

Some research findings on teaching in Hong Kong universities

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INTRODUCTION

Hong Kong is an international city and its international character is reflected among its university teachers who are of diverse nationalities and cultures. Although over 70% of these teachers are of Chinese ethnic origin, a considerable number of them have been exposed to a western style education at some stage. Hence, an assumption is often made by newcomers to Hong Kong and by some overseas researchers that because of their international character and connections, the universities are essentially similar to universities in western countries and that teaching and learning will be conducted, say, in much the same way as in the prestigious universities in the West.

At the same time many lecturers who are new to Hong Kong experience a kind of “culture shock” when finding that their students do not behave as they expect and that they have far less autonomy in the university system than they had been used to in their own country. This would lead us to expect that there may be some important differences between universities in Hong Kong and western countries. Either they may be more like Chinese universities than is usually thought, or Hong Kong may have developed its own distinctive university culture which is a mixture of eastern and western university cultures.

Recent research on conceptions of teaching and learning and of teaching effectiveness in Hong Kong and elsewhere can contribute to our understanding of this issue.

RESEARCH ON GOALS OF HIGHER EDUCATION & TEACHERS' CONCEPTIONS OF TEACHING

Studies of Gow, Kember, & Sivan, (1992) and Entwistle & Percy (1971) came out with very similar findings that Hong Kong teachers share similar teaching goals and experience a similar conflict of goals as do their western counterparts.

The general educational goal most frequently identified was an intellectual one: development of students' problem solving skills/independent/flexible/adaptive learning. This goal is very similar to that espoused by academics in western countries such as Britain and Australia. Next, but cited less often, was a vocational goal of training for specific professions. Other goals mentioned much less frequently were things like betterment of society. However in terms of what they were actually trying to achieve when teaching their own courses, these goals were reversed with professional training being a more prominent goal than development of problem solving skills. Gow, Kember & Sivan (1992) comment:

Problem-solving ability seemed to be an ideal which education should espouse but, in practice, did little to promote. (p. 138)

In broad terms Hong Kong university teachers' conceptions of teaching are similar to those of western teachers: they see themselves as transmitting knowledge (teacher-centred orientation) or facilitating learning (student-centred orientation) (Gow & Kember, 1993 and Kember, 1997).

In a further study of teachers' goals and classroom practices in one Hong Kong tertiary institutions, Kember and Gow (1993) concluded:

On the evidence of this study, higher education seems to have remarkably uniform goals and values. The influence of a different culture, economic situation and political pressures produces minor adaptations to practices rather than the emergence of different conceptions of the teaching and learning process or the desired end result. (p. 123)

RESEARCH ON EFFECTIVE TEACHING

In spite of the above research findings there are several reasons why the conclusion that "higher education seems to have remarkably similar goals and values" applied to Hong Kong is open to question:

- Though there is a strong western influence in Hong Kong by virtue of 150 years of British colonial rule and the myriad of foreign business interests, the territory, with 98% of its population being ethnic Chinese, still retains much of its Chinese character. While clearly not a Confucianist society in the traditional sense, Hong Kong is arguably a

Confucian Heritage Culture (CHC) along with China, Singapore, Korea, Taiwan and Japan.

- The universities form a bridge between the world of schooling and the world of work both of which retain many essential Chinese features, even though the latter is increasingly facing demands to internationalise its methods of doing business.
- Undergraduate students who form a large part of the universities and exert a strong influence on the teaching-learning environment are almost entirely ethnic Chinese.

For these reasons, and in order to explore the issue of Hong Kong teachers' conceptions of effective teaching and learning in a wider context, Kelly, Wong and Pratt (1997) conducted an extensive survey and interview study with Chinese and western Hong Kong university teachers in four universities and six disciplines. Both the teachers' goals and their conceptions of what makes their teaching effective were explored in this study, which also involved surveys and interviews with Hong Kong undergraduates.

Teaching goals

- When asked in the survey what they were trying to achieve in their undergraduate teaching the majority of teachers were concerned with the goal of developing intellectual skills such as problem solving and critical thinking. A further goal was developing independent learning in students or "learning how to learn". Together these goals accounted for 78% of the Chinese teachers and 46% of western teachers.
- Few teachers were concerned solely with knowledge transmission - 7% from the Chinese group and 14% from the western group.
- Very few teachers (3% in total) said that their goal was career development for their students.

These results are similar to those of Gow and Kember's (1993) finding for teachers' espoused goals, but as they point out, what happens in practice may be very different with a switch to emphasis on the students' professional development.

Different Ways to Achieve the Same Goal

However from our interviews with teachers it would appear that the Chinese and western teachers tried to achieve the goal of developing intellectual skills rather differently.

Many of the Chinese group argued that students need a sound factual knowledge base on which to build analytical skills and critical thinking. This could be called a step-by-step intellectual approach. A computer teacher explained it in interview as follows:

“I think every discipline has basic techniques, otherwise what do you teach? If not, you do not have any bounding and structure. In my discipline, the knowledge we teach is some design theories, philosophy and guidelines. You need to know how to enforce and use this knowledge. Learn to use them in some practical situations. It’s because the practical situation is changing all the time. For example, when working on database design, you need to design step by step with reference to the structure and knowledge. These are the most basic knowledge.”

A second theme common among the Chinese group was that of guiding and orchestrating the learning experience: determining just how much basic knowledge needs to be given as a basis for analysis and critical thinking and how much structure students need. For example:

“I want to balance how to give just enough to students so that they can develop their thinking. ... How to help them enter into the field, how to make them interested in the subject, how to help them grasp some important information about the subject, I think maybe they need clear explanation, concrete examples and chances to practice. At this period, it’s important to start thinking. When they are stronger, they can have more information. ... If I give them with much freedom at the very beginning, they may have the feeling of absence of direction and lack of information.”

The western group seemed to have a different interpretation of the goal of developing intellectual skills:

“I guess what it means to me is that students don’t just take exactly what I say, or exactly what the textbook says and give it back to me, that they actually take some background and pull it together

and process that together with the new situation and come up with a different solution.”

And there were more extreme views among the western group, in particular about the value of subject knowledge in the process of learning. Among this group, specific subject or discipline knowledge was seen as irrelevant to the goals of education. Subject knowledge is merely a vehicle for teaching thinking skills and approaches to problem solving without intrinsic value in its own right. Students are expected to construct their own knowledge from the outset with an open and critical mind.

“This is the whole point. ... It doesn't matter what it is you teach. It's how you go about it. The fact that you might end up getting the knowledge that you need to be a lawyer is an irrelevancy. It's irrelevant to the education.”

Chinese teachers in Hong Kong explain development of intellectual skills as a step-by-step process based on first acquiring basic knowledge in the discipline. They are also concerned with careful orchestration of the learning process, leading students gradually towards the goal of creating their own knowledge. Western teachers are less concerned with basic knowledge and may even discount it as unimportant.

Attribution of Effective Teaching

From the survey data the Chinese and western groups differed in term of attribution of effective teaching to teachers alone, to students alone, or teachers and students together. The Chinese group were more inclined to attribute effective teaching to students (26%) or both teachers and students (31.5%) and 35% to the teacher alone.

For the western group only 7% attributed effective teaching to students and 46% to teachers alone and 18% to both teachers and students. The rest consisted of a mixture of contextual factors such as class size, subject taught etc.

For both groups the most important qualities of the students were that they are responsive, interested, attentive and diligent.

In terms of the teachers' contribution to effective teaching, overall the Chinese group emphasised the importance of lecture presentation skills (45.5%) and preparation for lectures (29%) followed by helping and guiding students in their learning (9%). The western group emphasised delivery/presentation skills (39.0%) and preparation for lectures (13%) followed by helping and guiding (10.5%), but unlike the Chinese group also included their ability to critically challenge their students (8%).

Chinese teachers appeared to see their students' interest, behaviour and performance as a mirror of their effectiveness while western teachers were more focused on their own qualities as teaching professionals and on the teaching environment.

Different Approaches to Helping and Guiding

However, there is evidence to suggest that the idea of helping and guiding students may be interpreted differently by the two groups. In the Chinese group it seems to imply a sensitivity to students' needs and interests and the need to continually adjust teaching to meet these.

“They are divided into two streams. Some students are very interested in the subject while some are forced to take it. So I will set different requirements. In this sense, the requirements for achievement is different. For those who are not interested in the course, the achievement for teaching this group is to make them have at least some interest to examine Basic Law. They will not turn away from it. For those who already have an interest, I expect that they can go further. That means they can express their opinions when situations for discussing Basic Law comes up in society. I think I have two different feelings for these two groups of students.”

“When I am teaching, I emphasize the on-the-spot atmosphere and care about their response. I will try to feel in which area the energy level is. This group or that group? Boys or girls? I will respond to them. I will try to energize their responsiveness. I will give them reinforcement. In class, I often ask students questions. But I will phrase the questions according to their abilities. If they look silly today, I will ask simple questions. If they look very good and smart today, I will ask more difficult questions. I will say that they are smart and tell them I am asking a difficult question. That means

I will control the class atmosphere and sense their energy level. This is very important.”

The western group on the other hand were much more concerned with helping via assignment marking or with providing opportunities for success rather than structuring the learning to take account of individual’s needs specifically.

“I don’t criticize individual pieces of work. What I do is I write a general description of overall problems that were wrong within an assignment and then I give a model answer showing how was a reasonable way of doing it. I actually don’t go and do individual things on individual student’s piece of work. But I give them a general overview of what was wrong. They can figure it out They can tell what they’ve done wrong if they look at my solution after criticism.”

A version of helping and guiding among the western group is the idea of provoking and critically challenging students.

“... it’s certainly making challenges. I mean giving students challenges is part of the thing of giving them the opportunity to do something. If we don’t challenge them and yet we expect them to discover something and we don’t challenge them I mean how can they do it?”

“So that in cases where for example I would deliberately be provocative and members of the class are ... then will come back to me and say “We disagree. We think that the case of Jones versus R says this and you’ve said it means this” and so forth. So I think that’s a very practical example of success.”

In the Chinese group helping and guiding students seems to imply a sensitivity to students’ needs and interests and the need to continually adjust teaching to meet these. The western group were much more concerned with helping via assignment marking or with providing opportunities for success rather than structuring the learning to take account of individual’s needs specifically. They were also more likely to want to critically challenge their students.

Different Approaches to Teacher-student Relationships

In both Chinese and western groups there was a concern for teacher-student relationships, but once again this was interpreted differently by the two groups. The important aspects for the western group were knowing students' names, presenting a professional approach to the relationship, knowing what students are capable of, allocating office hours to students, giving students lecture notes, presenting yourself as a caring person. However they cautioned that caring is a time-consuming business. Some were, however, wary of being too close to students because of their dual role as assessor and pointed out that they were walking a fine line.

“The critical thing is to have a professional approach to the relationship in the learning environment.”

“My attitude towards whether I think that I care for students is whether I believe that I have what I would call a professional approach to .. that means they know what is expected of them, they know what I will deliver to them, and they know what I do in terms of assessment is going to be fair. In terms of my business of caring for them if I do that properly then I believe that I'm caring for them.”

“So I try to keep very caring but I keep a distance in the sort of things I do.”

The emphasis in the Chinese group was much more on informality in their relationships with students even though they also recognised that it takes up a lot of time. Uniquely some used the concept of “Heart” to express the way in which they cared for students.

“Even though generally I am quite opened up, students can come at any time they want. It's much more comfortable to chat with them. Because you know, when they come to your office, they would be more friendly.”

“Just if you care and appreciate the students, they will spend more time on learning your subject and so they develop interest in it. I think it is related to communication.”

“Since the students always keep on coming in , knock at the doors and say “Hi”, and then say a few words, you spend whole day talking with students. I think it’s good, it’s enjoyable. But the thing is you can’t do your work. During daytime, you really can’t do your work. This is the problem of this kind of open door policy. But I think this kind of open door policy is very important. Previously, I can get a lot of feedback from talking with students. I can see how students think and also how the students think about other teachers. You can learn from all this feedback about yourself so as to improve your teaching. But it’s a matter of time. It depends if you can afford the time to talk with the students.”

The teacher-student relationship is interpreted by the western teachers as a caring but strictly professional relationship whereas the Chinese saw it more as a caring but casual and friendly relationship. Both groups agreed that nurturing a good relationship takes time.

In summary, at a general level, research on teachers’ conceptions of teaching, their goals and conceptions of teaching effectiveness show similarities between Hong Kong and western studies and between Chinese and western teachers in Hong Kong. But on closer inspection there are subtle but important differences in how teachers interpret these conceptions in practice and in how they view their relationships with students.

References

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