

Ethnography Study: Effective Teaching in China

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Culture is cumulative; culture is found in groups of more than one, is passed from generation to generation, and experiences change. Harrison and Huntington (2000) posit culture is the “values, attitudes, beliefs, orientations, and underlying assumptions prevalent among people in a society” (p. xv). Culture is one of the driving forces that determine the success of a society (Berger & Huntington, 2002). Understanding different cultures can become a diverse and challenging endeavor under the best of circumstances. Research capabilities have added volumes of knowledge about how cultures are realized and understood amongst the multitude of different cultures existing and changing in today’s global world. In particular, ethnographic studies (found in qualitative research methods) have provided valuable tools in this quest to understand the variety, shapes and sounds of culture around the world. Chinese culture has proven to be no exception. According to Gao and Ting-Toomey,(1998) culture varies within societies and within communities, but one consistent cultural aspect found in Chinese culture are the teaching styles, which have remained remarkably the same for 2000 years. The purpose of this narrative ethnography study is to provide avenues in which teachers and professors can effectively communicate the valuable information contained in his or her lectures to Chinese students in China.

The Research Question

With an influx of Western influences, including business joint ventures and the educational merging of Western with Eastern teaching styles, the research question begs; how are Chinese students accepting the Western teaching styles that American teachers and professors bring to China in a university classroom setting?

Background and Design

Presenting effective English based lectures to university students in China is much different from the United States primarily because of the vast political, economic, and social culturally based differences. Language poses obstacles, of course, but more directly pertinent the cultural approach to teaching students is much different. Culture plays an integral role in society and in school constructs throughout the world necessitating the use of narrative ethnographic methodology (Neuman, 2006). The 10 students were coded using the alphabet letter with student 1 being assigned the letter A and student 2 assigned the letter B and so forth.(Salkind, 2009). The three categories connected to student malaise and a lack of interest were; falling asleep during lectures, using electronic equipment, and lacked asking questions (Neuman, 2006) presented in Exhibit B.

In Chinese culture, the professors usually dictate what each student should learn and the students are required to repeat the information (Gao-Ting-Toomey, 2000). A Chinese student may wish to study other subjects, but once a major is selected the entire course selection for the program (the particular major) is established by the school (Gao & Ting-Toomey, 2000). The exception to this rule is the special events and lecture series brought into universities each year and is the source of this narrative ethnographic study.

Narrative Observational Setting

This lecture series presented in July of 2008 included topics from cross-cultural relationships between the U.S. and China, to American educational goals for Chinese students who wish to study abroad, to business and the study of law, and public speaking. The classes began at 8:30 each morning, with each class lasting two hours in length. The classes and interest group sessions continued until 9:30 each evening, Monday through Saturday, with a two hour break for lunch and one hour for dinner. Each evening, at the conclusion of the class lecture series each day, the students were asked to provide feedback to enable the university and the professors to know how the lectures were received, what was learned, and what the professors could do to improve his or her presentation.

The feedback from these students prompted a concern about three (of the five) American lecturers and his or her presentation. One of the professors wanted a more detailed explanation to determine where he went wrong in his lectures to see how he could meet the needs of the students. The professor requested that the author of this project, a participating lecturer, with years of 'hands-on teaching in China, perform a brief qualitative analysis of the problem. As a field researcher (in training) the decision was made to conduct an ethnographic study to accomplish his goals. He (the Western professor) asked the author of this paper (the researcher) to sit in on a mini-lecture for a special interest group session on business law and to observe his teaching style and the students to see what might be causing malaise and a general lack of interest from the students. For the purpose of this paper only one review is presented in a narrative ethnography study format. To provide complete confidentiality, the name of the professor and his university affiliation will not be mentioned or referenced.

Setting

The naturalized setting for the min-lectures included a normal sized (in Chinese standards) classroom in a typical educational classroom setting in ZhuMaDian, China. ZhuMaDian is reputed to be a small town, yet in reality, has a population of eight million people, which is far larger than a typical American small town. A typical Chinese university classroom consists of the standard four walls, a concrete platform for the instructor to stand upon with a podium, chalk board, chalk, and sometimes electronic equipment for PowerPoint presentations and other computer generated activities. The classroom in ZhuMaDian was very much the same. The concrete floors and stark buildings had many windows, and the classroom had personal waste (such as used tissues, food wrappers, empty cans and bottles) and the walls, which were painted pastel colors, were peeling and black spots were present (probably mold) around the doors and windows.

Typically, no air conditioning or heating exists in these classrooms, but windows do provide air flow. Long narrow wooden desks with roughly hewn wooden stool benches (similar to American saw horses found in construction sites), but at seating height. Each bench is approximately 3' wide and 4' long providing seating for students, elbow to elbow, with an average class size of 35 students in a 12 X 15 sized classroom. A normal American university classroom would be approximately 18 X 20 and hold approximately 12 to 20 students. While visiting lecturers are considered rare throughout most of China, this university promotes and administers annual seminars and lecture series on a frequent basis to offer exposure to Chinese students who would otherwise, not see foreigners (other than in a tourist setting).

The visiting professor, under observation for this ethnography study, was observed by the field researcher for the first 30 minutes of his class. The field researcher sat on the third row on the far left hand side of the classroom with only a notebook to write field notes to appear like the rest of the students taking notes, yet appear to be an interested teaching observing a fellow cohort. During the 30 minute time frame the following

observations were generated from the field notes that aided the researcher in developing detailed notes of the class setting, the professor, and 10 of the 28 students.

Descriptive Narrative Analysis

The lecturing professor was a practicing attorney and a professor with a small university in the central section of the United States. He was approximately 35 years of age, wore glasses, and dressed in the appropriate classroom attire (slacks, shirt and tie) for lectures in China, as dictated by the Chinese government. He presented himself in a confident manner and received a formal introduction from the director of the university.

His lecture began with a brief biography of his accomplishments, titles, awards, and professional designations before providing a detailed description of the legal field he practices in and the courses he teaches. His presentation was clear, concise and appeared to be organized. However, once he concluded his introduction and brief bio, he became agitated when the electronic equipment would not work and he could not show his PowerPoint presentation. The professor recovered from this debacle and proceeded with his lecture on the study of law in the United States. He spoke very quickly and the lecture was fast paced and he frequently used legal language to describe litigation and other various legal functions found in the study of, and practice, of law. He did not use the chalk board and his body language was formal without expressive mannerisms, and he did not have a Chinese translator present.

The Chinese male and female students were an average of 19 years old and were taking the lecture series in English (English as a Second Language [ESL]). The students were required to wear school logo uniformed shirts (boys wear white and girls wear blue shirts in the summer) and jeans. All the students have dark hair, dark eyes and the majority were slight of build. Each student entered the classroom with a notebook for notes and pens to write with. When the class began all eyes were focused on the visiting lecture speaker. Students were sitting up straight, smiles on every face, and appeared eager to learn about American business law.

For the purposes of this ethnography study only the first two center rows (10 students) were observed due to time, space, and the inability to intently observe the behavior of the remaining 28 students. The first two center rows were selected because, in both American and Chinese classroom settings, these seats are assumed to hold the brightest and most eager to learn students in any given class (Gao-Ting-Toomey, 2000). Of the 10 students observed, 7 were female and 3 were males. 5 females sat on the first row with the two remaining females beginning the second row and ending with the 3 males.

Narrative Data Analysis

The 10 students began class in an alert and ready-to-learn posture. The professor asked each student his or her name and asked if he or she could hear him and if he or she spoke English. He received a positive response from each student. The professor began his lecture on the legal aspects of human relations departments in American businesses and progressed through the typical corporate legal chain of command before beginning environmental law; his field of expertise. This ethnography study was looking to see if areas of behavior surfaced that might indicate reasons for malaise and a lack of interest from the students in an American professors interest group class. Three guiding posts were selected to help determine if the students being observed were interested in the professor's lecture.

If students on the first two rows fell asleep, used electronic equipment, and did not ask questions, the professor will assume the students could not understand his lecture and will want recommendations to improve his teaching style. If the students stayed awake, did not use electronic equipment, and did ask questions the

professor would assume his previous class lecture evaluation was flawed and he will maintain his current teaching style.

During the first phase (the 1st 10 minute observation period) the students maintained eye contact and appeared attentive. Exhibit B provides a consensus on those students who fell asleep, used electronic equipment, and asked questions. This chart provides an over view of the events as they occurred throughout the 30 minute observation in the class setting while the professor was lecturing. None of the students fell asleep, used electronic equipment, and none of the students asked questions (see Exhibit A-1). As the class progressed into the intricacies of corporate law, in the second observation phase (2nd 10 minute observation period) 2 (20%) of the students began texting on cell phones while 1 (10%) student fell asleep or put this or her head on the desk, and no students asked questions (see Exhibit A-2). In the final phase (the last 10 minutes) of the 30 minute observation period, 4 students (40%) were asleep, 4 students (40%) were using electronic equipment and 1 student (10%) asked a question (see Exhibit A-3). This means a total of 80% of the students during the first 30 minutes of the lecture were either asleep or using electronic equipment.

Recommendations and Conclusion

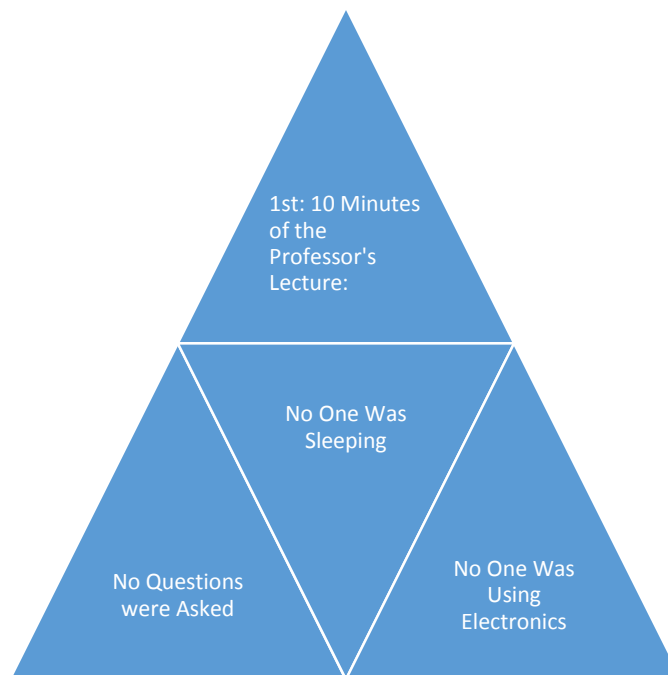
According to American faculty teaching in China and these lecturers, teaching in China can be difficult and problematic, however, the rewards for both countries are overwhelmingly positive (Marsh, 2003). American faculty may need to alter teaching styles when communicating with Chinese students. Chinese learners are accustomed to a memorization and regurgitation teaching methodology and students who participate in foreign lectures are doing so, in English as a second language. If American teachers and professors wish to communicate effectively in the classroom he or she might consider the following:

1. Speak slowly and use basic English skills (words and phrases) that communicate an idea or concept in small, yet integral steps. Avoid jokes, double meaning phrases and present materials and information in a clear and concise format. Avoid complex issues without appropriate backup tools (PowerPoint, worksheets, written definitions and explanations).
2. Provide an outline of the speech with difficult concepts and ideas printed with explanation or diagrams.
3. Use electronics (PowerPoint and charts) to help define and depict ideas and concepts.
4. Translation and translators are effective in communicating difficult ideas and concepts.
5. Remain flexible at all times. Events, times, meetings change with regularity. Stay calm.

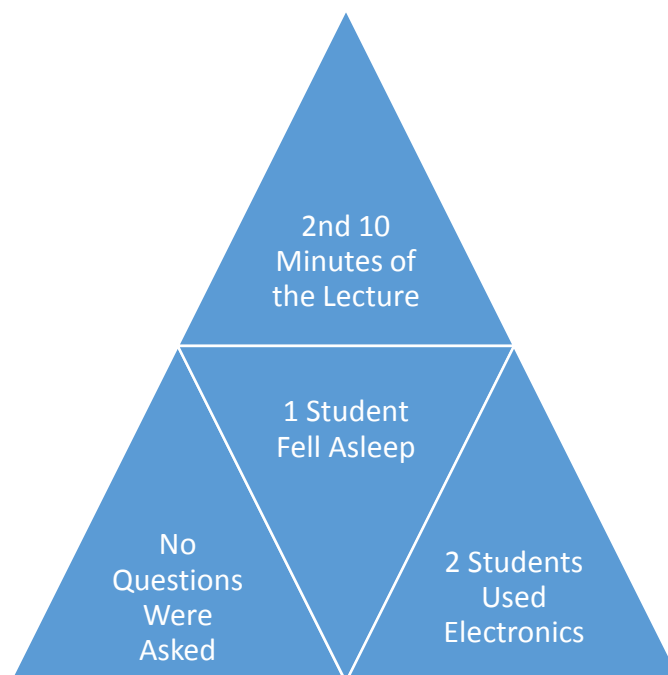
Teaching in China may prove difficult due to language barriers and other cultural aspects that pose obstacles between American and Chinese teaching styles, but using qualitative analysis to provide a working solution to the malaise and lack of interest in one professors lecture class has provided rich results. Future researcher may take these results and formulate extensive qualitative and quantitative studies that will expand upon these basic results. China and America are two powerful countries. Unless these powerful nations can develop a deeper and richer understanding of the cultural similarities and differences that drives each society, the future is not as bright (Marsh, 2003). Exploring the cultural differences in every aspect of life is critical to the future of these nations.

Exhibit A: 1-3

A-1



A-2



A-3

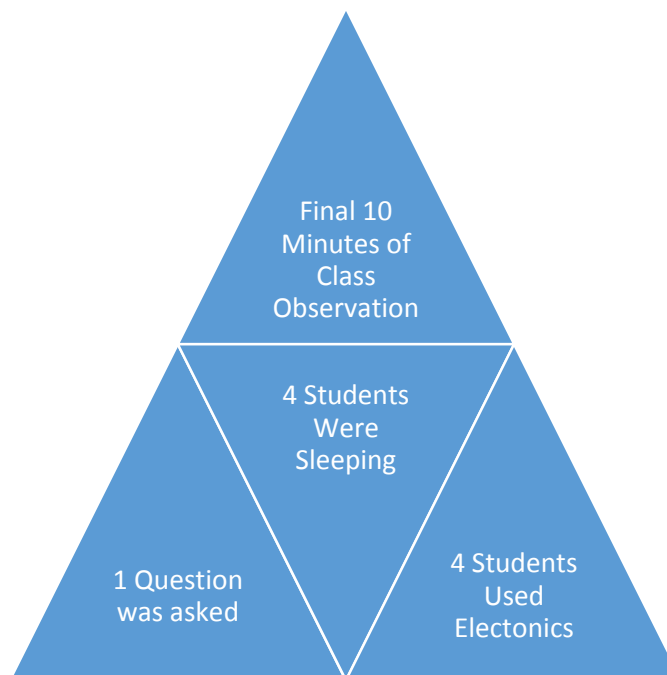


Exhibit B

Student Behavior Results: Business Law Class, July 9, 2008

Student	Fell Asleep	Played Electronics	Asked Questions
<i>Front Row Center</i>			
A	No	Yes	No
B	Yes	No	No
C	No	No	Yes
D	Yes	No	No
E	No	Yes	No
<i>Second Row Center</i>			
F	No	No	No
G	No	Yes	No
H	Yes	No	No
I	Yes	No	No
J	No	Yes	No
Total	998	908	90

Source: Total of 10 student observations spanning a 30 minute time frame during a lecture series (special interest group): Business Law Class.

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