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EXPLORING CRITICAL THINKING WITH CHINESE STUDENTS DURING INDUCTION

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Introduction

One of the outcomes of the continuing internationalisation of British universities is that academics meet an increasingly diverse student population, from many cultures and with varied English language experiences. International students come to the UK with expectations based on their prior experiences of education in their home countries. To do well at university in Britain, the ability to think critically is required, but Asian students are frequently criticised for their lack of critical thinking skills (Chiu, 2009; Durkin, 2008). However, a review of relevant literature shows that the theory of 'critical thinking' is often not clearly defined (Moon, 2008). Since the concept of critical thinking is both broad and non-specific, it gives no clear indication of what needs to be taught and makes it difficult for students to know what is required in practice.

Against this background, this chapter shares the experience of revealing the myths associated with critical thinking to students in an induction-week exercise undertaken by 24 new Chinese Master's students studying Tourism and Hospitality Management. It presents the Chinese students' view of critical thinking, their difficulties in using critical thinking skills and the lessons they learnt from the exercise, and a reflection on the effectiveness of this induction exercise.

The phenomenon of Chinese international students

In 2000, Britain launched a £5 million three-year worldwide marketing campaign to attract more international students to the UK, and in 2006 the second phase of the Prime Minister's Initiative for International Education (PMI) was launched to attract an additional 100,000 international students to study at higher education institutions in the UK. Through such continuing efforts, according to the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) in 2011, 428,225 non-UK domiciled students were studying in British universities which included 130,115 European Union students and 298,110 non-EU students. Analysing the nationalities of these students showed China is the biggest

contributing nation, with 78,715 Chinese students reported as studying in the UK in academic year 2011-12 (HESA, 2012).

The People's Republic of China (PRC), with one quarter of the world's population, has the greatest number of consumers of any country in the world, which is one of the reasons for its huge potential as a source market for tourism. Two other factors contribute to the anticipated increase in travel by the Chinese population: their increasing disposable income and the relaxation of outbound travel restrictions by the Chinese government (Cai et al., 2000). These factors affect the demand for study overseas. Chinese students generally depend on their parents or relatives, or use their own savings, to fund attendance at international Master's programmes. The favourite destinations are English-speaking countries including the USA, Australia and Britain.

However, a review of recent Chinese news concerning study abroad indicates that views are largely negative. The value of international education is being questioned in China as the rapidly increasing number of Chinese students with international qualifications, but with unsatisfactory skills, becomes apparent. Students returning to China find it difficult to adapt what they've learnt to their home environment (Sina Education, 2009).

In addition the market is changing as the Chinese government is strongly encouraging Chinese universities to develop international collaborations to bring international education back to China. At the same time non-English-speaking countries such as France, Germany and the Netherlands are proactively promoting their English Master's programmes to Chinese students in China. An analysis of the above situation makes it clear that British universities need to respond through developing their educational practices to satisfy Chinese students, in order to sustain their leading position for educating Chinese students.

Critical Thinking

The idea that the ability to think critically is required to do well at a university in Britain is widespread, but Vandermensbrugge (2004) argues that the concept is vague and does not seem to have the same meaning to all people in every circumstance. Mingers (2000) argues that there are many strands of thought in both the social and philosophical literature that can be labelled 'critical':

1. What is termed 'critical thinking', that is, developing the discipline of being sceptical or questioning about statements, propositions or information;
2. Critical social theory as in the Frankfurt School and more particularly the work of Habermas; work that is critical of the prevailing structures, values and rationalities in society;
3. Two strands of thought within the management literature that draw especially on Habermas – critical management studies and critical systems thinking;
4. The work of Foucault, especially on power and its relationship to knowledge.

Based on her review Vandermensbrugge (2004) divides existing definitions of critical thinking into two categories: the ability to develop a capacity to reason logically and cohesively, and the ability to question and challenge existing knowledge and social order.

Egege and Kutieleh (2004) point out that the definitions of critical thinking rest on the assumption that the kinds of thinking illustrated are not only desirable, beneficial, and attainable, but that they are also ubiquitously valued. Therefore they argue that these definitions fail to acknowledge that our understanding of what critical thinking entails is heavily influenced by the history and traditions of our academic 'institutions'. Their argument is consistent with Lloyd's (1996) opinion that the tradition of critical thinking is very much a product of Western culture and with comments from Huang (2008) that critical thinking is a socially constructed practice and people from different countries might have different learning practices.

There is a body of literature that suggests that Chinese learners are significantly different from Western learners and, by implication, less adequate in a Western setting. Samuelowicz and Bain (2001) suggested that Chinese-speaking students are passive and tend toward rote learning rather than analysis and critical enquiry. This would imply that Chinese-speaking international students may have difficulty with critical thinking tasks requiring analysis and reflection. Turner (2006) emphasises that the Chinese international students come to Britain with expectations that come from their past experiences in China and, whether they realise it or not, they must learn to adapt to new circumstances in order to succeed academically. Durkin (2008) explores the adaptation experience of East Asian Master's students in the UK in dealing with Western academic norms of critical thinking and debate and found that the majority of the students opt for a 'middle way' which synergises their own cultural approach to critical thinking with those aspects of Western-style critical thinking and debate that are

culturally acceptable to them. However, very limited research has considered the experience of Chinese students who have had an élite education in China which includes mastering different learning skills and styles.

The study

The study discusses the results of an action research project focusing on activities undertaken with the students during 'induction week', the week before formal teaching on the programme starts. Following the action research cycle (McNiff and Whitehead, 2002), a number of practical learning points were observed during student's activities. The exercise included showing the students a one-hour TV documentary about Abraham Lincoln, which offered different perspectives and views of his achievements. There was also a one-hour seminar in critical thinking. During the seminar, the students' understandings of critical thinking were drawn out with respect to the different levels of authority and diverse sources seen in the documentary (e.g. historian, politician, information from popular culture). Students' observations were noted. The students worked in groups, discussing their methods and their difficulties in dealing with critical thinking. The group leaders from each group then reported their common views to the class.

Following this activity the TV documentary was used as an example to discuss how to structure and develop arguments, in order to demonstrate critical thinking in written work. Bloom's taxonomy (Bloom, 1956) was introduced to the students as a learning tool. Emphasis was given to Bloom's higher order cognitive skills as they are inherent in the process of management and especially important as managerial complexity increases. The students were asked to produce a short essay on international education and employability for the next day to demonstrate their critical thinking skills. The structure for the essay and types of sources were suggested. The students were assured that this was a formative exercise, that there would be no grade but advice for improvement would be provided. One-to-one face-to-face feedback sessions were organised within the next few days to gauge how the students had dealt with this assessment and the lessons they learnt from the whole exercise. At the end of this feedback session, the students' views of the induction exercise were collected.

The data recorded from the training workshop and transcribed from interviews undertaken with the individual students were analysed. The 24 students were 100% of

the cohort of Chinese students on the programme in that year. The analytic procedure was based on Strauss and Corbin's microanalysis technique (1998).

The students' perceptions of critical thinking

Different views were identified when the students' perceptions of critical thinking were explored. Their views fell into the following three categories:

Critical thinking means thinking about the pros and cons of the theories you use

Based on their experiences of their undergraduate studies in the UK, the majority of the students (15 out of 24 students) summarised critical thinking as meaning 'thinking about the advantages and disadvantages of theories or findings':

'Critical thinking is to think logically, thinking all possible aspects of the issue, and then making reasonable decision according to the situation, it is a process of actively and skilfully analysing and synthesising.'

'For me, critical thinking is a method or way that means thinking something from bad and good both sides. For example, when I discuss network marketing, I will explore different needs of consumers and their ICT knowledge, and then compare them and discuss each advantages and disadvantages.'

Critical thinking means being critical of the research process

Six students discussed their understanding of critical thinking based on their experiences of their independent projects during the final year of their undergraduate degree. They recalled that their lecturers had told them that critical thinking means doing things logically, and placing emphasis on the research process.

'Originally I was not sure of the meaning of "critical thinking". But after discussing the matter with my supervisor, I got an idea that to be critical meant thinking and writing in a logical manner, and also reasoning every action I take.'

'When I had our research method module at Master's level, our lecturers emphasised the importance of logical research process and also be critical [of]

the process [by which] any research is undertaken. So for me, critical thinking is being critical of research process that a research uses.'

'I don't understand what critical thinking means'

Three students were very honest and confessed that they actually did not know what critical thinking means. This lack of knowledge might be due to a different teaching and learning system in their home country or to a misunderstanding of critical thinking.

Their frustration is clearly shown in their comments:

'As you know, this is my first ever experience abroad, I do not have clue how to do critical thinking except I can translate the terms from Chinese phrases.'

'Lecturers here in the UK take it for granted that everyone who is doing a Master's degree knows critical thinking. But I don't. I want to do well in this Master degree but I am not sure I have such ability.'

'My lecturers commented [on] my poor performance on critical analysis regularly. I presume this is the same as critical thinking. I thought I have done what they wanted as I have listed [a] lot of ideas from different research!?''

The students' difficulties on applying critical thinking in their studies

When the students were asked what kind of difficulties they had when they applied critical thinking in their studies, an analysis of the group leaders' summaries showed their concerns and anxieties could be summarised in three ways:

Language barriers

All groups reported that they understood what critical thinking meant but their insufficient English language skills made it difficult for them to apply critical thinking in their coursework or exams. As two group leaders frankly admitted:

'I don't think my English is good enough for Master's studies. I am struggling to read books and journal articles that lecturers recommended...being critical, I need to read a lot of materials but my English really stops me being critical.'

'Being critical means I can construct my arguments logically. But I can't as my vocabulary and grammar skills are not good enough to form clear sentences. Recalling what I have done for my assessments in my first degree, I know how to argue in Chinese but can't translate my idea well into English.'

Uncertainty about the use of sources

Appropriate use of literature sources or different evidence was perceived to be another difficulty in the context of critical thinking. Examples of such difficulties exemplified by the group leaders were (a) when should we use resources to support opinions; (b) where can we find relevant sources; (c) how do you know evidence is good quality; (d) how many examples of evidence should be used; (e) can we use Chinese examples in our English work?

Lack of a clear understanding of critical thinking

The students complained that because of their unclear understanding of critical thinking, they found it very difficult to apply critical thinking in their coursework.

'Different lecturers told me different things when I asked them what critical thinking really means. These really confuse me when I write my assignments.'

'As I have never been told by any lecturer how to apply critical thinking to my study, I am not sure whether I used it when I write my assignments. Low marks for my coursework possibly mean I did not use it.'

Through the exercise, where students discussed their understandings of critical thinking and shared their difficulties, they realised they were not alone in this difficult situation.

'It is reassuring when I heard my classmates have similar understanding of critical thinking.'

'Listening to complaints from my classmates I realised I am not alone. Some of them seem to have the same issues as me when we talk about critical thinking.'

'Different methods suggested by the classmates on how to apply critical thinking to our work seem to be useful. As those methods are all from us, they really make me feel I have mastered the skill.'

Lessons learnt from the induction exercise

In the one-to-one feedback sessions, held during the first week of their formal study, the students were given oral feedback on the essay and then asked what lessons they had learnt from the induction exercise. These data were analysed, and the lessons learnt can be summarised as follows:

A better understanding of what critical thinking is and what it requires

Ten students reported that after watching the video and the training workshop discussion, they were clearer about what critical thinking is and how to structure their arguments. Writing the induction essays and then receiving feedback made them surer about the critical thinking required at Master's level. Typical quotes include:

'It was strange to watch Abraham Lincoln video for a tourism course. But after the training session I clearly understood the purpose [for which] you used it. The session is very helpful for me to understand how to apply for critical thinking skill to my work.'

'Thanks for sharing with us your own experience in critical thinking. Your experience in how you actively read and make note[s] for your work made my understanding of critical thinking clearer and more approachable than different texts I have read and also advice I received from other lecturers when I did my undergraduate study in the UK.'

'Bloom's taxonomy is very useful for me to understand requirements for my potential Master's study. The use of the taxonomy helps me gain increased awareness and control of my cognitive development.'

Techniques of how to write an essay or a report with sufficient critical analysis

Five students were very glad to have had the training session in critical thinking during the induction period. They tended to be those who had been told during their

undergraduate study that they were not good at critical thinking. Their appreciation can be seen in the following quotes:

'Situations you shared with us to use different sources are very useful. I appreciate your tips in how to read efficiently. I have never thought about categorising different evidence based on topics.'

'The induction essay was a challenge as we need to produce an essay at such short notice. Moreover the topic you gave is more related to education instead of tourism subject. But your procedures that you shared with us are very critical in helping me finish the work on time. Your feedback on how to improve my work is so clear to follow.'

Effective use of different databases or the internet to gather relevant evidence

It was rather surprising to hear the students' appreciation of the processes used in searching for academic evidence. These students tended to be new to the UK, and very unfamiliar with writing essays or reports:

'Although I have done three month language course in Plymouth, your training workshop and feedback on my essays are most helpful for me to be sure of how to apply ... critical thinking skill to future work. The most beneficial aspect for me is how to use different databases to search different journal articles and what journals are good quality ones to follow.'

'I certainly use the internet a lot when I did my undergraduate study. But the way you showed us to search useful news and statistics and then use them for our work is brilliant. Watching Abraham Lincoln is strange for a tourism course but certainly realised your purpose at the end.'

Discussion and reflection

My findings reveal that the Chinese students have different views on critical thinking. These findings are consistent with the observations of Lowes et al. (2004) and Huang (2008) on the academic experiences of international students in the UK. The language barriers that cause students to have problems in applying critical analysis during their studies is consistent with the findings of Huang (2006) that the Chinese Master's

students studying Tourism and Hospitality find criticality difficult because of their insufficient language skills.

Egege and Kutieleh (2004) argue that the presumption of full understanding of critical thinking by every academic is questionable, and as universities employ more lecturers from non-Western backgrounds this presumption warrants closer attention. As a Chinese person teaching in a British university, my understanding of critical thinking is largely influenced and confirmed by comments and remarks from my lecturers, supervisors and academic journal reviewers. Previous research (Bennett, et al., 2010) in critical thinking skills tends to emphasise differences between the skills the international students have and critical thinking, and problematises the international students' skills. During the workshop, because of my own study experience in the UK, I did not follow this approach. Instead, I have emphasised the different skills sets the international students have in comparison to British students. Furthermore, critical thinking can take different forms in different cultures. I am in agreement with Cortazzi and Jin (2010) and Turner (2006) that critical and creative thinking have long been characteristics of education and intellectual traditions in China, but may manifest in different ways, such as active listening rather than verbal participation (Ryan & Louie, 2007). Based on my own experience in the UK and also on understanding of the potential requirements of graduates for their future careers back in China, I emphasised what the Chinese students already knew and similarities between their methods and critical thinking requirements. The students gained confidence to perform and also appreciated such empathy.

The students' positive reaction to the induction exercise confirmed that critical thinking skills need to be addressed prior to students starting to write, and should explicitly include the skills of critical reading. The evidence from the students is that they are unaware of the importance of reading critically, and of the techniques they could use (Higher Education Academy, 2011).

Conclusion

As a lecturer from non-Western background, I introduced these induction-week activities for two reasons: firstly, my own study and research experience in the UK showed me that critical thinking is a learned skill and can be developed given clear guidance and practice; and secondly, when the similarities between traditional Chinese learning skills and critical thinking skills are demonstrated, the Chinese students are

more willing to make changes to their learning process, and achieve good results. This approach has proved successful in the three years it has been part of the induction programme.

Critical thinking presents different perspectives on knowledge. It is a vital part of teaching students how to think and write whilst they study at UK universities. Through this small-scale intervention the Chinese students gain valuable new perspectives on their experiences in critical thinking.

In conclusion, the experience of working with Chinese students through induction and during the programme suggests that:

- Although cultural and linguistic differences are important, the way in which a subject and assessment task are presented to students has a profound impact on their learning;
- There is a need for lecturers to acquire intercultural competency, so that they can provide a safe environment for students, where intercultural dialogue, reflectivity and courage to think can be nurtured;
- The structured approach as used in Bloom's taxonomy can help Chinese students to understand requirements for different levels of study and to build their critical thinking skills and their responsibility for their own learning.

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