

2019

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Recommended Citation

Chan, E. Y. (2019). Blended Learning Dilemma: Teacher Education in the Confucian Heritage Culture. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 44(1).

<http://dx.doi.org/10.14221/ajte.2018v44n1.3>

This Journal Article is posted at Research Online.

<https://ro.ecu.edu.au/ajte/vol44/iss1/3>

Blended Learning Dilemma: Teacher Education in the Confucian Heritage Culture

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Abstract: With the rapid development of Internet technologies, higher education institutions have adopted blended learning to engage students in active learning and enhance their learning outcomes. This study investigated 261 preservice student teachers participating in a teacher education programme that was based on a blended learning design. Questionnaires and focus group interviews were administered to obtain data. The purpose of this study was to understand student' perceptions of blended learning and examine how the interaction between traditional and constructivist conceptions influences learning. The result indicated that the participants favoured face-to-face lectures over e-learning, and they exhibited strong preferences for traditional modes of learning. The author suggests that there is still some way to go before students fully engage with online learning but, as they are rooted in the Confucian heritage culture, this can also be used to encourage students to engage with this mode of learning as the process of transformation.

Introduction

Concerns over education quality have led to teacher education reforms in many countries (Anchan Fullan & Polyzoi, 2003; Darling-Hammond, 2006; Pantić, 2012). In Hong Kong, such concerns have resulted in reform efforts aimed at equipping teachers to be agents of change (Hong Kong Institute of Education, 2013; Ho, 2017). Chan and Elliot (2004) stressed that student teachers should be encouraged to participate more actively in reflective teaching in order to reduce their overdependence on authoritarian sources of knowledge in their learning. However, because of the challenges of such traditions as didactic teaching and passive learning, the reforms have not been as successful as expected. In Asia, students' passiveness towards learning is generally perceived to be shaped by Confucian heritage culture (CHC). Tran (2013) challenged this conception as an overgeneralisation with the argument that CHC learners can "adjust to active forms of learning if given the opportunity" (p. 64). With the rapid development of Internet technologies, higher education institutions (HEIs) have adopted blended learning as an innovative learning and teaching approach to engage students in active learning and enhance their learning outcomes. To drive and support blended learning, in our institution, hands-on technology-focused workshops (e.g., the functions and features of Moodle, Mahara, Echo 360, Adobe Connect and Turnitin) were organised for teaching staff. In our faculty, 83% of teaching staff used Moodle for blended learning in 2014-15. User statistics have shown a significant growth in the blended learning user base within the institution. Given that Hong Kong student

teachers represent a general Chinese approach associated with learning (Chan, 2015; Chan & Elliot, 2004), they may be unable to cope in a blended environment. Zheng (2013) suggested that a critical examination of student teachers' perceptions of learning would assist in informing future practices on blended learning classrooms because learning beliefs vary between cultural groups. This study was undertaken to investigate two related questions.

- (1) What are student teachers' perceptions of blended learning in the CHC context?
- (2) How does the interaction between traditional and constructivist conceptions influence learning?

The Context

Hong Kong's learning environment is distinct. As a British colony for more than 150 years, Hong Kong Chinese learners have incorporated both Eastern and Western cultural systems (Hong et al., 2000; Hayhoe, 2011). Studies investigating the epistemological beliefs of Hong Kong student teachers have revealed that the factors influencing the teacher's belief are complex and linked to cultural contexts (Chan, 2015; Chan & Elliott, 2004). Traditionally, researchers have used CHC as a context for understanding Chinese students as learners (Dasari, 2009; Education Bureau, 2017; Higgins & Zheng, 2002; Lau & Yeung, 1996).

Confucian Heritage Culture and Learning Outcomes

In the CHC context, Chinese parents always place high expectations on their children's academic success. The concepts of success and failure relate not only to the individual ego, but also to the family and society as a whole, and are therefore crucial in motivating children to learn. Achieving good assessment results is pragmatically appreciated, because academic success is considered a means to attaining social mobility (Kennedy, 2002). From early in their education, Hong Kong children are required to concentrate on studying because success is more likely to be attributed to effort and willpower than to inherited ability or intelligence (Li, 2002; Rao, Cheng & Narain, 2003). Collectivism, one of the prominent features in Chinese culture is regarded as a "causal factor in the determination of high motivation for performance for students in the Hong Kong school system" (Dasari 2009, p.49). Hong Kong students performed well in major international assessments, such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), and these results are promising and note-worthy for high appreciation. However, Education Bureau (2017) stated that there is a need to investigate why our students have a high level of achievement but low self-concept, and low motivation and engagements in lessons.

Hong Kong currently provides 15 years of free education in which secondary schools are ranked and identified by a 'banding' rating system from bands 1 to 3. Chan's (2012) study revealed that the school banding system further encourages exam-oriented culture in Hong Kong. Research showed that Hong Kong students experience highly content-based, textbook-driven and didactic teaching approaches in schools that are solely assessed by tests and examinations. Their performance and attitudes revealed some typical characteristics of Chinese learners. Kember (2000, 2009) demonstrated that Hong Kong students adopted the surface approach to learning owing to the reproductive assessment orientation in their educational context, but he emphasized that they also tried both to understand learning contents and to commit them to memory for good assessment marks.

Confucian culture emphasizes order, stability, hierarchy, self-discipline and obedience. Chinese classrooms are comparatively more 'authoritarian' than Western classrooms (Salili, Chiu & Lai, 2001). Chinese learners are used to a hierarchical relationship with the teacher as a leader, but this relationship also incorporates a warm and caring approach as well as mutual respect and acceptance. However, students in Hong Kong are generally considered as passive and rote learners (Chan, 2017). According to Mok (2005), Hong Kong Chinese undergraduates appear to view their teacher as the 'expert' and prefer the teacher to provide the 'best' solution. As a result, students entering tertiary education are predisposed to a 'rote' learning approach, the cause of this phenomenon is identified either with their school experiences, learning preferences or some mixture of these. Law et al. (2009) reported that although pedagogical innovations have been introduced in Chinese communities such as Hong Kong, teachers continue to struggle to reconcile the tensions between satisfying the demand for examination preparedness and engaging in new modes of learning. Meanwhile, school teachers are slowly moving from traditional teaching methods to constructivist approaches in teaching that cultivate divergent thinking and creativity (Rao, Ng, & Pearson, 2009). While changes gradually occurred in HEIs, it is necessary to conduct systematic studies that actually look into the learning approaches exhibited by students from the secondary system, or any changes that might occur as a result of their tertiary experiences. Popular discourse claims that higher education in Hong Kong has undergone pedagogical reforms for shifting to a more constructivist approach, but far stronger empirical evidence is needed to support this claim.

Hong Kong Chinese Student Teachers' Conception of Learning

For more than a century of British rule, Western political, economic and educational ideas and systems were introduced in Hong Kong. Hayhoe (2011) acknowledged that Hong Kong has a set of educational resources arising from the British heritage and its synergies with Confucian values, and such resources could be extremely valuable in implementing future reforms. With the implementation of education reforms in the 2000s, Hong Kong Chinese secondary school students and teachers have shown that they can engage in new modes of learning (Law et al., 2009). Secondary school students were found to value knowledge-building processes for solving authentic problems and appreciated the importance of idea diversity when engaging in peer discussions to improve ideas. Technological tools (e.g., online forums) to support collaborative knowledge building have been adopted by students who have grown up in an increasingly digital world. Students' learning has gone beyond the roles of memorisation and understanding, indicating the emergence of a new epistemology that includes an understanding of how collaboration provides intellectual stimulation for idea diversity. Dasari (2009) revealed in his study that Hong Kong Chinese undergraduates tend to work cooperatively in small group situations but do not respond to direct questions in lecture situations. Their study behaviour is interpreted as collaborative and cooperative in seeking understanding. In supporting the movement towards a more constructivist approach for Chinese undergraduates, many teacher education programmes have incorporated views of reflection into their course structure. Teacher educators (for example, Chan, 2015; Yu & Lau, 2011) have adopted inquiry-based approach to promote pre-service teachers as creative and reflective thinkers. Yu and Lau (2011) expressed concerns over the relationship between learning experiences and outcomes when more time must be invested in the inquiry process. This is the dilemma teachers have faced when adopting a constructivist approach in their teaching under time constraints. Although Hong Kong has gone

through various stages of the reform movement to foster student-centred learning, experiential learning, creative thinking and life-wide learning (Education and Manpower Bureau, 2005; University Grants Committee, 2010), research is needed to confirm trends towards this in HEIs. Since there is an emerging trend of adopting blended learning in higher education, this research is conducted to verify whether it is useful in its implementation to promote independent learning and critical thinking skills with the challenge of the Confucian culture.

Rao and Chan (2009) indicated that the new educational policies and reforms introduced to CHC systems have necessitated a new understanding of Chinese learners regarding their conceptions of teaching and learning. Considering that traditional teaching methods may exacerbate the passivity and reflective abilities of Hong Kong Chinese students, most institutions are being encouraged to move towards more online and blended learning to improve learning outcomes.

The Blended Learning Approach

With rapid advancements in technologies used in education, many higher education institutions (HEIs) in Hong Kong are adopting blended learning to engender transformations in teaching and learning practices. According to Garrison and Vaughan (2008), blended learning “is the organic integration of thoughtfully selected and complementary face-to-face and online approaches and technologies” (p. 148). Researchers have asserted that blended learning can enhance both the effectiveness and efficiency of meaningful learning experiences (e.g. Garrison & Vaughan, 2013; Twigg, 2003). Through the blending of text-based asynchronous Internet technology with face-to-face learning, students can benefit from increased time and spatial flexibility for their study, wider and easier access to learning resources, and a higher level of autonomy in regulating their learning.

The shift from traditional teaching methods to blended learning approaches is driven by not only rapid technological developments but also the urge to meet expectations regarding improving the quality of learning experiences. Researchers (Cheng, et al., 2009) suggested that teacher education programmes in Hong Kong should model a teaching/learning environment that is consistent with the constructivist approach instead of encouraging passive reception of knowledge from authority figures. In this study, blended learning means integrating the online and face-to-face formats to create a more effective learning experience than either medium can produce alone. By combining the power of asynchronous discussion and classroom learning activities in a synergistic relationship, blended learning becomes a constructivist approach which has the potential to transform teacher education. In Toe et al.’s (2008,) view, an integration of technology into the classroom has provided the motivation for teacher educators to “engage in continual improvements in the curriculum to equip teachers who could cope with the multifarious demands in the school environment” (p. 170). According to Farmer’s (2005) study, “technology increases opportunities and means to express facts and perspectives, and facilitates metacognitive processes; participants can transcend reactive activity and become more engaged and productive” (p. 12). Thus, blended learning has emerged as a constructivist mode of learning, presenting a special challenge to the traditional classroom.

Blended learning supports student teachers to become active learners if students are considered as knowers to construct knowledge at their own pace. In addition, it is particularly effective to promote students’ active learning and reflective thinking when students are engaged

in a community of inquiry. Garrison and Kanuka (2004) stated that whether face-to-face or online, a community of inquiry consists of three elements: cognitive, social, and teaching presence. According to Garrison and Kanuka (2004), “the sense of community and belonging must be on a cognitive and social level if the goal of achieving higher levels of learning is to be sustained” (p. 97). Therefore, it is advantageous to organise several face-to-face classes at the beginning of a blended course to build a sense of community. When complex issues requiring reflection are discussed, tasks are more effectively and efficiently accomplished through an asynchronous online discussion forum. Because teaching presence manages the environment and facilitates learning experiences, teachers’ efforts aimed at creating opportunities for critical discourse and reflective thinking are vital to successfully implementing blended learning. This notion of design is based upon building a fully ‘student-centred’ environment. It focuses on the students’ learning, and that learning is a reflective and interactive process in which the role of teacher is a facilitator (Biggs, 1999; Kember, 1997).

Many studies on blended learning have focused on students’ preference of learning. For example, undergraduate students in Israel were shown to resist e-learning and prefer traditional methods (Rubbin & Sarid, 2007); however, their American counterparts were reported to demonstrate that competitiveness rather than cooperation determines the average intensity of their participation in electronic discussion boards (Hwang & Arbaugh, 2009). Clarifying students’ perceptions of blended learning in this study is critical because it enriches the literature on understanding the implementation of blended learning in a Chinese or multi-cultural context.

The Study

Students were requested to have undertaken at least one course using the blended learning approach to ensure that they had relevant experience before answering the study questionnaire. The course lecturers and the researcher cooperated in designing the course and developing the online materials. Learning materials available on-line through the Learning Management System (LMS) included the course outline, assignment descriptions, and some teaching materials in PowerPoint format. External links to websites were provided for extended learning. In the current study, face-to-face lectures played a major role in course delivery, with e-learning accounting for 30% of the course time. Students were encouraged to study the online learning materials at their own pace and discuss the online work with their peers. Interactive learning was used in the form of online learning tasks and discussion boards. Online tasks: for example, quiz, definition of terms and a reflection of the class activity were organised to foster students’ independent learning skills. They were required to complete two online tasks and to participate in online discussions. Asynchronous online group discussions over the reading material and video were included in the courses so that the students could interact with the lecturers and learning peers for a deeper experience in learning the subject content through the LMS.

An understanding of student teacher’s perception of learning would assist in informing future practices on blended learning classrooms. It is important to examine student teachers’ belief about learning, including their choices and decisions, teaching methods and the construction of their learning objectives, all of which influence education in many ways. Yilmaz and Sahin (2011) suggested that teachers’ conceptions of teaching could be examined under the traditional and constructivist categories of teaching practices. Studies on Hong Kong Chinese student teachers’ epistemological beliefs and approaches to learning have shown that teachers

tend not to believe that knowledge is certain or unchanging, but they believe that authoritarian or expert knowledge from authority figures (e.g., teachers) is certain and unchanging (Chan & Elliot, 2004; Cheng et al., 2009).

Participants

All of the full-time preservice student teachers (first to fourth year) pursuing a 4-year undergraduate degree in education at a university in Hong Kong were invited to participate in the study on a voluntarily basis. To maintain anonymity and confidentiality, pseudonyms were used for all the participants, and all data collected during the study period were kept confidential. To meet the requirements of the ethical review committee in our institution, the participants gave informed consent to demonstrate that they were clear on the study aims and procedures as well as their right to withdraw from the study without penalty of any kind. Out of 303 students, a total of 261 returned their questionnaires (response rate = 86.1%); the final sample comprised 77, 71, 54, and 59 students from the first, second, third, and fourth years, respectively. All of the participants were ethnically Chinese and ranged in age from 19 to 23 years. Apart from two male students, all the participants were female students. The marked contrast in the gender ratio was due to the actual enrolment figures for the whole group, rather than purposeful sampling. Focus group interviews were scheduled on a class-by-class basis, with a total of 60 students comprised 16, 17, 13 and 14 students from the first, second, third, and fourth years, respectively.

Instruments

Questionnaire Survey

The questionnaire contained 28 items, of which 14 were questions related to students' previous experience with e-learning, course format preferences and satisfactions with the blended learning approach. The remaining 14 items were statements on a 5-point Likert scale to understand students' learning preferences in blended learning (see Table 2). It was developed on the basis of key issues raised in the literature (Ausburn, 2004), and the dichotomous modes of learning between Chinese and Western students (Li, 2009). The questionnaire was trialled on a random sample of full-time students. Feedback was drawn from both students and teacher educators before the final survey was disseminated. Following a preliminary analysis of the questionnaire data, keywords were drawn up for use in unstructured interview questions.

Focus Group Interviews

Using systematic sampling on a class-by-class basis, follow-up focus group interviews were scheduled to enable an in-depth examination of the students' views. Five to seven students from each class were sampled systematically on a voluntary basis, with a total of 60 students participating in the interviews. An interview protocol was established to ensure that research ethics were followed, keeping the participants adequately informed of the research aims and ensuring their anonymity. The interview questions were developed according to the research aims and a preliminary analysis of the questionnaire data. They were classified in four main categories: (i) Students' learning experiences on face-to-face lectures and e-learning. (ii)

Effectiveness of blended learning in promoting independent learning and critical thinking skills. (iii) Comments regarding the use of face-to-face lectures as a mode of instruction whether value-added when compared with e-learning. (iv) An example that indicates whether e-learning or face-to-face is a better way to learn.

Analysis

The results of students' perceptions of blended learning are presented in Tables 1 and 2. Table 1 displays results generated from the questionnaire using closed-ended (e.g., "yes" or "no") questions. Percentages are given to indicate the proportion of the total number of responses. Table 2 displays the mean scores of items that were answered using a 5-point Likert scale.

Students' Perceptions of Blended Learning

Regarding the usefulness of the blended learning approach, the results in Table 1 indicate that the students perceived the learning materials or related websites posted on the LMS as the most useful resource (83%) and asynchronous online discussions as the least useful (12%). Generally, they felt that the blended learning approach could promote independent learning (51%) more than critical thinking (22%). The students were asked to indicate their preferred course format, and the responses were 87% for face-to-face and 13% for e-learning. As the students noted in the interviews, they valued their lecturers' live explanation of the lecture notes (usually in PowerPoint form) or their sharing of experience, both of which they believed would help them link theory to practice:

We are preservice teachers and we are inexperienced. I think [lectures] not only communicate knowledge but also enable the lecturers to share their experience with us. We can apply this to our own experience and relate it to the theories. It is good. There is no relevant example in the books . . . (Second-year student, P)

Numerous studies have indicated that the successful pedagogical use of blended learning depends on students' attitudes and acceptance towards online learning. As shown in Table 1, the students in the present study expressed both positive and negative opinions regarding the blended learning approach; this is consistent with the results of Browne, Mehra, Rattan, and Thomas (2004), who reported that students appreciated receiving learning materials and responses from the LMS but expressed concern about the isolation associated with online learning approaches.

Item	Descriptions	Responses (n = 261)
1.	Usefulness of learning materials/websites posted on the LMS	83%
2.	Usefulness of online tasks	60%
3.	Additional learning picked up from e-learning	23%
4.	Usefulness of asynchronous online discussions	12%
5.	Usefulness of blended learning in promoting independent learning	51%
6.	Usefulness of blended learning in promoting critical thinking	22%
7.	Preference to learn by face-to-face lecture	87%
8.	Preference to learn by e-learning	13%

Table 1: Students’ perceptions of blended learning

Regarding the positive aspects of blended learning, the students in the present study indicated that the information posted on the LMS was a useful resource for them, particularly when completing an assignment:

It served as a good reference for me when doing an assignment. I can go and revisit those written on the discussion boards, the web links, etc. they will give me ideas . . . (Second-year student, G)

We may have questions but some of us may not be brave enough to speak up [in class] . . . online discussion boards can help in this way. . . . Online learning tasks can help us to reflect on what we are learning. (Third-year student, K)

Regarding the negative aspects of blended learning, the students perceived writing through the LMS as time-consuming. As some students noted in the interviews, “online discussions were ineffective and could be done more effectively through paper-based assignments” (First-year student, A, B & K). As indicated in Table 1, the students gave relatively negative opinions regarding the usefulness of asynchronous online discussions. Only 12% of them agreed that this format of discussion was useful for their studies. The students indicated a strong preference for learning through face-to-face lectures, which echoes the findings of the study by Lanham and Zhou (2003), in which Chinese students preferred face-to-face learning over e-learning. From my own experiences, the success of any initiatives to implement technology in an educational programme depends strongly on the support and attitudes of the students involved. Research suggested that if students believe or perceive e-learning not to be fulfilling their own learning needs, they are unlikely to accept technology into their learning (Toe et al., 2008). Indeed, there was a criticism of how the tasks were organized by the lecturer and this reminded us to pay more attention to the issue of integration. As stated by the students “it was unnecessary to discuss tasks further online, since they had already been discussed in class” (Second-year students, A & C).

Students' Learning Preferences in Blended Learning

The items were ranked according to the mean scores from highest ($M = 3.84$) to lowest ($M = 2.91$). Notably, the items from the upper part of the table can be categorised as traditional conceptions and those from the lower part as constructivist conceptions.

According to the mean score of the questionnaire items (see Table 2), the students favoured traditional approaches to learning. The students exhibited relatively strong agreement that knowing the assessment method ($M = 3.84$, $SD = 0.67$), collecting lecture notes ($M = 3.83$, $SD = 0.61$), identifying resources ($M = 3.8$, $SD = 0.65$), and attending lectures ($M = 3.78$, $SD = 0.68$) were critical to improving learning outcomes. They also indicated a high level of value in both interactions with the lecturer and their peers ($M = 3.72$, $SD = 0.66$) and step-by-step guidance from lecturers ($M = 3.72$, $SD = 0.65$). Similar to traditional Chinese learners, they were diligent but rather passive and dependent. Generally, as indicated in Table 2, the students expressed positive opinions towards the traditional mode of learning, a finding that is consistent with the findings of Lanham and Zhou (2003), who revealed that Chinese students were unfamiliar with e-learning or constructive modes of learning that required them to learn proactively and acquire knowledge at their own pace. They indulged in step-by-step guided learning and therefore, felt uneasy when completing online tasks alone. What they expected was clear instructions and immediate feedback from lecturers:

I think lecturers' guides are very important. . . . It is necessary for the lecturer to make clear the guidelines on what should we do, what responses are expected from us. Or, specifically tell us the expected responses. It is not good to be too general. And it is necessary for us to know what response the lecturer will make [to our online work]. (Fourth-year student, A)

The traditional teaching approach is teacher-centric and focuses on the transmission of correct knowledge (Rao, Cheng, & Narain, 2003). As noted in Tables 1 and 2, the students showed a strong preference for face-to-face lectures, and they perceived in-class discussions ($M = 3.52$, $SD = 0.62$) as more helpful than asynchronous online discussions ($M = 2.91$, $SD = 0.64$). Nevertheless, the students valued learning from discussions but rejected online discussions for the following reasons:

If we want to discuss, [it is better] for us to discuss ideas in class. . . . Written responses through the online discussion are routine and brief because we write just what was required by module lecturers. (First-year student, B)

It appears that online discussions are discussions among peers in the same group. During class, we have discussions followed by a summary from the lecturer. [Through the lecturer's summaries], we know whether our views are correct and whether we have misunderstood anything. Also, [the lecturer] will give us some supplementary [information]. I believe the input from the lecturer is important, and that is better than discussing online. [Online discussions] are like sharing among peer students only, without knowing whether these views are correct or not . . . or [I am not sure] whether there is anything wrong with my work. (Third-year student, E)

Traditionally, teacher educators are university-based researchers who transmit formal knowledge and theory (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999). The nature of knowledge is regarded as something that must be learned or understood with presumed certainty. This implies that students are empty vessels, passive knowledge receivers, and accumulators. In this conception, students

usually seek assurance or approval from their teachers after peer discussions or sharing. As one third-year student said:

[The lecturers' comments] are more authoritative. We will probably doubt [our peers' comments] but we believe more in our teachers. (Third-year student, E)

As indicated by the results of the present study, Hong Kong students tend to accept knowledge from the teacher without questioning. They are inclined towards the traditional Chinese mode of learning but open to suggestions for adopting constructivist approaches. Given that both students and teachers go through a similar process of constructing and reconstructing their theory of practice, it is crucial that teacher educators take the initiative to accept innovations in teaching to bring about change for their students. Hou et al. (2009) proposed a problem-solving strategy to promote knowledge-sharing within online educational groups in the context of e-learning. The adoption of technological tools is already assumed by students who have grown up in an increasingly digital world (Law et al., 2009). However, students are extrinsically motivated to participate in e-learning because they will prioritise their work according to the marking criteria of the assessment. As one student said:

If one of the e-learning tasks carries marks and others did not, of course I'd deal with the one that carries marks first. Whether I'd finish the un-assessed e-learning tasks or not would depend on whether I have extra time. How much participation would there be in those un-assessed tasks? . . . [My participation would] certainly be affected by the low response rate of a certain task. (First-year student, N)

The interview data showed that academic success, in the form of grades, was crucial and might influence students' perceived quality of learning. Online tasks or discussions for which marks are not allocated may result in very low participation rates, low-quality input, and minimal additional learning. The students proposed that e-learning tasks should account for approximately 5%–20% of a course's total marks, depending on the nature and scope of the tasks. If more marks were allocated, the students would put additional effort into their work. As stated by first-year student K, “[We] are really pragmatic. If there is a 10% mark for the online tasks . . . we will definitely participate in them.”

The survey results also showed that the students acknowledged the importance of the learning process ($M = 3.56$, $SD = 0.75$) and took the initiative to plan their work ($M = 3.46$, $SD = 0.72$). The findings indicated that Hong Kong student teachers' conceptions of teaching and learning comprise both traditional and constructivist conception dimensions. Accordingly, although a shift to the constructivist approach is possible, this type of change means that teachers must adjust their role by inspiring students to work together to achieve the intended learning outcomes.

Item Descriptions	Response Mean*	SD
1. Knowing the assessment method (e.g., exams, essays) is important for my learning	3.84	0.67
2. Lecture notes are important for my learning	3.83	0.61
3. Identifying the best possible resources (e.g., books, websites) is important for my learning	3.80	0.65
4. Lecture presentations are important for my learning	3.78	0.68
5. I prefer step-by-step guided learning from lecturer(s)	3.72	0.65
6. Interactions with the lecturer/my peers are important for my learning	3.72	0.65

7. Readings after lectures are important for my learning	3.68	0.70
8. I involve other people/peers in my learning	3.63	0.66
9. I prefer to learn at my own pace	3.58	0.72
10. The learning process is more important than the assessment results	3.56	0.75
11. Classroom discussions are helpful	3.52	0.62
12. I plan well so that I can complete learning activities successfully	3.46	0.72
13. I think of different ways to learn the materials	3.44	0.62
14. Asynchronous online discussions are helpful for my learning	2.91	0.64

* Based on a 5-point Likert scale where 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree

Table 2: Students' learning preferences in blended learning

Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to understand students' perceptions of blended learning in order to assist teacher educators in devising a pragmatic approach to meet the expectation of improving the quality of learning experiences. The results suggest that there is still some way to go before students fully engage with online learning but, as they are rooted in the CHC, this can also be used to encourage students to engage with this mode of learning. Teacher educators can play the role of mentors to show examples of online activities and encourage participation. It is also based on the belief that student teachers need to have practices modelled to them if they are to use them in class. With rapid advancements in technologies used in education, blended learning has emerged as a way to engage students through constructivist modes of learning. Efforts to integrate technologies in digital classroom, to foster student-centred learning, and encourage critical thinking also resonate with *Aspirations for the Higher Education System in Hong Kong* (University Grants Committee, 2010). A specific area of interest for the researchers was the students-teachers' response to the constructivist pedagogies afforded by these technologies, given the traditional CHC approaches to learning with which students are familiar.

User statistics have shown a significant growth in the blended learning user base within our institution. However, the actual potential of blended learning fell into question when user statistics revealed that the majority of online activities on Moodle involved the uploading of resources for students to download. Participants of this study also reported a preference for face-to-face lectures over e-learning. Student-teachers' conception of learning was that the authorities are more experienced and convincing and they, therefore, favoured traditional approaches over constructivist approaches. As mentioned earlier, under the long-term effect of schooling and/or cultural tradition, Hong Kong students have a high regard for authority and are therefore comfortable with a teacher-directed approach to study.

The researcher of this study suggests that student teachers need independent learning skills and the ability to construct knowledge in different educational settings so that they can teach this to their students. Changing student-teachers' conception of learning is not an easy process. It requires a collaborative effort between teacher educators and student teachers to make a shift from the traditional approaches to a new mode of learning. Connelly and Clandinin (2000) stressed that teachers' beliefs exert a great impact on knowledge construction and this informs practices. There are stereotypes existing in the literature about Chinese students as rote learners, passive knowledge receivers and accumulators (Ho, 1994; Salili, 1996). If teachers accept the stereotyped view, they may implement their pedagogical practices according to their beliefs about students' learning preferences (Dasari, 2009; Sakurai et al, 2014). Further, it is important that teachers in HEIs review their own understanding of their students based on empirical

evidences so that they can develop more effective blended learning strategies for students coming from the Confucian culture. In Sakurai et al.'s (2014) view, "teachers' biased expectations could result in an undesired pedagogical design, which may lead to a poor quality of student learning" (p. 137).

This study revealed that high-quality learning virtues, such as resolve, diligence and obedience, are deeply embedded in Hong Kong Chinese learners. A blended learning approach is recommended as an alternative way of teaching since it can facilitate active learning on the one hand but sustain the strength of the 'traditional' CHC approaches on the other. It is the professional judgments of teacher educators in deciding when each mode of course delivery is appropriate. At a certain point, direct instruction and interpersonal contact are considered necessary, especially in the latter years of the teacher education programme when student-teachers are having their teaching practices in the field. The roles of lecturers and peers in facilitating practitioners' knowledge are deemed important. It denotes CHC values of cultivating student teachers' human aspects, their observational skills, passion and commitment towards the profession.

Making the transition from a traditional face-to-face course to a blended learning course is a challenge, and instructors may be anxious about negative student feedback about e-learning. It is crucial that teachers of blended courses take extra care in explaining the purpose of the blending and inspire students to work at their own pace via online learning. In traditional Chinese cultural discourses, teachers are leaders since they have been positioned in the same league as other key cultural figures, including heaven, earth, the emperor and parents (Gao, 2008). The current study also confirmed that Hong Kong students are used to a hierarchical relationship with the teacher as a leader, and they tend to rely on teachers as generators of knowledge. Teacher educators can make use of this Confucian worldview to demonstrate themselves as role models for student teachers to adopt blended learning in their future classrooms. HEIs in Hong Kong are increasingly adopting blended learning, but the form of adoption is still at the stage of exploration. Borrowing Porter et al.'s (2014) view that future research may emphasize strategy, structures and support issues in relation to their progress in adopting blended learning. Their study has provided a framework that could be a reference for further investigations.

To conclude, the study findings indicate student resistance to e-learning, with a strong preference for traditional CHC approaches. Students' passiveness is rooted in CHC, their adaption of blended learning provides a starting point for shifting to a more active mode of learning. Blended learning complements traditional CHC approaches; it promotes active learning rather than the passive acceptance of knowledge from authority figures, and it is arguably a pragmatic approach in response to the bicultural characteristics of Hong Kong Chinese students. Developing blended courses is achievable, but the challenge remains whether the technology can be used in a constructivist way and students become more receptive to innovative teaching approaches.

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