Understanding Chinese Educational Leaders’ Conceptions in an International Education Context

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Abstract

This paper presents an interpretative study of an Australian offshore education program in educational leadership conducted at Hangzhou, Zhejiang Province in China from 2002 to 2003. It is a study of the influence of international education on the conceptions of the participants in a particular context, where Chinese culture and Western cultures came into contact. The study is significant because it investigated a relatively new aspect of international education, offshore education, this time from the perspective of the participants. It explored the conceptions of learning and leadership brought by a group of Chinese educational leaders to the course and investigated the perceived influence of the course upon their conceptions and self-reported leadership practice. It employed a culturally sensitive approach which recognizes that a complex interaction between Chinese and Western cultures is occurring in the subjects of this study.

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Introduction and Rationale


This paper presents an interpretative study of an Australian offshore education program in educational leadership conducted at Hangzhou, Zhejiang Province in China between 2002 and 2003. It is a study of the influence of international education on the conceptions of the participants in a particular context, where Chinese culture and Western cultures came into contact. The study is significant because it investigated a relatively new aspect of international education, offshore education, from the perspective of the participants.

International education is a significant and current topic of research for educational researchers across the world. Increasing globalisation has drawn developing nations into closer ties with educational providers from Western countries. As a result, internationalisation of higher education over the past two decades has brought about considerable change to Australian universities. Growing numbers of international students have enrolled in Australian universities and similarly, the number of students studying offshore has also increased considerably (Gribble & Ziguras, 2003). There seems little doubt that the internationalisation of education is here to stay, and has increasingly become a part of the everyday work of Australian academics (Tsoidis, 2001). The emphasis of research into international education has been most commonly placed on big picture issues like student movement across national boundaries and the economic implications involved (e.g. IDP Education Australia, 2002a, 2002b). Much material has been published on the ramifications of the increased numbers of onshore

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1 While the terms “globalisation” and “internationalisation” are closely related (indeed, they could be seen as synonymous), some may recognise subtle distinctions between them. “Globalisation” generally refers to the spread of ideas, policies and practices across national boundaries, while “internationalisation” relates to the adoption of outward-looking perspectives in stark contrast to ethnocentrism (Walker & Dimmock, 2000b, p. 227).
international students studying at Australian universities (Ballard, 1987; Ballard & Clanchy, 1997; Barker, 1990; Samuelowicz, 1987; Tsolidis, 2001).

However, there are relatively few published research studies on offshore teaching and learning, particularly from the perspective of students (Bennington & Xu, 2001; Gribble & Ziguras, 2003). This study examined one Australian offshore leadership development program conducted in China between 2002 and 2003. It explored Chinese educational leaders’ (i.e. school principals, university administrators and system officials) conceptions of leadership and learning. It investigated the perceived influence of the course upon their conceptions and self-reported leadership practice over one year period. It also examined how they perceived contemporary Western leadership ideas and Western approaches to teaching and learning.

The specific impetus for investigating Chinese educational leaders’ conceptions in this study came from two issues. The first issue concerned the relative absence of empirical studies about offshore teaching and learning situations, particularly from the students’ perspective. An in-depth investigation about how Chinese participants perceive the learning process and content of the course will inform offshore education research. Chinese leaders hold conceptions which are greatly shaped by learning and leadership traditions as well as social, economical and cultural contexts in China.

Learning traditions in China mainly emphasise didactic teaching in the context of positivist knowledge transmission. Many Chinese students tend to hold absolute rather than relativistic beliefs about knowledge. They tend to regard knowledge as static, objective and universal truths which can be readily transmitted from teachers to learners (Zhu, 2002). In contrast, contemporary Western approaches generally emphasise participatory learning in the context of a constructivist adult learning framework. Constructivists place an emphasis on an indefinite, subjective and pluralist notions of knowledge. They regard learning as active construction of meaning through multiple interpretations of phenomena (Foley, 2000). These differences therefore lead to questions about how Chinese participants in an offshore program experience Western modes of learning and teaching. Few studies have systematically examined participants’ concepts and experience of Western modes of learning and teaching in the context of an offshore program.
Moreover, leadership traditions in China mainly focus on hierarchy, directive leadership approaches, and the moral development of individual leaders (Child, 1994; Wong, 2001). More participative, strategic and visionary forms of leadership are needed in the changing context (Feng, 2002; Huang & Cheng, 2001). Contemporary Western leadership theories generally emphasise shared vision and distributed leadership (Gronn, 1999; Lakomski, 1999, 2001). We therefore need to investigate how Chinese leaders in an offshore program perceive Western leadership. To date, and to the knowledge of the researcher, this study is the first empirical study which has systematically examined an offshore leadership development course in terms of the content and learning process from the perspectives of participants.

The second issue came from a growing awareness of the internationalisation and globalisation of educational policies, without sufficient attention given to cultural differences and diversity (Diao, 2000; Gu & Meng, 2001; Liu, 2002; Shi, 1999; Wong, 2001; Zhang, 1999; Zhong, Jin, & Wu, 2000; Zhou, 1999). The current scene in education administration in East Asia, including China, is full of “cultural borrowing” (Cheng, 1998; Dimmock & Walker, 1999; Walker & Dimmock, 2000a) and the vital importance of avoiding “cultural imperialism” is increasingly emphasised (Bush & Qiang, 2000). It is acknowledged that leadership is a value-laden concept (Sergiovanni, 2001), which is influenced by social, political, cultural and technological contexts. The importation of substantive ideas from one cultural context to another can be beneficial but is fraught with risk. As such, it should be undertaken with sensitivity and care (Ribbins & Gronn, 2000). Therefore, it is unwise to assume that theories and practices of leadership espoused in Anglo-American cultures are universally applicable to Chinese culture. It is important to explore intercultural interaction and understand how national and indigenous cultures influence and modify the uptake of ideas and practices imported from Anglo-American countries.

Research into international programs suggests that we should address issues like cross-cultural pedagogy, cultural sensitivity and awareness, cultural dissonance and intercultural understanding (Tsolidis, 2001). The concept of intercultural understanding frames cultural interaction in dialectical terms as a conversation or interview rather than a frozen snapshot. It also recognizes the power of human agency by privileging reflective dialogue over submissive cloning. It understands that interactions between
individuals from different cultures entails inherited frameworks infused with differing perceptions and values. However, dialogue offers possibilities for building emergent understandings and new frameworks rather than submission to imported wisdom. It permits adaptation, fluidity, nuanced change and even resistance. When this occurs both the change agent and the recipient become partners in intercultural construction. What emerges from such interactions is too subtle for cross-cultural cartography\(^2\) (Collard & Wang, in press). Therefore, the research is not a cross-cultural study in the traditional sense, which implies a comparative approach. It employs a more culturally attuned and sensitive approach which recognizes that a complex interaction between Chinese and Western cultures is occurring in the subjects of this study. Chinese and Western educational ideas are not viewed as polar opposites. They are at various points of a continuum, sometimes overlapping or sharing similarities. Such a concept lays the foundation for intercultural dialogue and integration underpinning this study.

**Research Questions**

The current understanding of offshore students’ learning situations is often general, fragmented, and sometimes confusing (Gribble & Ziguras, 2003). This study redresses the need for more systematic and coherent information in that it provided an in-depth contribution to answering two main research questions:

- How do Chinese educational leaders conceive learning and leadership in an international education context?
- What is the influence of a Western leadership development course on Chinese educational leaders’ conceptions of learning and leadership and their self-reported leadership practice?

The study also examined four specific subsidiary questions:

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\(^2\) Cross-cultural approaches generate generalised statements about differences between cultures. The classic exemplar in the field is Hofstede’s cultural frameworks (1980, 1991, 1994). Such frameworks are valuable but limited to macro and somewhat static views of culture.
1. What were Chinese educational leaders’ conceptions of learning before and after undertaking a Western leadership development course?

2. What were their conceptions of leadership before and after undertaking a Western leadership development course?

3. What changes (if any) have occurred in their conceptions of learning and leadership after undertaking the course, and what accounted for such changes from their perspective?

4. To what extent did they perceive that their conceptual changes in learning and leadership affected their self-reported leadership practice?

Research Methodology

An Interpretative Case Study Inspired by Phenomenography

The research design of the study was a pre-post comparison case study following the phenomenographic tradition. The study was primarily qualitative, longitudinal, and phenomenographic. Conceptions of learning and leadership and self-reported leadership practice of Chinese educational leaders over a one-year period were examined. Phenomenographic methodology was followed because it was considered to provide full descriptions that allow coherent meaning to evolve from the findings (Boulton-Lewis, Wilss, & Lewis, 2003).

The design of this research was a case study, which focused on exploring the perceptions of learning and leadership from the perspective of Chinese participants of a Western leadership development course. A case study does not attempt to “describe everything” (Yin, 1998), it is rather an intensive description and analysis of a “bounded system” (Smith, 1978; Stake, 1988) for the purpose of gaining an in-depth understanding of the situation and meaning for those involved. This study was concerned with describing contemporary phenomena rather than statistically testing hypotheses or confirming cause-effect relationship.

This study can be best described as a single case study where qualitative inquiry dominates, “with strong naturalistic, holistic and cultural interests” (Stake, 1994, p. 236). A case study research methodology is appropriate for the study since it is the in-depth analysis of a phenomenon in its natural context, and from the perspective of the
participants involved in the phenomenon (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996, p. 545). The nature of the study means that interpretative case study method is preferred in order to explore conceptions of a cohort of Chinese educational leaders who participated in a Western leadership course. This sets their learning and leadership conceptions in a contemporary international education context.

Phenomenography is the empirical study of the limited number of qualitatively different ways in which we experience, conceptualise, understand, perceive, and apprehend various phenomena and aspects of the world around us. These differing experiences and understandings are characterized in terms of categories of description, logically related to each other, and forming hierarchies in relation to given criteria. Such an ordered set of categories of description is called the outcome space of the phenomenon and concepts in question (Marton, 1992, 1994; Trigwell, 2000).

This study is an interpretative study inspired by the phenomenographic tradition of educational research (Marton, 1981, 1986; Marton & Booth, 1997). Research within this tradition initially focused on investigating students’ learning from the perspective of students themselves (Marton & Booth, 1997; Prosser & Trigwell, 1999; Ramsden, 1992). An awareness of the meanings, or range of meanings, and the intentionality with which students approach their studies was seen as an essential component in advancing our understanding of the nature of student learning. More recently, this research approach has extended into university teaching from the perspective of teachers themselves, examining academics’ conceptions of and approaches to teaching. As with the research into student learning, a core assumption underlying these studies is of the importance of understanding the meanings of teaching, and the intentional nature with which academics approach their teaching (Åkerlind, 2003; Åkerlind & Jenkins, 1998; Kember, 1997; McKenzie, 2003; Prosser & Trigwell, 1999; Samuelowicz & Bain, 1992, 2001; Wood, 2000).

In recent years, considerable research interest in education has been given to investigating students’ conceptions of learning using the phenomenographic approach (Dahlin & Regmi, 1997; Dahlin & Watkins, 2000; Fung, Carr, & Chan, 2001; Marton & Booth, 1997; Marton, Dall'alba, & Beaty, 1993; Marton, Dall'alba, & Tse, 1996; Prosser, Trigwell, & Taylor, 1994; Purdie, Hattie, & Douglas, 1996). Previous research
has established consistent conceptions of learning, i.e. learning as increasing one’s knowledge, memorizing and reproduction, applying, understanding, seeing something in a different way, changing as a person (Marton et al., 1993). Such research on student learning has given increased attention to how learning is experienced, understood, or conceptualised by learners. Phenomenographic studies have also focused on knowledge and concept formation in various domains, including students’ conceptions at various educational levels and systems (Boulton-Lewis, Marton, Lewis, & Wilss, 2000; Collin, 2002; Johansson, Marton, & Svensson, 1985). Recent years have also seen an increasing interest in exploring how leadership is conceived by leaders (e.g. Collard, 2000; Fairholm, 2002; Hsieh & Shen, 1998). Understanding leadership entails understanding people’s conceptions of the phenomenon. This approach to leadership is relatively underdeveloped in the literature. In spite of considerable interest in phenomenographic research in education, relatively few empirical studies employing such approaches have examined conceptions of learning and leadership held by educational leaders, particularly in an international education context.

This study, undertaken from a phenomenographic perspective (Marton, 1981, 1986; Marton & Booth, 1997), investigated participants’ conceptions of learning and leadership and their conceptual development. This focus on critical aspects of and structural relationships between different ways of understanding a phenomenon is seen as having powerful heuristic value in adding insights into learning and leadership. In particular, the various contexts in which the educational leaders worked (schools, systems or universities) were acknowledged as a potential influence upon individuals.

A study of the responses of contemporary Chinese educational leaders to a leadership development program delivered by a Western university enters into a very complex territory. The interviewees carry a complex set of conceptions of learning and leadership from their indigenous culture. The content of the course on Western leadership is not a coherent and unified body of knowledge and theories, and it contains tensions and dissonance. This interactive dynamic occurs within complex contemporary contexts. This is further complicated by the different contexts within which educational leaders work (schools, systems and universities). If contexts influence conceptions and beliefs, it is unlikely that they would all see the concepts of learning and leadership
through the same lens. Therefore, a phenomenographic approach is best suited to capture this complexity of the interactions.

**Sample**

Fifty-two educational leaders from Zhejing Province, China enrolled in the course of Master of Educational Leadership. Forty participants in the course accepted interview invitations and twenty of them participated in this study. Because the focus of the study was on variations in ways people experience a phenomenon, the study included a range of individual’s experiences, and the sample was selected to maximize the possible variation (Trigwell, 2000). The participants interviewed were selected to represent as much variation as possible, being from varied disciplines, ages, genders, with varying levels of experience as a teacher, and working in various education sectors (primary and secondary schools, higher education institutions, and local educational authorities).

In the cohort, 77% of the participants were males and 23% were females. School principals, university administrators and system officials each accounted for approximately one third of the cohort. Participants were aged between 28 to 52 and the mean age of the cohort was 37 years. About 64% of the participants were aged between 35 to 45 years old. All except two participants had teaching experience before they undertook the administrative positions.

The sample comprised 20 subjects, 15 (75%) males and 5 (25%) females. School principals (8) accounted for 40% of the respondents while university administrators (6) and system officials (6) each accounted for 30%. The ages of the subjects ranged from 31 to 52 and the mean age was 38 years old. More than two thirds of the interviewees were aged between 35 to 45 years old. Twelve interviewees were from Hangzhou, the capital city of Zhejiang Province while 8 interviewees were from other cities in the province.

All interviewees had teaching experience in schools or universities before taking the administrative positions. All had Bachelor degrees and about two thirds of them had participated in graduate study and obtained postgraduate certificates. Students who study certain core subjects in postgraduate courses can obtain Graduate Certificates, but these are not formal recognized qualifications in Chinese higher education qualification framework.
degrees covered a wide range of disciplines ranging from mathematics, psychology, physics, physiology, chemistry to history, Chinese, and English. More than half of them had science teaching background. It is speculated by the researcher that a scientific paradigm or scientific way of thinking may dominate among the interviewees before the interview. Three subjects had formal qualifications in educational administration or management. The majority of subjects had training and professional development experience in education or specific disciplines.

**Procedure**

This interpretative study was inspired by the phenomenographic approach. The study examined the experiences and understandings about learning and leadership of Chinese leaders in an offshore program, a Master of Educational Leadership from 2002 to 2003. The program was delivered in a flexible mode in three intensive teaching brackets of six subjects. An in-depth and semi-structured interview technique was adopted with the goal of exploring and elucidating specific research questions. Two sets of interviews were conducted in April 2002 and April 2003 to examine the conceptions of 20 participants drawn from the course. In this study participants were asked to respond to questions about the particular phenomenon being studied. Their responses were sorted into conceptual categories on the basis of similarities and differences. The study sought a better understanding of their conceptions by making a comparison between their perceptions prior to and after undertaking the course. Participants were from schools, universities and educational departments. Potential differences across the three sectors were also considered in the analysis.

The researcher interviewed 20 students individually for appropriately 45 to 90 minutes during the first intensive teaching brackets in April 2002. Those 20 students were interviewed again for about 45 to 90 minutes during the last week of the third intensive teaching bracket in April 2003. The average time for each interview in both sets of interviews was approximately one hour. All documents distributed to participants had been translated from English into Chinese by the researcher, and all interviews were administered in Chinese. In this way the researcher could capture articulate, fluent and developed responses in the mother tongue, which would not have been possible if the interviews were conducted in English.
Data Analysis

Each interview was audio-taped, transcribed verbatim and analysed following the principles of phenomenography. The 200-page transcripts were reviewed several times and summarised by the researcher. Around half of the transcripts were translated from Chinese into English. Full translation of relevant parts and summaries of transcripts was conducted rather than translating sentence by sentence. The researcher, also an accredited translator, transcribed the interviews and translated the transcripts. In the first stage, the researcher analysed the transcriptions and identified sets of categories of descriptions meant to describe the key aspects of the variation within the set of transcripts as a whole. The analytical process was iterative. The researcher then took the categories back to the transcripts, revised the categories and the relationships, and continued to iterate between the transcripts and categories until stable sets of categories and relationships were developed (Martin, Trigwell, Prosser, & Ramsden, 2003).

Limitations of the study

This study is limited to the perspectives of a relatively small sample of educational leaders in Zhejiang Province, a well-developed region in China. Generalisation of their conceptions to Chinese educators in other regions requires caution. Further research which covers a greater number of participants and wider range of samples in various regions in China would be required to have a more comprehensive picture about the perceptions of broader populations of Chinese education leaders.

Another limitation is that the study was exclusively based on the self-reports of the respondents. The reliability of such reports is always questionable. There might be differences between professed beliefs and embedded beliefs in practice. They may have been tempted to agree with beliefs that they may suppose were expected of them and mask socially undesirable or contentious opinions. Moreover, the respondents as students may have felt the need to please the teacher or give right answers to the interview questions, given the Chinese cultural tradition which pays high respect to teachers. Confirmation of leadership beliefs and behaviours in their workplaces would require confirmatory or observation strategies.

In this study, interviewees were highly motivated to get something out of the course, and they were in a culture where students may tend to please the questioner. These
factors need to be considered in interpreting participants’ self-reported conceptual change and practice change. Caution should therefore be exercised in putting too much confidence in the inferences from a single study such as this. Furthermore, other informal forces such as ageing, changes in family relations, and workplace reforms may have influenced these participants. Despite these limitations, the findings of the study provide an exploratory indication of Chinese educational leaders’ conceptions in an international educational context. The findings also constitute a basis for further research.

**Results**

**Conceptions of Learning**

Four categories of conceptions about learning (X-A to X-D) before the course emerged from data analysis. The second round of interviews yielded data about conceptions of learning after the course. Seven categories emerged from the data analysis including the four identified in the first interviews and three new categories (X-E to X-G).

1. Category X-A Learning as acquiring knowledge and skills
2. Category X-B Learning for instrumental purposes
3. Category X-C Learning as applied knowledge
4. Category X-D Learning as understanding the world
5. Category X-E Learning as transforming perspectives and personal development
6. Category X-F Learning as promoting organisational development
7. Category X-G Learning as promoting social development.

These three conceptions (X-E to X-G) developed over the course tend to be more complex and focus on meaning and development at personal, organisational and social levels. They could be defined as higher order conceptions of learning. A wider range of conceptions of learning was identified after the course. This suggests that the range of respondents’ conceptions of learning may have been expanded after the course. The first five categories are consistent with those identified by previous studies like Marton et al. (1993). Two categories (X-F and X-G) emerged which have not been identified in other studies adopting phenomenographic approaches to investigate conceptions of learning (e.g. Dahlin & Regmi, 1997; Marton, Watkins, & Tang, 1997; Pillay &
Boulton-Lewis, 2000; Purdie et al., 1996; Tang, 2001). However, the notions of learning as promoting organisational and social development have broadly aligned with ideas of organisational learning (Argyris, 1999; Argyris & Schon, 1978; Senge, 1990) and learning as social transformation (Freire, 1976; Horton & Freire, 1990; Mao, 1968). In this aspect, this study extends the findings of previous phenomenographic studies.

An analytical framework about conceptions of learning is depicted in Figure 1. At the lower part of Figure 1 are the seven conceptions identified from the interviews where participants reported their conceptions of learning before and after the course. The two orientations stand at the upper part of the figure. These seven conceptions of learning can be considered as first-order concepts and the two orientations as second-order concepts (see Punch, 1998).

As shown in Figure 1, Category X-A, X-B, and X-C are covered by a content focused and utilitarian orientation. Another orientation, meaning focused and developmental orientation, covers four first-order conceptions: Category X-D, X-E, X-F, and X-G. An arrow from a content focused/utilitarian orientation to a meaning focused/developmental orientation suggests the conceptual change path undergone by most participants in this study. Category X-D is shaded implying that it is a linking conception between the two orientations because a better understanding of the world could be a necessary step leading to personal, organisational and social development. The research findings show that before the course, participants’ conceptions were limited to categories X-A to X-D and most reported conceptions from X-A to X-C.
After the course, most respondents reported categories X-D to X-G. This study suggests a tendency of movement from lower order thinking to higher order, more complex conceptions among most participants.

Conceptions of Leadership

Five categories of conceptions about leadership (L-A to X-E) before the course emerged from data analysis. Six categories of conceptions of leadership emerged from the data analysis of the second round of interviews. The categories include the five identified in the initial interviews and one new category (L-F).

1. Category L-A Leadership as positional power
2. Category L-B Leadership as non-positional power
3. Category L-C Leadership as practical art
4. Category L-D Leadership as teamwork leaders
5. Category L-E Leadership as vision and strategic planning
6. Category L-F Leadership as consultation and collaboration.

The conception (L-F) developed through the course tended to be more complex and focus on consultative and collaborative leadership. Conceptions L-E and L-F could be defined as higher level conceptions of leadership. They moved beyond inherited thinking which tended to focus on task and directive leadership. The scope and depth of the six conceptions after the course seemed to go beyond the five initial conceptions. This suggests that respondents’ conceptions of leadership had been expanded by the course.

An analytical framework about conceptions of leadership is depicted in Figure 2. At the lower part of this figure are the six conceptions identified from the interview descriptions. The two orientations stand at the upper part of the figure. These six conceptions of leadership can be considered as first-order concepts and two orientations as second-order concepts (Punch, 1998).
As shown in Figure 2, Category L-A, L-B, L-C, and L-D are covered by a task focused and directive orientation. Another orientation, focused on motivation and collaboration, covers two conceptions: Category L-E and L-F. An arrow from task focused and directive orientations to motivation focused and collaborative orientations suggests a conceptual change path undergone by most interviewees. Category L-D is shaded implying that it is a linking conception between the two orientations. This conception focuses on teamwork within a group of leaders, and is primarily a directive leadership perspective because leadership is viewed as concentrated amongst a few at the top or middle level of administration. However, attention has been paid to collaboration within a group of leaders or middle level managers. Conception L-D therefore seems to be a necessary step leading to collaborative and participative leadership shared with a much broader base of organisational members. The research findings reveal that before the course, participants reported conceptions from L-A to L-E and most held conceptions of L-A to L-D. After the course, participants seemed to report a wider range of perspectives and many reported conceptions of L-E and L-F. This suggests a tendency of shift from a task/directive orientation to a motivation/collaborative orientation.

**Themes Derived from Conceptual Change in Learning and Leadership**

Given the analytical framework and the summary of conceptions of learning reported by the interviewees, some general comments are made about the important themes that emerged from this study. The following themes indicate the particular conceptual
change path undergone by most participants in the course. The five themes are
presented here as differences between extremes on a continuum of learning
conceptions. Respondents were not entirely clustered around their respective extremes
before or after the course. It would be more appropriate to think of the conceptions as
unevenly spread along a line, one end marked “Chinese learning traditions before the
course”, and the other marked “newly developed conceptions after the course”.
Respondents tended to occupy the full range, from one end (a content/utilitarian
orientation) to the other end (a meaning/developmental orientation). However, the
distribution was decidedly skewed, with responses before the course toward one end
and responses after the course toward the other. This situation can also be illustrated by
the analogy of a seesaw. Before the course, the weight of the seesaw tended to be
placed on one end (a content/utilitarian orientation). After the course, its weight was
placed on the other end (a meaning/developmental orientation).

The findings relate to five themes or patterns of conceptions of learning:

1. role of learner: passive recipient of knowledge vs. active constructor of
   knowledge;
2. learning approaches: individual learning vs. cooperative learning;
3. nature of knowledge: sacred and authoritative knowledge vs. indefinite and
   contestable knowledge;
4. purpose of learning: acquiring knowledge and skills for practical purposes vs.
   transforming perspective and promoting personal, organisational and social
   development;
5. forms of learning: formal learning vs. informal and lifelong learning.

Similar to the presentation of the analysis about conceptions of learning, the five themes
about leadership are presented here as differences between extremes. Before the course,
the emphasis tended to be placed on one end (a task/directive orientation), and after the
course, the emphasis was placed on the other end (a motivation/collaborative
orientation).

The findings relate to five themes or patterns of conceptions of leadership:

1. role of leader: operational implementer vs. visionary strategic planner;
2. leadership approach: directive vs. participative;
3. relationship between leaders and staff: command and obey vs. collaborate and participate;
4. creating goals: idiosyncratic wills vs. shared vision;
5. leading process: task oriented vs. motivation oriented.

Table 1 shows the self-reported change profile in conceptions and leadership practice according to the extent of change. Half of the respondents reported large change in conceptions of learning and nearly one third declared large change in conceptions of leadership. One quarter of the respondents reported large change in leadership practice. Around one third reported moderate change in learning conceptions and 45% declared moderate change in leadership conceptions; half of the respondents reported moderate change in leadership practice. About 15% of respondents reported small change in learning conceptions and one quarter of respondents reported small change in leadership conception; one quarter of them also reported small change in leadership practice.

Table 1 Self-Reported Change Profile in the Conceptions and Leadership Practice

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Extent of change</th>
<th>Changes in learning conceptions</th>
<th>Changes in leadership conceptions</th>
<th>Changes in leadership practice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Large</td>
<td>10 (50%)</td>
<td>6 (30%)</td>
<td>5 (25%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>7 (35%)</td>
<td>9 (45%)</td>
<td>10(50%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small/no</td>
<td>3 (15%)</td>
<td>5 (25%)</td>
<td>5 (25%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total subjects</td>
<td>20 (100%)</td>
<td>20 (100%)</td>
<td>20 (100%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: analysis of data.

Not one single factor but a cluster of interactive influences can account for the interviewees’ conceptual change in this study. However, all these may derive from one main influence, exposure to a Western leadership development course and direct exposure to Western pedagogy. Respondents’ own accounts of their conceptual changes provided evidence to understand the contributing factors. The conceptual changes in learning and leadership can be explained by the following factors:
1. direct experience as stimulus to change;
2. intellectual content as stimulus to change;
3. self-reflection as stimulus to change;
4. peer interaction as stimulus to change;
5. assessment and application of knowledge as stimulus to change.

**Summary of Findings**

Chinese educational leaders in this study reported comparatively traditional conceptions of learning and leadership in quite a limited range prior to undertaking a Western leadership development course. Comparison of reported conceptions prior to and after the course indicates an expanded range of conceptions, showing a general movement towards more complex and diversified perspectives. Learning experience and exposure to Western educational ideas and practices seems to have led participants to reflect on their assumptions and to expand their conceptions. Many leaders also reported using an expanded range of leadership strategies after the course. While a range of issues related to specific conceptions of learning or leadership is discussed previously, the focus of this section is to integrate these specific findings into more general reflections on both learning and leadership in the following dimensions:

- **A shift from lower-order, limited conceptions to more complex and expanded conceptions**: A general shift in orientations and an increased understanding about learning and leadership expanded participants’ range of perspectives, and also increased the availability of operational strategies in their leadership practice.

- **Variations in conceptual and practice changes**: Most participants reported some change in their conceptions of learning and leadership and their leadership practice. However, the extent of change in the conceptions and practice claimed by individuals varied.

- **Differences in changes represented among sectors**: Respondents from school, university or system sectors all reported large, moderate or small change in their conceptions and leadership after the course. Some difference can be detected among the three sectors regarding the changes.

- **Multiple conceptions of learning and leadership**: Participants in this study generally reported several conceptions of learning and leadership
simultaneously. They also reported that they would utilize them selectively according to different situations.

- *Loosely coupled hierarchical structures of categories:* The categories of conceptions in the study are not classified in a neat, strict hierarchical order. They are not strictly linked in a completely hierarchical relationship based on inclusivity. However, the categories have logical relationships, arranged from lower order, simpler conceptions to higher order, more complex conceptions.

- *A dual focus on conceptions of learning and leadership:* The researcher initially meant to mainly focus on participants’ conceptions of leadership. A dual focus emerged which looked to understand both learning and leadership and examine the relationship between them. There was a good case in this study for examining both the learning process and substantive content of leadership from participants’ perspectives.

- *A close relationship between conceptions of learning and leadership:* Another emergent finding of this study was the existence of a relationship between the conceptions of learning and leadership. There seemed to be a link between authoritative knowledge/passive learning and authoritarian leadership before the course. There also seemed to be a link between conceptions of contestable knowledge/participative learning and shared leadership after the course.

**Contributions to Theory and Practice**

Taking into account the limitations, the study makes its contributions to theories and practice in the following aspects. Firstly, the study makes its contribution to knowledge development and further understanding of learning and leadership, particularly in international education contexts. It extends categories of conceptions of learning identified by previous research based on phenomenographic approaches. It is one of a few phenomenographic studies exploring conceptions of leadership, and the first empirical study examining Chinese leaders’ conceptions of learning and leadership in an international education context.

Secondly, the study shows that international education programs can play a limited but positive role in expanding participants’ conceptions of learning and leadership. It is suggested that such programs may also help to enhance their international perspective
and intercultural awareness, develop alternative perspectives, and to some extent, improve their leadership practice. Thirdly, the study provides recommendations regarding designing, developing and delivering international programs. Within the context of international education programs, some effort needs to be made to tailor course provision to adapt to the local culture and nature of the learners.

Fourthly, the study suggests that leadership is value-based and contextualised. The learning and leadership conceptions and practices are context dependent and inevitably influenced by particular cultural contexts. It is understandable that participants held beliefs and conceptions which were compatible with the existing contexts and teaching and leadership practice in China. Exposure to Western educational ideas and pedagogies has made them reflect on their own learning and leadership practice and given impetus for further reflection. An open, positive and discerning attitude of “absorbing any essence of advanced cultural heritage from other cultures” will facilitate expanded leadership conceptions and strategies.

The study also illustrates the tension between different cultural forces in the international education. During the process of intercultural dialogue and understanding, as intended in this international leadership development course, cultural dissonance seemed to be unavoidable. People may generally escape cultural dissonance by retreating to the dominant culture in which they are living. In practice, after the course participants continued to be subjected to the strong forces of the Chinese culture and context, while mediated the influence of Western culture and ideas.

**Directions for Future Research**

This study focuses on the perspectives of participants in an offshore leadership development program rather than those of the course deliverers. In order to investigate the dynamic interactive learning process in an international educational context, further research is needed to examine the experience and perspectives of the Western academics and the adaptation that they have made.

The study is limited to the influence of an Australian offshore program upon participants’ conceptions during a one-year course from 2002 to 2003. The influence of the course on their perspectives and practice after they completed the course goes
beyond the scope of this study. It would be significant to investigate the long-term influence of this leadership development program upon participants. Follow-up research is therefore suggested to further examine the applicability of Western theories and how those participants are relating these perspectives to their workplaces longitudinally, through observations of the participants and consultation with relevant stakeholders like teachers, students, parents, and superintendents.

This study implies and critically reflects on a prevalent practice in contemporary China, namely that Western educational and management theories have been introduced to China as scientific knowledge systems. However, a close link between those abstract theories and practice often seems to be missing. What is needed is more empirical research on critical adaptation of Western ideas to Chinese contexts rather than the current focus on translating Western books into Chinese or introducing theories systematically to China.

The research findings indicate that the leadership or management field is more about contextualised and applied practices than a pure objective science. This study challenges the beliefs held by many Chinese academics that management or leadership disciplines are a science comprising objective, authoritative, irrefutable knowledge or truth. Indeed, it can be argued that educational leadership and management in the West is not actually a discipline in the traditional academic sense. Rather it is a field of endeavour which incorporates diverse and even contradictory assumptions about human beings, their organisations and cultures (Gunter, 2003). As such, it will continue to pose fundamental heresies for traditional Chinese thinking. Further research is expected to explore philosophical paradigms underpinning Chinese learning and leadership.

Conclusion

This study explores the conceptions of learning and leadership from the perspective of Chinese educational leaders in an international education context. It also describes and analyses a developmental process in their conceptions. As indicated by the participants in this study, there is a trend to integrate Chinese and Western educational and leadership ideas. At least in this instance, leadership development programs across the national boundaries are helpful for educators from developing countries to enhance intercultural awareness, develop an international perspective, get to know contemporary
educational ideas and best practices from other countries, reflect on their own perspectives and practices, and then accommodate alternative perspectives and ideas critically to improve their leadership practice. The study highlights the importance of critical reflection and adaptation on the part of practitioners when importing Western educational ideas to non-Western countries. It also questions the universal applicability of Western theories and ideas in non-Western contexts.

Under the influence of globalisation and internationalisation, it has been noted that education development trends in various countries are tending to converge on common issues such as mass higher education, information and communication technology, site-based management, economic rationalism emphasizing accountability, efficiency and effectiveness, and curriculum reform (e.g. Marginson, 1997; Wu, 2002). Collective efforts have been called to seek synergy while still valuing the unique characteristics of each country’s educational heritage. While the East turns to the West to promote student creativity and problem solving ability, the West turns to the East to demystify the high academic performance of Asian students in international mathematics tests. The argument in this study is that intercultural dialogue and integration of educational ideas and practice are likely to come about when East meets West in an open and reflective dialogue.
References:


The listed references are processed through EndNote 6. The reference style is based on the modified form of American Psychology Association (APA) 5th system of referencing. Headline style capitalisation rather than sentence style capitalisation is used in the references in order to accommodate the style of references in Chinese sources.


Appendix: Interview Schedules

Initial Interview Questions

1. Could you please introduce briefly your workplace, position and job duty?
2. Please indicate critical challenges you are facing as an educational leader.
3. What are the motivators for your participating in this course? What do you expect to get from it?
4. How do you understand leadership and learning? What is your personal understanding of these concepts?
5. Do you think your perceptions and leadership practice will change after undertaking the course? Why?

Final Interview Questions

1. Could you please introduce briefly your previous training and professional experiences?
2. How did you understand learning before the course and how do you understand it now? What is your personal understanding of the concept? Has your understanding of learning changed as a result of the course? Could you illustrate in what ways your understanding of learning has changed, if any?
3. How did you understand leadership before the course and how do you understand it now? What is your personal understanding of the concept? Has your understanding of leadership in educational organisations changed as a result of the course? Could you illustrate in what ways your understanding of leadership has changed, if any?
4. How do you perceive the relationship between leadership and learning?
5. In what ways has the course helped you to respond to the critical challenges you face as an educational leader?
6. Has your leadership practice in your workplace changed as a result of the course? Could you provide examples of your behavioural change, if any?
7. Could you identify three most important learnings you have gained from the training course? Have your expectations of the course been met?