning when I wake up, I go online to read new messages, and there goes half of my day. I'm on the verge of breaking down. (Vivian, interview 3)

Coping strategies (behavioural shifts)

When the two students encountered a question or a problem that did not hinder them from completing their assignments, they would simply ignore it because they both felt that the process of asking a question online to the teacher took too much time and effort. Jennifer also said that the delay in time 'killed the passion' for wanting to know the answer (interview 5). She expressed frustration with the teacher's online responses, which were shorter than those offered face-to-face:

When my question was one sentence long, the reply I got from the teacher was very likely to be only one sentence as well. Maybe the teacher was busy, or didn't know how specific I expected the answer to be. I realised asking questions online wasn't as effective as I had expected, so I gave up. (Jennifer, interview 5)

Both of them had difficulty interpreting the teachers' feedback on their assignments, but neither said they would ask the teachers about it. For Vivian, it was because she did not believe she was capable of making any improvement next time in any case:

It's not like now I don't get a full mark in a specific category, so I make more effort and next time I can improve my mark. Impossible. My level doesn't change. (Vivian, interview 5)

But for Jennifer, this lack of questions to the teacher resulted partly from not wanting the teacher to think she was asking for a higher mark and partly from thinking she had not done a good job in that assignment.

When a problem was too big to ignore, both students coped by turning to friends or the teachers for help in private instead of raising the issue on the forums. In addition to worrying that she might be the only one who had the problem and possibly be laughed at, Vivian suspected the authority of her classmates' replies:

Even if I get a reply from my classmate, it's unlikely that the teacher would post a message afterwards to confirm whether what my classmate says is correct or not. So in this situation ... I still don't know whether the answer is correct. I can only rely on my judgment to see if the reply makes sense, or to compare all the replies I get, which is still not definite. (Vivian, interview 2)

Jennifer explained that she was reluctant to bring up her problems online because she did not want to show her weakness:

I didn't want to make a bad impression on my classmates. I didn't want to let them know I didn't know how to do it ... I would ask people I know in private. I wasn't that desperate yet. I prefer to solve my problems on my own. (Jennifer, interview 3)

Discussion

Acculturation experiences

Catterick (2007) posited that teaching approaches typically espoused by Western academics for online learning were likely to disadvantage Chinese learners because of the focus on

active learning, reflective practice, collaborative learning, and autonomous learning, approaches these learners were unused to in their educational past. This seemed to be reflected in the findings from this study.

The two participants represent a stark contrast in terms of their learning approaches and preferences before taking the online subjects. Vivian's profile matched the stereotype of a Chinese learner, while Jennifer's resembled more an ideal Western learner. Regardless of these initial differences, both concluded that the quality of their learning via the online mode was less satisfactory than that of their face-to-face learning experiences in the previous semester. In short, the main reasons they gave were that the teacher did not provide sufficient input or enforce learning, and that the nature of the communication medium prevented them from developing relationships with the teacher and their peers. It is worth noting that the students seemed to ascribe the reduced input by teachers to the limitation of this mode of learning rather than to the teachers' pedagogy or any negligence in carrying out their teaching responsibilities.

The results of this investigation indicate that most of the challenges the participants encountered in their adaptation to online learning stemmed from the perceived absence of the teacher. Two teaching responsibilities were identified as integral to student learning by the two participants: disseminating knowledge and enforcing learning. It is important to clarify that by *dissemination of knowledge* the students did not mean simply transmitting information, but saw it as a means for teachers to impart their interpretations based on perspectives and experiences. Where anyone can obtain information (or, as one participant called it, 'objective knowledge') by reading on their own, it was the teachers' own perspectives (or 'subjective knowledge') that these Chinese students believed they would find most valuable. In other words, the teacher is seen not only as a gatekeeper to the specific field of knowledge, through whom the novice students gain access to the field, but also as a guide once the student is inside. This was why neither of the participants in the study found the forum discussions useful in this regard. In their views, not until the teacher had confirmed their fellow students' personal opinions could these opinions become legitimate knowledge. This desire to be taught should not be mistaken for an intention to passively regurgitate what the teacher says. Both participants described themselves as active in face-to-face classes in terms of engaging with and asking questions about the content, but passive when studying online.

In addition to disseminating knowledge, these students also expected the teacher to enforce their learning by exercising a certain degree of control over the learning process. This is best understood as an expectation of a 'teacher-in-charge' pedagogy (Li, 2001, p. 133), where learners still manifest 'a sense of agency' (Li, 2001, p. 132), rather than an authoritarian approach. The two participants expressed feelings of insecurity, anxiety, and discomfort about having to make most decisions for their own learning. For them, time and space were two decisive factors for the type of learning to be undertaken. The boundaries between formal and informal education were drawn at where and when learning was done. While the former meant learning in the classroom taught by a teacher, the latter referred to learning on one's own outside the class context. Therefore, they felt disoriented when they were expected to carry out the out-of-class style of learning while in the class context of online learning. Accordingly, this study does not lend support to the view proposed in the literature that Chinese students appreciate the temporal and spatial flexibility afforded by online learning (Ku & Lohr, 2003; Thompson & Ku, 2005). On the contrary, the students in this study shared the belief that these flexibilities gave rise to the teachers forgoing their control because they did not coordinate classroom activities or manage discussions, as they would have in face-to-face contexts. As a result, Jennifer lost her 'passion' (interview 5) for learning in this environment, so she spent less time in her online subject than in her other,

face-to-face, subjects. Vivian, on the other hand, experienced stress throughout the semester because of her determination to absorb all information posted online and struggled to meet the minimum requirement of participation.

Another issue, meriting particular attention and echoing Tu's finding (2001) that Chinese students attach great importance to interpersonal relationships, is that the participants expected to get not only intellectual but interpersonal connections from their learning community. In fact, for both of them, interpersonal interactions represented a prerequisite for intellectual communication. They stated that a face-to-face class not only guaranteed a certain amount of input from the teacher but also provided opportunities to develop interpersonal relationships with the teacher and classmates. Unfortunately, although new technologies offer such possibilities, in reality, especially with busy postgraduate students, this is likely to become an empty promise. According to the participants, this is because of the difficulty of finding a meeting time, the *superficiality* of the communication in terms of being unable to discuss issues to any great depth, and lack of a common topic due to the nature of self-paced learning.

Acculturation strategies

Consistent with Berry's framework of acculturation strategies (2005), the changes in the two participants' perceptions of online learning and their learning behaviours indicate that Jennifer's acculturation strategies shifted from one space to another, whereas Vivian's remained in the same space. Jennifer's attitude to learning initially leaned towards a typically Western approach and she seemed to adopt the *assimilation* acculturation strategy (see Figure 2). For example, she was enthusiastic about interacting with her teacher and Australian classmates and did not want to read her Chinese classmates' postings. However, as the semester proceeded, she spoke more and more critically of student-centred pedagogies and exhibited a stronger preference for the teacher-in-charge approach. These shifts did not occur in all areas, though, as she still insisted that interactions were essential for learning. At the risk of oversimplifying the issue by drawing on this dichotomous distinction between Chinese and Western pedagogical differences, we would suggest that Jennifer's desire to maintain elements from both her heritage and host learning cultures denotes a movement to the *integration* acculturation strategy. Vivian, on the other hand, demonstrated a tendency towards the *separation* strategy throughout the study, illustrated by her persistent preference for a teacher-centred learning environment and reluctance to interact with the Australian classmates in spite of feelings of isolation. Neither of these two students exhibited any *marginalisation* attitudes or behaviours. This is not surprising, because it would be unlikely that the students who did not want to have connections with either the Chinese cultural group or the larger Australian learning community would volunteer to participate in this type of research study. This is not to say, of course, that marginalisation might not occur in a similar context, only that we did not find evidence of it in this study.

Conclusion

Berry's model, by making the *analytical distinction* between two cultures, enables empirical investigation of claims about the effects of globalising educational markets. Rather than beginning from assertions concerning hybridising cultures, one can critically examine these processes. That the students in this study brought with them particular ways of thinking, acting, and being that they felt were at odds with the assumptions of and practices in the educational context into which they came highlights the significance of such an approach.

If we were to proclaim rather than critically examine hybridity and complexity, then the difficulties faced by such students would be occluded, making it difficult to explore how their educational experiences could be improved. Therefore, we consider Berry's acculturation framework valuable in guiding this study: the conceptualisation of the acculturation phenomenon it provides helped to focus the study on the key issues of cross-cultural adaptation, and the distinctions made between different acculturation strategies enabled acculturation stances and strategy shifts in the participants' experiences to be conceptualised.

The case studies presented here illustrate the adaptation processes of two Chinese learners to online learning in Australia. The fact that both participants had completed a semester in Australia prior to their commencement of the online subjects, thus having a reference point to compare their adaptation experiences, highlights the magnitude of the challenges that online learning posed for them. While this study confirms some of the findings from previous research, such as Chinese learners' needs for more teacher control and interpersonal relationships, it also yielded findings that contradict past studies. One is that the two participants did not report any benefits from the temporal and spatial flexibility online learning provided them. Being full-time on-campus students, they were free to attend regular classes and had no need for this flexibility. It was also found that when online participation was voluntary or not rewarded by the teacher, the text-based communication medium did not enhance the levels of the learners' participation. In fact, for the learner who did participate in discussions in face-to-face classes, online learning reduced this level of participation.

More importantly, the study suggests that the challenges Chinese learners encounter when studying online may have their roots in their fundamental beliefs about the nature of knowledge and the way to acquire knowledge. Past research (e.g., Ku & Lohr, 2003; Thompson & Ku, 2005; Wang & Reeves, 2007) has proffered many suggestions for how to improve Chinese students' online learning experience, but most represent context-specific solutions. In other words, they may only be suited to certain pedagogical designs. We believe that the differentiation between 'subjective' and 'objective' knowledge by one participant in this investigation may lead to one root of the problem. It should be emphasised that by 'subjective knowledge' our participant did not mean simply personal opinions but rather objective knowledge that had been subject to change. In other words, for these Chinese learners knowledge is not simply something to be passed on without change; rather, legitimate knowledge has been subject to change by the teacher – it has been selected, recontextualised, and evaluated by someone considered to have an authoritative position. This is an area that warrants further investigation.

Notes on contributors

Rainbow Chen is an experienced educator who taught for a number of years in Taiwan. She is in the final stages for her PhD study at the University of Wollongong, Australia.

Sue Bennett is a senior lecturer in the Faculty of Education at the University of Wollongong, Australia. She is the coordinator of the Cognition and Learning Design Research Group.

Karl Maton is a lecturer in sociology at the University of Sydney, Australia, with expertise in the sociology of knowledge.

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