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### Issues to consider when implementing student-centred learning practices at Asian higher education institutions

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## Issues to consider when implementing student-centred learning practices at Asian higher education institutions

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A large number of failures in learning reforms at Asian universities have been documented recently in the literature. The main reason is that reformers often import Western-developed practices to Asian classrooms without a careful examination of their appropriateness within the socio-cultural context of these countries. This approach faces a high risk of failure because Western-developed practices are often supported by structural conditions and cultural values that are not always found in Asia. To ensure the success of student-centred learning reforms in Asian classrooms, this paper claims that reformers should not simply borrow and impose student-centred practices on Asian students. Rather, Asian educators need to be assisted to bring about change in their teaching practices and instructed how to design assessment that promotes student-centred learning practices. Moreover, some principles of student-centred theories need to be modified to become culturally appropriate in the Asian context.

**Keywords:** Asia; higher education; reform; student-centred learning

It is often necessary for education to change in order to respond to the requirements of the economy. Historically, different models of learning are selected and emphasised at certain times owing to the requirements of the labour market. Renshaw (1998) discusses how models of learning changed during the last century. In detail, he argued that from the mid 1880s to the middle decades of the twentieth century when the world of work was characterised by authority regimes, the hierarchical learning model underpinned by the behaviourist learning theory became prominent inside classrooms. Teachers acted as surrogate managers and bosses who required students to work independently to complete the teacher's requirements. However, since the late twentieth century the world of work has been characterised by the domination of the rapid growth of capitalism. At the same time small enterprises and advanced technology emerged as predominant parts of the economy; workers are required to have specific skills such as cooperation and interdependence in order to work in production teams. Perspectives of the behaviourist learning theory became outdated. Instead, the socio-cultural theory with its views of learning being mediated by the individual's active involvement and participation in situated social practices and not as the result of knowledge transmission has been widely adopted. Since then, higher education institutes worldwide have tried to reform teaching and learning practices to ensure that graduates are provided with these new skills. In Asia where many countries are influenced by Confucian culture (e.g., China, Malaysia, Singapore, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Korea and Vietnam), the push for

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student-centred reforms has become stronger because Confucian teaching – that learners should depend on memory, study dependently and re-produce the teacher's words without questioning or challenging, is failing to provide workers with the necessary skills to work in today's global market (Tran & Swierczek, 2009).

However, infrastructure developments and material resources at Asian universities seem inadequate for the requirements of student-centred practices. Besides, Western student-centred practices are often developed based on cultural values that have many conflicts with Confucian cultural heritages (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005). Consequently, many student-centred learning reforms at Asian universities have been unsuccessful (Ng, 2009). To improve the present situation, this paper aims to propose a conceptual framework built on the Activity Theory (Vygotsky, 1978) that works as a guide to instruct Asian educators how to address necessary issues in order to optimise success in importing student-centred practices to their classrooms. According to the Activity Theory, to achieve success in implementing learning reform, reformers should not address learning alone but need to bring factors that have a relation with learning in the whole Activity System into investigation. In the case of implementing a student-centred attitude at Asian universities, the framework claims that Asian educators need to bring about change in present pedagogical strategies and assessment practices. Besides, to encourage Asian students to adopt student-centred practices, mismatches between principles of student-centred practices and the learning culture of Asian students need to be solved. The empirical findings can be used to demonstrate that the proposed framework is applicable and workable and not merely theoretical.

### **Learning reforms in Asian countries**

Recently a massive number of learning reforms have taken place in almost all Asian nations. Overall, Asian nations are trying to import Western teaching and learning practices that are underpinned by constructivism, post-structuralism, and multiculturalism as a shortcut to advance their education systems. Therefore, teaching and learning practices in Asia have been strongly characterised by models developed in North American and Europe (Keeves & Watanabe, 2003; Ng, 2009). The trend of prioritising Western-developed practices can be easily seen in recent the educational policies of many Asian countries. For instance, Thailand has recently passed a new national educational bill to promote learner-centred teaching, lifelong learning, decentralisation and autonomy in curriculum design. Hong Kong is also calling for a major overhaul of the whole education system and reform is needed in curriculum, pedagogy and assessment strategies. The Education Commission emphasises that:

Education nurtures talents for the society and promotes its prosperity and progress. In an ever-changing society, it is imperative that our education system keeps pace with the times and be responsive to the needs of learners. To design an education system for the future, we must envision future changes in the society in order to cater for the needs of learners in the new society and to define the role and functions of education in the new environment. (Hong Kong Education Commission 2000, cited in Ng, 2009, p. 7)

In Malaysia, the 'Vision 2020' policy promotes democratisation, privatisation, and decentralisation of the educational system (Lee, 1999). Noticeably, Malaysia announced the establishment of an initial 91 constructivist-oriented schools in 1997 known as the 'Malaysia Smart Schools' (Ismail & Alexander, 2005). This project emphasises the

replacing of the traditional teacher-centred approach with one that is learner-centred. In Singapore, the 'Thinking Nation' reform promotes the development of creativity and critical thinking among their students. Since the early 1990s, Singapore applied the following mission statement in order to establish a new globalised and knowledge-based economy:

[Singapore] students must be Learners, Creators and Communicators to meet the demands of the next century-Learners in the sense that they must view education as a life-long process and develop a passion for continuous learning; Creators who not only have the measure of discipline found in our current workforce but display independent and innovative thinking; and Communicators who are effective team players, able to articulate their ideas confidently. (Tan, Lee, & Sharan, 2007, p. 12)

In Vietnam, in response to the requirements of the Renovation policy of the late 1990s, the State announced that new curricula must aim to elevate people's knowledge, train human resources, foster talent, and produce workers with cultural and scientific knowledge, professional skills, creativity and discipline at work. Therefore, there must be radical changes in training methods: to change from passive knowledge transmission in which teachers are talking and learners are taking notes; to advise learners on the ways of active thinking and receiving knowledge, to teach students the methods of self-learning; to teach students the methods of self-learning, systematic collection of information and of analytic and synthetic thinking; to increase the active, independent attitude of students in learning process and self-management activities in schools and social work (Pham, 1995).

However, learning is not an independent variable that can simply be borrowed and implemented in all contexts. Rather, learning is shaped and influenced by other factors including teaching methods, learning tasks, assessment demands, workload and the culture of students (Kember & Gow, 1994). Noticeably, these factors are constrained by structural conditions and cultural values in different contexts. Therefore, learning will not necessarily have the same outcomes in a place where institutional conditions and cultural values are different. If reformers simply borrow and impose imported practices on students, the reform is very likely to be rejected (Fullan, 1993). Examples are given in the studies by Thanh-Pham (2011) and Tan et al. (2007). Thanh-Pham conducted a study which examined the present teaching and learning reforms at various Asian higher education institutions. The results reported that Western-developed practices such as teamwork and group work have been widely applied in Asian classrooms. However, a majority of the teachers and students did not see these activities as being better than their traditional practices in terms of increasing students' academic achievement and developing new ideas. The teachers and students still believed that to succeed in exams, students need to reproduce the teacher's lectures and information covered in textbooks. Consequently, the initial intent of bringing teamwork activities to the class so that students can work in a community and are empowered to develop creative ideas as envisaged by reformers, has failed. Similarly, Tan et al. conducted a study to investigate the effectiveness of the group investigation method of cooperative learning in Singaporean classrooms and found that the group investigation approach was not more effective than the traditional method because the traditional learning culture of Singaporean students did not match principles of cooperative learning. For instance, the students were only accustomed to learning passively from teachers, taking notes, and preparing for tests and examinations but were not familiar with investigating a topic, acquiring information by themselves or from their peers, or learning in groups. As a result, the teachers failed to encourage the students to conduct research independently.

These failures demonstrate that Asian educators should not assume that what has been done successfully in the West will produce similar outcomes in the East. The success of learning reform in Asian classrooms depends on various factors that include the characteristics of the nature of the change, the make-up of the local district, the character of individual schools and teachers, and how the existence and form of external relationships interact to produce conditions for change or non-change (Fullan & Stiegelbauer, 1991). It would be beyond the scope of this paper to bring the relationship between learning and all of these factors into discussion and examination. Underpinned by the Activity Theory (Vygotsky, 1978), this paper claims that for student-centred practices to be employed in Asian classrooms, pedagogical strategies and assessment practices at Asian universities need to be changed in a manner that promotes student-centred behaviour. Moreover, some principles of student-centred learning models need to be modified to suit the learning culture of Asian students.

### **Teaching at Asian universities: a hidden challenge to student-centred learning reforms**

Asian countries are claimed to be among the nations with 'high power distance' (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005). It is generally asserted that nations with 'high power distance' place greater emphasis on hierarchical relationships. In the educational realm, students are taught to obey and listen to teachers (Ruby & Ladd, 1999). The exclusive roles of the teacher in delivering knowledge create a situation in which Asian students are not often familiar with questioning, evaluating and generating knowledge. Instead, they often accept teachers as the definitive knowledge source and adopt the role of passive listeners in the class. They believe that truth is not found primarily in the self, but in exemplars (teachers) (Kennedy, 2002). For a long time, students have been taught to 'master the content, through diligence and patience, without questioning or challenging what is presented' (Pratt, 1992, p. 315).

These assumptions about the nature of teaching and learning have been deeply imbedded in the mentality of both Asian teachers and students for many decades and are not easily removed. They are barriers that prevent Asian teachers from accepting any pedagogical practice that tends to put teachers on a par with their students and detracts from teacher authority. Asian teachers often feel reluctant to adopt a pedagogy that may put them at the risk of losing face and find it hard to change from an instructor who delivers knowledge to a facilitator who only intervenes when students need clarification in instructions as suggested by student-centred perspectives (Hativa, 2000). Those student-centred principles that allow students to develop knowledge independently, then exchange information within the group to get collective knowledge may bring the teacher's knowledge into question seem unacceptable in the Asian context. This traditional hierarchical perception about teaching and learning certainly creates large obstacles which hinder the introduction of a student-centred approach to Asian classrooms. Therefore, for student-centred learning practices to be employed in Asian classrooms, it is Asian teachers who should change their perceptions about the roles of the teacher and students first. Various studies have demonstrated that when teachers changed their teaching practices, students also changed their learning accordingly. For instance, to assist students to shift from the old habit of mainly memorising facts in the text to cope with exams to extending knowledge beyond curricular requirements, the teachers in Tan's study (2007) were asked to reduce lecturing and apply peer teaching activities. According to this approach, the students were introduced to a distillation set up, then asked to pose 'what if' questions about it. At the end of the course, the

students successfully moved from rote learners to deep investigators by making use of their questions and the corresponding peer responses as a wealth of information to develop and extend their knowledge. Similarly, Tucker (2006) and Gillies (2004) conducted research to investigate the impact of teaching on cooperation among the students and found that the more the teachers used mediated-learning interactions, asked more question and made fewer disciplinary comments, the more the students could be able to provide more detailed explanation, shorter responses and asked more questions.

### **Assessment at Asian universities: problems and recommended strategies to enhance student-centred learning practices**

Assessment has been widely claimed to have a strong influence on determining students' learning approaches (Kember & Gow, 1994). When assessment is designed to test high-level knowledge that is not obviously seen in the text, students have a strong motivation to engage in active learning practices such as teamwork and problem-based learning to share ideas and information so that each member can understand the text deeply, then use analytic and critical knowledge to find the correct answer. By contrast, when assessment is designed to test low-level knowledge, students often employ an individual and surface learning approach to memorise lessons because this type of assessment does not require students to interact and negotiate meaning. Traditionally, Asian teachers tend to assess students via individual tests such as multiple-choice tests that rate students based on a single product at the end of the course, rather than being based on their performance during the entire learning process (Luu, 2010). This type of assessment is preferred by both teachers and students because it allows a large number of testing items to be covered in a short time, gives students lower anxiety and allows a higher success rate (Struyven, Dochy, Janssens, Schelfhout, & Gielen, 2006). However, a concern is raised about the association between the multiple-choice examination and the employment of a teacher-centred and individual learning approach. This concern emerges because a multiple-choice test consists of a single-end product which only requires a 'right' answer. To complete this task, Cohen (1994) states that group members are not motivated to interact and solve problems as a group. Similarly, Vedder (1985) claims that when students are fixated on finding the right answers, they spend little time discussing together to think and talk about problem-solving strategies. Luu (2010) also criticises such an assessment approach as it forms certain degrees of individualism and competition among learners because learners, particularly high-ability ones, tend to retain knowledge for themselves and quietly compete with others during their study for high achievement in exams.

These arguments claim that to promote student-centred learning practices, Asian educators need to be assisted to design the types of assessment that could promote and encourage active learning among students. Thanh-Pham (2011) conducted a study to demonstrate that a change in assessment could influence students to change their learning from teacher-centred approach to cooperative learning. Specifically, to influence the students to adopt cooperative learning, participant teacher should replace the common multiple-choice test that required students to work individually and achieve scores separately, with group projects that required students to complete an essay in a group, and then group members shared group scores. Findings from all data sources reported that group projects created conditions that forced the students to cooperate with each other better. In particular, the students became more interdependent, more accountable, more eager to meet with each other, more careful in communication, and more engaged in processing

group products. Besides, the students also shifted from using surface learning techniques to adopting a deeper learning approach. It was evident from these findings that assessment is an important driver that can determine how students learn. When Asian educators are enabled to develop the types of assessment practices that require students to learn from each other actively instead of depending on the teacher passively, student-centred reforms are guaranteed to succeed, to a great extent.

### **Solving disjunctions between being student-centred and Asian students' learning culture**

Broadfoot (2001) argues that pedagogy is seen not just as a science of instruction but as a set of cultures which reflect different contexts and behaviours inside and outside classrooms, hence, the pedagogies do not often produce the same outcome in a different cultural context. For student-centred learning practices to be imported to Asian classrooms, besides addressing the present teaching and assessment practices at Asian universities, reformers should develop strategies to match disjunctions between student-centred principles and the learning culture of Asian students. Asian students might otherwise easily reject those student-centred practices that contrast with their traditional learning habits. The impact of local cultural values on learning reform is strong in Asian countries because Confucian teachings, that have many values contrasting with Western cultural values, have become the people's beliefs and perceptions. These values stay at the inner layer of their mentality and are not easily removed. Marzano, Zaffron, Zraik, Robbins, and Yoon (1995) argue that 'beliefs and perceptions' of individuals exist in a 'paradigm'; hence, it would be extremely difficult to use external forces to break the culture in this paradigm. Usually when implementers are forced to change these values, they tend to reject the reforms (Fullan, 1993). Consequently, instead of forcing students to change their learning culture, it is always a wise strategy for reformers to modify some principles of student-centred theories to make them culturally appropriate to Asian students' learning preferences.

When implementing cooperative learning in Asian classrooms, Thanh-Pham (2011) claims that cooperative learning principles need to be modified to fit at least two learning cultural characteristics of Asian students: friendship attachment and group leadership traits. Friendship attachment needs to be taken into consideration because when grouping students, cooperative learning researchers generally recommend that students should be grouped in mixed-ability groups. This grouping method has been proved to benefit students more than other types of grouping formation and is often included in cooperative learning definitions (Watson & Marshall, 1995). However, Thanh-Pham (2011) conducted several experimental studies to examine whether Vietnamese students were interested in working in friendship or mixed-ability groups. The result reported that the students consistently showed their negative attitudes toward the mixed-ability grouping method. They pointed out three main reasons that made them uninterested in working with strangers: (1) the students felt uncomfortable to work with those people whom they had never worked with; (2) group members did not work effectively because they did not know each other's strength and weaknesses; and (3) the students could not use language and slang as freely as when they worked with close friends. The students also said that they preferred friendship groups because the bond between group members played an important role in binding them together, motivating and even forcing them to 'fight' for the sake of the group. Besides, working with friends gave the students confidence in expressing their opinions because friends could forgive easily if they accidentally criticised the others. In another study, Nguyen (2008) also found that Vietnamese students had a strong desire to work with friends they were allowed to select rather than with people the teacher randomly assigned to their group.

Friendship grouping emerged as a strong preference of Vietnamese students, in contrast with the preferred heterogeneous grouping method in the West. Hofstede and Hofstede (2005) argued that this occurs because Asian and Western nations are characterised by contrasting collectivistic and individualistic cultural values. In teamwork, Western individualists are often known as highly endorsing independent thought, encouraging creativity and distributing equal opportunity in order to achieve power and influence over others (Glazer, 2006). For them, good group members are the ones who can enable each other to achieve the highest academic achievement. As a result, when choosing group partners, they tend to put cognitive ability as their first priority. Personal relationships appear to be neglected in this decision. In contrast, since Asian collectivists may not consider capacity the foremost priority when choosing group members, because they tend to be more interdependent and have strong obligations to each other. In fact, Glazer (2006) claims that in teamwork, collectivistic people accept that each individual contributes what he or she can to the fullest and people work together to ensure that the quality of work is acceptable and they are willing to sacrifice their own voice for the sake of group harmony. As a result, for Asian students, good group partners are the ones who are able to help each other spiritually rather than academically. Therefore, they tend to be grouped with friends who can understand them easily. This explains why in collectivistic cultures, people have such sayings as: 'Friendship is valued higher than any other value except freedom' and 'Friendship first, competition second'.

Similarly, when implementing teamwork in Asian classrooms, reformers should also pay attention to the group leadership culture of Asian students. Western researchers tend to suggest that the instructor should rotate roles within the group after the first activity to assure that all students experience a multitude of roles. For example, Millis and Cottell (1998) recommend that individual team members can play such roles as group facilitator, timekeeper, recorder, checker, summariser, elaborator, research-runner and wildcard. Even Cohen (1994), an uncontested leader in the field of cooperative learning, advises that cooperative learning groups should not have a leader because there are some drawbacks. If the group has a strong leader, then group members tend only to listen and respond to the leader's directions, especially those who prefer not to do any work and 'ride on the coat-tails of others'. Consequently, all group members have limited opportunities to exchange ideas even though some of them may have valuable thoughts. However, in Thanh-Pham's study (2011) the students expressed a strong desire to have a group leader to manage the group. When the group did not have a leader, no one worked as a referee to solve conflicts among group members or no one pushed free riders to accomplish their responsibilities. In their study, Luo, Duerring, and Byham (2008) also claim that when working in team, Asians have an ingrained culture of following their group leader. They prefer to have a leader and if the leader is strong and competent enough, they certainly become good followers who are always reliable, discrete, and loyal to the leader. The influence of a leader over his/her followers is so strong that when the leader leaves the group, often his/her followers will do the same. Group leadership trait has become a strong preference of Asian students because Hofstede and Hofstede (2005) claim that Asian countries belong to nations with 'large power distance' cultures. In these countries, members of institutions get used to the attribute of a hierarchical pyramid structure where power is distributed unequally. Therefore, there needs to be a leader wherever teamwork exists. These behaviours are rather different from those of people in Western nations that are characterised by 'small power distance' cultures. In these places, democratic values support a 'participative leadership' style (Doel & Sawdon, 2001) in which power tends to be decentralised among group members rather than remaining in the hands of one or more leaders. This is why group members usually shift their roles during the process of learning together.

This analysis shows that friendship appreciation and leadership preference initially came from Confucian philosophy; they have now been practiced by Asian people for many centuries. Therefore, they have become predominant and permanent cultural characteristics of Asian students and appear impossible removed. When implementing learning innovations in Asian classrooms, reformers should always take the impact of such cultural values into consideration. Otherwise, the chance for success is slim.

## Conclusion

In this paper, the current situation of learning reforms in Asian nations has been discussed, including the crucial issues that reformers should take into consideration when implementing student-centred reforms at Asian higher education institutions. The trend of borrowing and imposing Western practices on non-Western practitioners has been widespread because globalisation is ensuring that information on Western teaching and learning practices is readily available in the East. To modernise the education system quickly and avoid a painfully long research stage, Eastern educators tend to adopt Western practices without considering their appropriateness for either the different instructional contexts or the impact of these practices on students' learning. However, learning is a complex phenomenon which always has connections with many other factors that can pull and push the effectiveness of a learning practice. Therefore, when learning is addressed individually and separately, the potential to fail is huge. Many previous learning reforms at Asian universities have demonstrated this. Therefore, in order to bring about success in student-centred reform, reformers should examine the implementation of student-centred practices in the complexity of existing local practices and rules, policy-makers, school administrators, institutions and the working culture of teachers and students. Among these factors, reformers should pay special attention to the impact of teaching, assessment and the learning culture of Asian students on learning. The findings of several pieces of empirical research discussed in this paper show that student-centred practices can only be introduced to Asian classrooms when Asian teachers are willing to delegate authority to students and are assisted to develop assessment that promotes student-centred learning practices. Moreover, strategies to modify those student-centred principles that contrast hard-to-change learning cultural characteristics of Asian students need to be developed. Edelson (2002) claims that at its heart, education is a design endeavour. Teachers design activities for students, curriculum developers design materials for teachers and students, administrators and policymakers design systems for teaching and learning. If the ultimate goal of educational research is the improvement of the education system, then results that speak directly to the design of activities, materials, and systems as demonstrated in this paper is the most useful result.

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