STRATEGIES FOR EFFECTIVE LEARNING IN
THE MULTI-CULTURAL CLASSROOM

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It has been recognised for some considerable time that cultural differences impinge on educational processes and outcomes. These differences relate to age, gender and ethnic diversity, the latter being increasingly obvious as greater numbers of students from different ethnic backgrounds have been appearing in Australian universities. However, there has been relatively little concern in the literature of higher education about the effect of the assumptions and expectations of Australian university education on students with other assumptions and expectations.

One of the expectations of the Australian tertiary education system is that students will take an active role in the development of their own learning and understanding with the related assumption that they can and will want to do this. For various reasons this approach may be difficult for some students - immaturity, frustration with the process, hostility or resentment and so on (Boud, 1981; Yerbury & Kirk, 1990). For students whose previous educational experience has been quite different, this expectation may be in direct conflict with their own cultural and value systems and therefore they may be disadvantaged by teaching activities and assessment practices which seek to put the student at the centre of the learning process (Ballard & Clanchy, 1991).

The programmes of professional education offered through the School of Information Studies at the University of Technology, Sydney aim for the development of autonomous information practitioners, capable of independent thought and action and practised in creating new professional knowledge through the application of the theoretical knowledge of the discipline and the application of principles of reflection to problems of practice (Yerbury & Kirk, 1990). Our experience since 1986 has provided a great deal of information on individual student differences in the process of developing autonomy and the factors that might have contributed to these differences.

SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING AND CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

An integral part of the Bachelor of Applied Science in Information Studies course is a sequence of subjects, Professional Studies, which is based on the principles of self-directed learning and the use of learning contracts. From 1989,
the ethnic composition of students undertaking this programme began to alter markedly and Asian students became a numerically significant group. At the same time, it was evident that more and more students were having difficulty with the self-directed learning approach in Professional Studies and that, among those students experiencing difficulty relating to the notion of student-centred learning or to the idea of self-analysis and reflection, were a significant number of Asian students. The question then arose whether self-directed learning in some way discriminated against students with particular cultural beliefs and values.

The literature on multiculturalism in education (see useful bibliography compiled by the National Centre for Cross-cultural Curriculum and Staff Development at Flinders University) does not identify clearly the role of cultural beliefs in learning other than to emphasise a need to recognise and tolerate cultural differences. There is often an assumption that integration into the mainstream will occur naturally over time. The literature documenting the problems associated with self-directed learning deals with negative reactions as one phase in the process towards the development of the independent learner (Kirk, Yerbury & Lewis, 1989).

Nevertheless, there are some pointers in the literature to factors which might affect the ability of Asian students to come to terms with self-directed learning. These, combined with anecdotal evidence from students themselves, enabled the identification of two aspects related to cultural beliefs which may hinder self-directed learning and the development of the autonomous professional. These aspects relate to the orientation to learning and the individual students motivation and view of authority, and to the ability and willingness of the individual to make choices.

Briefly, an individual student's orientation to learning may be 'narrow', that is, may be based on a process of step-by-step learning, the steps being determined by the lecturer. Some research (Kember and Gow, 1990) suggests this is relatively common amongst Chinese-speaking students for a number of reasons including a poor command of English and a cultural tradition which emphasises the authority of the teacher. The result of this in self-directed learning is that students deal with present tasks but lack the overview to take a future orientation and to see the whole picture.

The second aspect arising from a particular set of cultural beliefs and values is that students are unable to set their own
learning objectives, the focal element of self-directed learning, because the needs of the individual are subordinate to those of the family and social group. Some students were obviously determined on a particular occupational outcome based not on personal choice or ability but some other factor. There was a lack of interest about the area of learning and professional practice and about professional values. The emphasis in learning contracts was on developing technical skills. This may be particularly true for international students returning to their own cultural context in which practice and the skills needed for it may be quite different to those in Australia.

In addition, there was a third more practical problem hindering the self-directed learning process and that was the lack of local knowledge of many students. This not just a lack of knowledge about geography, people or organisations but about the norms and standards of local professional practice.

To summarise, the limited research findings and the evidence from observation and reporting from students in this programme indicate clearly that self-directed learning based on learning contracts is inherently more difficult for students with certain cultural beliefs and educational traditions. The educational approach itself is successful for the majority of students and achieves the aim of developing autonomous professionals. Therefore, just as strategies are needed to overcome initial student frustration and hostility with self-directed learning so strategies are needed to support the learning process for students faced with cultural conflicts.

STRATEGIES FOR SUPPORTING STUDENT LEARNING

A number of general strategies are being implemented in the School of Information Studies at the University of Technology, Sydney to enable students with different cultural beliefs and values to achieve within the self-directed learning environment. It is hoped that these will have value not only for the Professional Studies subjects but for the whole programme of study. The primary strategy is the establishment of a mentoring scheme which would address the narrow orientation to learning. The mentor would initially fulfill the role of authority figure gradually progressing into the role of resource person and professional advisor.

As well, the mentor will assist the student to set learning objectives by helping them to understand the concept of standards of practice. It can perhaps be assumed that students conditioned to the importance of group beliefs and norms would readily
understand the notion of a professional group and the importance of meeting its expectations. The choice of mentor would require careful matching of the student with a person (academic, practitioner, graduate) most appropriate to their situation both now and in future.

Other learning support strategies being implemented include raising awareness of teaching staff within the School and developing mechanisms for staff-student interaction on problems and issues on a regular basis. In addition, a pool of people willing to assist students and share local knowledge is being established. Assistance may include work experience and an introduction to professional associations and networks. The research into learning styles and cultural beliefs will also continue.

REFERENCES


