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Asian Students' Perceptions of Group Work and Group Assignments in a New Zealand Tertiary Institution

Jacqui Campbell
Massey University

Mingsheng Li
Massey University

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Campbell, J. and Li, M. Massey University, Wellington, New Zealand. Asian Students' Perceptions of Group Work and Group Assignments in a New Zealand Tertiary Institution

¹Campbell, J. and Li².

Jacqui Campbell

College of Business

Massey University, Wellington, New Zealand

Email: J.A.Campbell@massey.ac.nz

²Mingsheng Li, PhD

College of Business

Massey University, Wellington, New Zealand

Email: M.S.Li@massey.ac.nz

ABSTRACT

Globalisation, cultural diversity, and structural reconfiguration in organisations of all types, have led to academics in New Zealand tertiary institutions embracing changes in their course delivery approaches. One of these changes is the emphasis on collaborative learning, featuring group work and group assignments.

This study examines Asian students' perceptions of the much-promulgated collaborative learning concepts in the form of group work and group assignments. The research was conducted in 2005 in a New Zealand tertiary institution. Twenty-two Asian students participated in one-hour individual semi-structured interviews.

The study found that Asian students valued highly the significance of classroom group discussions where they could interact with students from other cultures and backgrounds, improve their English language skills, enhance their cultural understandings and provide them with opportunities to make friends. However, they held intensely negative views about group assignments that require students to complete a project as a group with shared marks determined by the performance of the group. Contributing factors affecting group dynamics included: members' attitudes and willingness to cooperate and contribute as a team, the composition of the group, students' competing demands on students' time and attention, heterogeneity from the natural abilities of students, and the varying cultural values and beliefs held by group members. Most Asian students felt disheartened, helpless and desperate, having to complete such mandatory group assignments.

The study suggests that collaborative learning has its strengths and weaknesses. Students' needs, interests, cultural values, beliefs, and teaching effectiveness rather than fashions should be considered as a priority in teaching in tertiary institutions.

Key words: Asian students, perceptions, group work, collaborative learning, culture, constructivism

INTRODUCTION

The presence of Asian students in New Zealand has attracted considerable attention from central and local governments, educational providers, educators, scholars and researchers. According to the figures provided by Education New Zealand, the number of full fee-paying international students in New Zealand in 2005 was 82,436, of whom 37, 207 (45% of the total) studied at tertiary institutions. Over 85% of these international students came from Asia.

The export education industry in New Zealand suffered a serious setback in 2005. There was a 15% overall drop in the number of international students in the whole education export industry in

New Zealand. The rising New Zealand dollar, changes in New Zealand immigration policies, and adverse publicity are reasons often attributed for the falling numbers. Richardson (2005) suggests that as long as quality assurance is in place, the New Zealand export education industry will stand firm and steady. However, how international students, particularly Asian students, perceive the quality of our education remains unexplored.

There is a converging theme in the surveys conducted from 2003 to 2006 by researchers from five New Zealand tertiary institutions: Asian students' level of satisfaction was lower than that of New Zealand domestic students and international students from other countries. Sherry, Bhat, Beaver and Ling (2003) studied students' perceptions of services experienced by both domestic and international students at the UNITEC Institute of Technology in New Zealand, these services including learning support, quality teaching, staff-student communication, and feedback from tutors. They found that there was a significant difference between the two groups: international students felt that their expectations had not been met and expressed greater dissatisfaction with the services than domestic students.

Ward and Masgoret (2004, Victoria University of Wellington) conducted a national survey of the experiences of international students studying in New Zealand. The results of the survey corroborate the findings from surveys by Newall and Daldy (2004, the Auckland University of Technology), Holloway (2004, the University of Auckland), and Sandbrooke (2006, Massey University): international students were less satisfied with their overall learning experiences than domestic students, but respondents from Asian countries were even less satisfied than other international students.

These surveys did not provide an in-depth analysis and discussion of the reasons for the Asian students' lower level of satisfaction with their learning experiences in New Zealand educational institutions. Our current research, conducted at a New Zealand tertiary institution in 2005, attempted to explore and examine some of the challenges through a qualitative research approach. Listening to students' voices and their stories helped identify and address some of the issues that these Asian students face. Students' voices, narratives or stories are lenses through which we view and review our teaching practices as well as students' learning experiences, levels of satisfaction, perceptions, intentionality, values, beliefs, desires, feelings, and aspirations. This paper focuses on the experiences of working in groups including experiences of undertaking group assignments.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Collaborative learning, which is often used interchangeably with cooperative learning, group learning, peer learning, learning community, constructive learning, has become a common practice in schools and tertiary institutions in New Zealand (Ward & Masgoret 2004). Students are divided into small groups to learn content knowledge, to explore or discuss an assigned topic, or to complete cases, projects and group assignments, to answer a few challenging questions, or to engage in an exchange of ideas, and share some insights with group members (Holter 1994; Porter 2006). The frequently used techniques include 'Socratic questioning, problem-based learning, case studies, role playing, critical thinking, and behavioural analysis' (Porter 2006, p. 1).

Collaborative learning is believed to provide a more comfortable and supportive learning environment than solitary work, foster critical thinking skills, develop individual accountability, increase levels of reasoning and positive interdependence, improve problem-solving strategies, internalise content knowledge (Gupta 2004; CSHE 2002; Gokhale 1995; Schofield 2006; Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec 1992). Some research indicates that, regardless of subjects, students who work in groups achieve better results and are more satisfied with their learning experiences than those who do not work in collaborative groups (Gross, 1993; Springer, Stanne, & Donovan 1999). Other benefits of this collaborative learning include promoting retention rates, transferring knowledge, providing counselling to students with cognitive, physical, social, and emotional problems, and enhancing their intercommunication skills (Porter, 2006). It reflects and responds to the needs of workplaces in industries where team building, cooperation and collaboration are highly

emphasised. Therefore, the collaborative learning approach prepares students in problem-solving in a collaborative way and provides them with experiences which could be utilized in their future careers (Springer, Stanne, & Donovan 1999; Gupta 2004; Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec 1992).

Collaborative learning is based on constructivism that emphasises “real talk” which includes discourse and exploration, talking and listening, questions, argument, speculation and sharing, but in which domination is replaced by reciprocity and cooperation’ (Jarvis et al 1998, p. 73). Cross (1998) sees small group learning that is the core of constructivism as ‘a fundamental revolution in epistemology’ as opposed to a traditional view of knowledge as ‘the external reality’ (p. 7) that can be passed from an authority to a novice. Knowledge is thus co-constructed by people working, ‘not just cooperatively, but interdependently’ (Cross 1998, p. 5), and is generated ‘through a process of questioning and evaluation of beliefs’ (Holmes 2004, p. 295). Bruffee (1995, p. 9) notes, ‘We construct and maintain knowledge not by examining the world but by negotiating with one another in communities of knowledgeable peers.’ Constructivism therefore fosters active learning over passive learning, collaboration over competition, and community over isolation (Cross 1998; Gross 1993). Constructivism featured by small group work and collaboration could be problematic in a cross-cultural classroom setting (Quaddus & Tung 2002). CSHE (2002) and Burdett (2003) outline some common issues and concerns with group work and group assignments:

- lack of perceived relevance to actual industrial demands
- lack of clear objectives
- inequality of contribution among group members
- unequal distribution of effort
- unequal effort not reflected in marks
- difficulties of accommodating different work schedules for meeting times
- overuse of group work
- lack of staff support
- the potent effects of assessment
- lack of choice and flexibility
- difficulty accommodating cultural and language differences by students themselves

One of the most visible features of Asian students studying in Western tertiary institutions is their negative response to and low level of participation in group work and group assignments, which is often interpreted by Western academia as barriers to effective learning and an obstacle to developing independent and critical skills in learning in a Western tertiary institution (Hodne 1997). Holmes (2004) attributed Chinese students’ lack of interest in participating in group work to interpersonal communication differences in the classroom, such as classroom conformity, group harmony, collective interest, respect for knowledge, teachers and authorities in hierarchy, efforts on high achievement, and competition-oriented and authority-centred, dialectical model of learning, which are emphasized in the Chinese classroom culture. All of these features disadvantage Chinese students in a New Zealand classroom culture where individualism, assertiveness, verbal skills are highly emphasised.

However, Wong’s (2004) research suggests that a majority of Asian international students could adapt very quickly to the Western classroom culture through their own cultural and individual resilience. His study demystifies Western stereotypes about Asian students having a preference for ‘spoon-feeding’ and teacher-centred styles of teaching. In fact, he argues, most Asian students prefer ‘a more student centred style of learning’ (p. 165). In terms of group work and group assignment, he further notes, Asian student prefer to ‘work individually so that they can have full control of the final product’ (p. 162) and to manage their own time.

Tiong and Yong (2004) point out that Asian students ‘prefer doing group work and learn collaboratively in an informal learning environment (after the class)’ but they become silent when ‘it comes to group discussion in the classroom among peers and teachers’ (p. 4), the contributing factors being Asian students’ inadequate language skills, the influence of their prior learning experiences, their underdeveloped interpersonal communication skills (shyness, low self-esteem,

lack of confidence, face-saving), cultural differences, and their perceptions of the relevance of group work to learning.

Tani's study (2005) found that there were many contributing factors for Asian students' silence in group participation, such as cultural influences, teacher-student relationships, the composition of the group members, and teaching approaches. However, Tani concluded that these factors were minor when compared to another key factor: when students' participation in group work was tied up with assessment. It was the anxiety and lack of understanding of the system of reward and punishment as demonstrated from group assignments that brought about Asian students' silence.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative research approach was chosen, using semi-structured face-to-face interviews lasting up to one hour. For this in-depth qualitative investigation of Asian students' learning experiences in New Zealand, twenty-two participants were recruited (see the following tables). The researchers sought and obtained the approval of the human ethics committee at the institution and informed consent was given by the participants. The participants were drawn from a number of papers within the business school. Letters of invitation to participate were distributed by academic staff other than the researchers. The criteria for participant selection were as follows: participants were business undergraduate students of Asian origin who had been in New Zealand and had studied at the university for at least one year.

Participants		Age			Time in New Zealand			
Male	Female	20 or under	21-24	25-29	1 yr+	2 yrs+	3 yrs+	4 yrs
9	13	2	13	7	2	6	10	4

Ethnicity								
P.R. China	Hong Kong	Thailand	India	Cambodia	Vietnam	Indonesia	E. Timor	Total
15	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	22

The sampling population roughly matches the international student profiling at the university campus, with Mainland Chinese being the dominant group. In some business-related papers at the university, more than eighty per cent of the students are Chinese.

There is an assumption that international students experience adjustment difficulties in the initial period at institutions of higher learning, especially in the first semester. Cultural adaptation is a continuing process, and many of these difficulties disappear during the process of cultural transition (Heggins & Jackson, 2003). We assumed that after one year of study at the university, they had become familiar with the New Zealand academic culture, patterns of teacher-student interactions, and the university learning environment, and thus had adjusted well academically, socio-culturally, and psychologically by developing their coping strategies and intercultural and interpersonal communication skills. This study examined their academic adjustment issues by drawing on their past and present learning experiences at the university through their own narrative stories.

The interview questions addressed their learning experiences, learning skills, academic difficulties, their attitudes towards instructional methods, the perceptions of educational quality, relationships with lecturers and domestic and other international students, and their recommendations for the university to improve its practice for international students. All the interviews were audio-taped, transcribed verbatim, and coded. All participants chose pseudonyms for the purpose of the research. This paper focuses on the participants' experiences of group work.

FINDINGS

This section reports the findings of the research. It describes the experiences of participants in group learning situations: group discussion within the classroom setting, their attitudes towards group discussion and group assignments with a common group mark and group assignments where a portion of the marks is allocated by the students within the group. The benefits and disadvantages of group learning experiences will be discussed.

Attitudes, Group Discussion

The research indicates that most Asian students highly valued the significance of classroom group discussions where they could interact with students from other cultures and backgrounds. They saw them as opportunities to improve their English language skills, to enhance their cultural understandings through such intercultural encounters, to broaden the understanding of the course or assessment-related issues, and to develop their negotiating, teamwork, interpersonal communication skills, and to make friends.

Rikki said that he liked to enter into group discussions because 'different people, different student has different ideas'. He found that he could gain many useful insights from other students. Sunny also agreed that group discussions could help him see things from new perspectives. Avinda found that 'there are lots of benefits from this discussion in groups because different people have different knowledge and they come up with a wide range of their ideas.' Cindy felt that small group discussions helped reduce her anxieties arising from discussions in a large class where her shy personality did not fit. She said, 'Maybe I am not ready for the class. I think that's the big problem. I don't like to discuss in class.' She found that she could share her ideas and views with other students without much apprehension.

In group discussion, the participants identified that they got more and different perspectives, enhancing their understanding. They recognised discussions as opportunities to express their opinions, though a novel experience for many of them. One participant saw it as an opportunity to influence others' points of view. The experience enabled them to clarify, challenge and reflect on their own thinking and their problem-solving and conflict resolution skills. Helen said that when her opinion conflicted with others in the group she tried to argue and convince them that her idea was right: 'I learn to protect my opinion.'

Most participants were satisfied with face-to-face interactions and exchange of ideas in group settings. This was demonstrated by people listening and responding with smiles and eye contact. Salic felt very happy about group discussion: 'I feel happy for that 'cause they really care about what you are saying.' As students came from different backgrounds, they could come up with many fresh ideas that were useful for students to understand the theoretical concepts and to complete their assigned projects in a positive way. Avinda found such group discussion very helpful and constructive. Although sometimes group discussion could go off on a tangent, she enjoyed the 'friendly and relaxed' learning environment: 'Sometimes, I'm so surprised to hear someone came up with some ideas we never thought about, and they're so interesting to discuss in groups.'

Group members came from different social, cultural, ethnic and religious backgrounds with different beliefs, values, attitudes, and conceptualisations about teaching and learning, together with their team competing demands on their time and interest, and heterogeneity from the natural abilities of the members (Chang, Arkin, Leong, Chan, Leung 2004). All of these could impact upon group dynamics and results of group work. Group work played an important role in developing students' ability and skills to manage and resolve conflicts that arose in the process. Tony indicates, 'Sometimes you give up your idea to follow other people. Sometimes there can be too many ideas.'

A difficulty in making friends has been a perennial problem for international students (Ward & Masgoret 2004). Asian students, having experienced difficulties making friends with domestic and other international students, saw group discussions as opportunities to meet and make new

friends. Queena, for instance, made friends amongst different groups through group work. She claimed she could have never made as many friends if it had not been for group work.

Our research suggests that even after the group disbands the members remain friends. Sometimes, they continue to meet for exam preparation. One of the best outcomes from a group experience has been those members who have continued to work together in other papers. Having cooperated before, and having a good understanding of group norms and group culture, they are able to go straight to the tasks. Mackie, with some positive experience in group work, studied in a group to prepare for assignments and final exams: 'That worked for me very well because maybe I don't know the question very well. I can ask them and then they can teach me, and if they don't know the question they have a problem. Then I can help them as well. It was a positive experience.'

Attitudes, Group Assignments

A group assignment requires students to complete an assignment as a group with shared marks. The marks for each individual are determined by the performance of the group. Group assignments aim to develop students' understanding of teamwork, skills in coordination, collaboration, contribution, sharing, and dedication. Many Asian students expressed ambivalent feelings about the group bonding. Many factors influenced the group dynamics, such as members' perceptions, attitudes and willingness to cooperate and contribute as a team. An important role in the outcome of group work is group members' perceptions of and attitudes towards group assignments play. As mentioned above, most Asian students enjoyed group work where they could discuss their academic issues but unanimously disliked group assignments where all members shared the same marks regardless of the contribution made by the members. To many participants, this practice seemed to penalize bright and hardworking students and reward dull and lazy ones, and promote laziness and irresponsibility at the sacrifice of the efforts of hardworking students. Sunny and Jane felt intensely negative about this experience and found it to be an unfair and unreasonable practice. Jane pointed out: 'I hate it, I exactly hate assignment group, group assignment, because from all my past experiences the other member are not really cooperate with each other. They don't help each other to try to complete group assignment done before the due date. Always finish at the last minute so I hate it and it is hard for everyone to get together to get the assignment done.' Mackie felt very sad that she had to do group assignments. She said she always got very high marks when she did her own individual work, but she got terribly low marks for group assignments.

One of the problems in group assignments is inequality of contributions by group members. Most participants mentioned free riders as a source of stress and a disruptive force. Many said that, without free riders, they would enjoy group work. Mackie had been in several groups and had similar experiences with free riders. She said that it happened in all groups irrespective of the ethnic backgrounds of group members. Resentment, by those who worked hard, was a common feeling towards students who received good marks for little or no contribution. Avinda said that these 'slack' students and free riders did not do anything in the group, and they simply copied what other good and hardworking students had done, but they were given the same marks. She said, 'That's really, really painful to me.' Most participants viewed groups negatively when the individual contribution to the group was not recognised in mark allocation and that each group member received equal marks, irrespective of their contribution. Group work that is not associated with marks was viewed more positively and participants identified a number of benefits.

Within groups, varying linguistic and writing skills presented problems. When roles were ascribed, some participants reported that some members' contributions were of poor quality in terms of substance. Different writing styles, levels of grammar and syntax styles, and knowledge of academic conventions posed a dilemma for the group leaders who often rewrote parts in an effort to improve the quality and to make the assignment more cohesive, all with the primary objective of raising the marks. This happened particularly when students undertook their own part of the work without much consultation with others. Distributing tasks with group members performing these in isolation resulted in a poor outcome. There was lack of flow and overall cohesion was missing. Often as leaders they did far more than their fair share of the workload as seen from Salic's own

experience: 'I was the leader of the team and I was trying to lead a team to be a good team, try to respect each other, like help you, help me – cooperation. It is very important, especially for a team. Last semester I do have a good mark from the group assignment and I thought if I do it individual I don't think I can get that good mark.'

Different students had different ways to manage their time. In terms of group assignments, time management became a serious issue. The nominal group leaders generally did not have any authority to put pressure on the members whose poor time management was an issue. Leaving things to the last minute was common. Sunny pointed out that 'I write properly for my part of the assignment but other people just they are lazy, they didn't contribute, they just wrote something that is useless and our overall mark come down.'

The Issues of Group Organisation and Leadership

Participants frequently commented that the process of group work was harder than working alone as individuals because they had to liaise with others. Commitment to other papers and part-time jobs made it logistically difficult to find common times to meet. Even with emails and texting, finding suitable times to meet proved a time-consuming process. Most participants viewed the planning of times for regular meetings and agreement on division of labour as key contributors to successful outcomes or as communication barriers. Setting goals and some ground rules for the assignment task were identified as important, especially if some group members' wanted a high mark rather than just a pass. Maintaining group harmony rather than challenging each other's views or offering conflicting views was seen as a high priority for participants. This often resulted in their remaining silent when problems arose because challenging somebody's views could be interpreted as disrupting group harmony (Cheng 1999). Modesty, respect for authority and assertiveness are not encouraged in many Asian societies (DeVito 2000; Nieli 2004). Many Asian students were reluctant to identify and acknowledge their strengths, making it difficult to assign particular tasks. Who should assume the leadership role was often an issue as group members were reluctant to assert themselves. Identifying each group member's talents and distribute tasks based on these was extremely difficult. The division of labour was a particular challenge in the early stage of group development. However, in order to achieve good marks, some participants stated that they volunteered to assume the leadership role in an attempt to take some control of the process and to ensure a good assignment mark.

Issues with Student Grouping

Most participants reported that their group work took place within groups that consisted of only Chinese students or eighty to ninety percent of Chinese students. Mandarin instead of English became a means of communication. Students' desire to improve their English skills through group discussions in English was not acknowledged. Besides, these same-ethnicity groups came from the same cultural backgrounds and there were limitations with regard to issues beyond their cultural perspectives. For example, many participants claimed that they had little knowledge of business contexts in New Zealand and other parts of the world. The same-ethnicity grouping, or grouping with one particular ethnic group dominating, limited the opportunity for acquiring such knowledge.

When the participants entered the university, and even after a period of study at the university, they were unsure how to establish and develop functioning groups, uncertain about expected roles and uneasy about establishing relationships with strangers, particularly strangers having a better command of English. Most preferred to choose their own group members rather than being assigned to groups by the lecturers. Groups organised by lecturers tended to start with less positive attitudes, yet groups of friends did not always work out either. In groups where everyone was of the same ethnicity, their native language was the predominant language of communication despite an expressed desire to speak in English and improve language ability in the host culture. Often in groups that are 100% Chinese students, the language chosen was Mandarin, the rationale being that it helped them express themselves more clearly and comprehensively. This irritated some participants who considered that improving their English was a significant reason for being in the new culture. Rikki conceded that by not speaking English the students were being lazy and making it more difficult for themselves to communicate in English. There were occasions when

groups had only one member from another minority group. In Sam's most recent group, he was the only one who wasn't Chinese. This created a problem because the other participants all spoke their native language and he felt left out. He was resentful because he came to New Zealand to learn English.

DISCUSSION

The results of this research suggest that Asian students viewed group work positively where they can discuss the course related topics and issues, interact and make friends with other students from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds, and develop their problem-solving and interpersonal communication skills, and other skills such as conflict management and resolution, team building, collaboration and sustainability. However, they hold an intensely negative view about group assignments that require students to complete an assigned task as a group with shared marks. Therefore the effectiveness of the constructivist approach in the form of group work depends on collaborative tasks, activities, topics, students' interest, perceptions of the relevance, expectations, motivations, language skills, study load, time management, leadership, teaching approaches, the composition of the group, instructional skills, and learning contexts (Tiong & Yong 2004; Volet 1999). These findings challenge some stereotypes that view Asian students as passive and reproductive learners with no interest or enthusiasm in participating in group work (Ballard & Clanchy 1984).

Collaborative learning is not unfamiliar to Asian students (Jung & Sosik 2002). However, what is practised in New Zealand tertiary institutional is a real challenge. They have difficulty identifying the congruence which can help them adapt sooner. Cultural differences reflect in the adoption of the constructivist approach that emphasises 'self-regulation theory of learning' (Volet 1999, p. 628), active interactions with other group members, co-construction of knowledge, talking, and debating contradict what Asian students are familiar with: classroom conformity, competition, ranking, group harmony, face saving, and respect for authority (in lecturers and books).

What remains to be a problem is often unarticulated. Lecturers often assume that 'the learning process and activities valued in the host Western environment represent universal norms and that any deviations from it are cognitive, behavioural or social deficits' (Volet 1999, p. 628) and they often ignore the training and time needed for Asian students to adapt and to transfer their skills acquired in their home country. The onus rests on students' responsibility to adapt, to 'cross-culturally manage themselves... to manage cultural differences at the interpersonal level...and institutional level' (Sizoo & Serrie 2004), sink or swim. Without proper training for both students and lecturers, Sizoo and Serrie argue, cultural sensitivity and understanding may not increase, regardless of years of stay in the host country.

In fact, the constructivist approach emphasises the importance of co-construction of knowledge between instructors and students and among students themselves (Cross 1998). Our research findings demonstrate that what was practised by some lecturers at the university was collaboration among students only and lecturers did not seem to have any responsibilities. Students were left alone to form their own groups or to wait for lecturers to organise groups for them. Students lacked skills that are needed for group assignments but such skills had not been taught: stages in group work, team building, conflict resolution, the decision-making process, time management, coping with diversity in cultures, ethnicities, language skills, religions, ages, and interests. To many Asian students, they felt they had been abandoned and that they were asked to produce more than they what was taught. This generated a very negative response among participants. For example, Jie held a very negative view about the teaching approaches that were perceived to be irresponsible: 'I feel that it's more like, people [lecturers] are more selfish. They won't care about you. ... so you have to do it all by yourself.' Similarly, Jack also felt that there was a lack of belonging at the university. If the constructivist or collaborative approaches are to be effective, lecturers' roles have to be brought into play.

One theme that emerged from this research is that a teaching approach that emphasises group work and assignments is perceived to lack a sense of competition. This reflects the cultural impact

these Asian students had from their host societies where learning involves competition (Phuong-Mai, Cees, & Pilot 2006). Such a cultural value runs counter to the constructivist approach. Within the learning group, some Asian students feel disoriented when competition does not exist. Sam who came from Cambodia pointed out that in her culture, competition for excellence was the target of learning. Sharing knowledge with others, she argued, was not in agreement with her cultural beliefs.

According to Schofield (2006), one fundamental core component of constructivism is that knowledge is individually constructed as a result of 'the activation of the senses' and 'it involves testing ideas and thoughts against prior knowledge and experience, and integrating the new knowledge and/or understanding with pre-existing intellectual constructs'(p. 2). It is concerned with students' prior learning experience or schema, perceptions, expectations, attitudes, personal feelings, and subjectivity (Bae 2004). Our research findings show lecturers' do not consider this core component in collaborative group learning. For example, when most students had negative attitudes toward group assignments, when Asian students' prior learning experiences and intellectual constructs did not match what was practised, students were still forced to do group assignments, without taking students' feelings into account and without evaluating pedagogical effectiveness.

Globalisation has an enormous impact upon higher education. Post-modernists believe that in this 'liquid modernity' (Bauman 2000), the only thing that is certain is uncertainty. What we firmly believe in, such as collaborative learning, group work and group assignments, is seriously challenged. While we expect Asian international students to adapt, lecturers also need to adapt. Collaboration and cooperation between teachers and students can help both parties to embrace changes, cross each other's cultural border, find more congruence, and achieve each other's goals. It would be unethically appropriate to require international students to change while lecturers stay put.

This study reveals some of the serious concerns in Asian students' voices with regard to their perceptions of group work and group assignments. However, we acknowledge that there are some limitations in this research. Firstly, the sampling is relatively small, especially the non-Chinese ethnic groups with only one student from each, and the findings may not necessarily represent the overall views of all Asian international students. Secondly, our research did not involve domestic students to identify their views about group learning. It would be worthwhile comparing the views of both international and domestic students. Thirdly, classroom intercultural communication involves both students and lecturers. Our research studied the voices of Asian international students only. Research in lecturers' views of and attitudes towards group work and assignments could be conducive to a better understanding of the challenges faced by both students and lecturers.

CONCLUSION

This study examines Asian students' attitudes toward and perceptions of collaborative learning based on constructivism, which emphasises co-construction of knowledge through collaboration and cooperation, 'non-transmitted ways of classroom instruction' (Bae 2004, p. 1), in the form of group learning. The study finds that Asian students value the significance of classroom group discussions, where they can interact with students from other cultures and backgrounds, improve their English language skills, enhance their cultural understanding, develop intercultural communication skills, and secure possible opportunities to make friends. However, most Asian students feel disheartened, helpless and desperate participating in group assignments that require them to complete a project with shared marks determined by the performance of the group. The emerging themes with regard to their negative attitudes include the composition of the group, members' attitudes towards and perceptions of the relevance of the assigned group tasks and activities, skills in group communication, time management, problem-solving, conflict management and resolution, understanding of the decision-making process, different levels of language and writing skills, and different interests and expectations. The study suggests that collaborative learning with constructivism as its theoretical base has its strengths and weaknesses. In terms of pedagogy, constructivism values collaboration between lecturers and students and among students

themselves. It also considers students' needs, interests, cultural values, beliefs and prior learning experiences. We recommend that both lecturers and Asian students accommodate classroom and pedagogical changes, are willing to cross each other's cultural borders, and finally adopt a win-win approach to achieve each other's goals.

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