

Developing graduate capabilities in the business curriculum: perspectives from international students studying in Australia

Since 2008, students in undergraduate business degrees at Victorian University (VU) in Melbourne, Australia, complete three mandatory units designed to maximize employability skills. The first of these units, Professional Development 1: Critical Thinking and Problem Solving (PD1) presents a challenge for international students new to Australia, many of whom are unaccustomed to communicative pedagogies and who, initially at least, seem disadvantaged by the English proficiency required of a dynamic learning setting in an Australian classroom that includes local students. This paper considers PD1 from the perspective of Chinese students and examines the employability skills explicitly taught and assessed in the unit - especially the focus on communication, critical thinking and problem solving - and questions their relevance for Chinese students and the Chinese labour market. The paper uses international students' reflective journals, Blackboard Discussion postings and focus group responses to provide a sense of what this cohort finds worthwhile, challenging or useful in PD1 to their future studies or employment. The paper also considers student responses to the teaching approach of PD1. The unit is taught in 3-hour seminars of 40 students in purpose-built learning spaces with a range of technologies to support collaboration, communication and ICT competencies. Many learning activities and assessment tasks are team based and require both a mix of local and international students in each team and a "native speaker" proficiency in English. The PD classroom is an active learning space that requires a paradigm shift in students' learning approaches. Most of VU's international students come from China and it is the responses of Chinese students that inform this survey. Given that China is examining how to better prepare graduates for the labour market, this study contributes to a larger discussion about global employability and education and teaching approaches.

Keywords: graduate employability, internationalising the curriculum, English, team work

“When a teacher asks me if I agree or disagree with them, I don’t know what to say”
(Chinese student in interview teaching styles in China and Australia: Szabo & Deng, 2009).

Introduction

This paper concerns the first of three Professional Development (PD) units of study at Victoria University (VU), Melbourne, Australia which were developed after a review of undergraduate Business programs at the university. Professional Development 1: Critical Thinking and Problem Solving (PD1), Professional Development 2: Analysis and Strategy (PD2) and Professional Development 3: Challenge and Leadership (PD3) began delivery in 2008. PD1 presents a challenge for international students many of whom are unused to communicative pedagogies and who initially seem disadvantaged by the English proficiency required of a dynamic learning setting in an Australian classroom. This paper focuses on what international students from China studying in Australia think about PD1: the unit’s purpose, the way it is taught and its usefulness. Focus group responses, emails and student reflections (used with permission) indicate some Chinese students’ views on this curriculum initiative.

VU’s 2006 review of its Business programs surveyed business practitioners, HR managers, VU Business alumni and VU Business academics (Papadopoulos et al., 2006). Over 700 respondents completed a survey that asked them to rank the professional skills and knowledge required of the work-ready business graduate. The most desirable or essential *personal attributes* in graduates included such qualities as motivation, enthusiasm and initiative as well as cultural awareness and sensitivity. Respondents ranked *professional skills* such as capacity to work in teams and oral communication skills as essential. The Business Review recommended the development of PD units in VU’s Business degrees to maximize students’ employability skills. The curriculum of PD1 develops these attributes and skills in a highly interactive way. PD1 develops students’ graduate attributes, orients them to the requirements of academic discourse and provides them with support in transition. The views of Chinese students on PD1’s assessment approaches that are often team-based and which

require considerable English proficiency and confidence are of interest given the highly individual and exam-based Chinese educational tradition and the language issues Chinese students experience when mixing with “local” students.¹

Methodology

How relevant are Australian employability skills to Chinese students? How inclusive or assessable are PD1’s highly communicative teaching approaches to Chinese students? Reflective journals, Blackboard Discussion and focus group responses of students from China provide glimpses of what this cohort finds worthwhile, challenging or useful in PD1. Students have offered work for inclusion and given permission for selected comments to be quoted. Focus groups asking PD students about their experience of the subject initially had a mix of local and international students; then Chinese students were invited to stay on for an extra session to answer questions about language, team work, pedagogy and studying in Australia. Significantly, Chinese students were less talkative in the mixed focus group. A student said that it was hard to find the space to respond to questions quickly because she was “*competing*” with locals. Some student responses are generalised while verbatim student comments are italicised and in quotation marks. A literature review considers employability skills in Australia and China to provide a context for the discussion.

Employability Skills

Employability skills include communication skills, teamwork skills, problem solving skills, self management skills, planning and organising skills, technology skills, life-long learning skills and enterprise skills (DEST, 2002). The prominence of employability skills in

¹ Chinese students clearly distinguish themselves from “local students”. The myth of the local student is worth unpacking and is the topic of a paper under development. The myth of the local student echoes the myth of “the native English speaker”: it is a racially-based assumption that non-Chinese, non-International students are more proficient in written and spoken English. In my classes, Chinese students have variously referred to a German exchange student as a local and an Afghani-born, Pashto-speaking-at-home student as local – so it is not clear how helpful or geographically meaningful the term is. It is of interest given that Chinese students say that PD1’s team-based approach to assessment improves their English and their confidence in speaking English in part because they are working with local students.

Australian curriculum is due to a number of drivers including the students themselves, industry and professional bodies and policy directives of State and Federal governments. Most students enrol at VU to enhance their employability prospects and VU is keen to support graduates' transition into "the workforce" through numerous preparatory initiatives both within the curriculum and in extra-curricular programs. All courses taught at VU embed VU's six Graduate Capabilities: "the university accepts that it has the dual responsibility of enhancing the employability of its students and developing their effectiveness as lifelong learners" (VU, 2008). As well as problem solve, VU graduates are expected to be able to

locate, critically evaluate, manage and use written, numerical and electronic information; communicate in a variety of contexts and modes; work...autonomously and collaboratively [and] in an environmentally, socially and culturally responsible manner; and manage learning and career development opportunities (VU, 2008).

How relevant are VU's attributes to Chinese students' professional aspirations? How relevant are Australian employability skills to Chinese workplaces? Is PD1 appropriate for students who expect that "a degree from a foreign university...may give them better chances of finding a job in China on graduation"? (Szabo & Deng, 2009: p. 4).

Employability in China Like the Australian Government, China's Ministry of Education (MoE) also monitors the employability of graduates. The *Higher Education Law of the People's Republic of China* (1998) stresses that graduates have "basic skills, techniques and related know-how necessary for...practical work" (MoE, nd). One Chinese scholar says that employers want 'not bookworms who could talk big, but "hens" who could "lay real eggs."' Employers, argues, Zhao (2003) "do not employ degrees, we employ talent" (p.4).

Reports suggest that Chinese graduates are under prepared for the labour market partly because China's "educational institutions are not able to meet the requirements needed for managerial success of their graduates" (Guo & van der Heijden, 2008: 290). The expansion of China's higher education sector has contributed to a changed labour market with no guarantees of employment choices for graduates (Li, Zhang & Matlay, 2003). More

importantly, traditional teaching methods in China are challenged by the need to develop graduates with “global thinking”, “cross-cultural communication skills” and “the ‘savvy’ to do business with foreign counterparts” (Guo & van der Heijden, 2008: 290). China’s MoE concedes employer dissatisfaction with graduates: “current graduates have high exam scores, yet low ability and transferable skills...many students do not even have a clear idea how to present themselves during job interviews” (Zhang cited in Guo & van der Heijden, 2008). Graduates may have a degree but employers say they have no ‘real talent’ or the ability to apply it (Zhao, 2002: 5). A broad translation of employability, ‘ke gu yong xing’ (Partridge & Keng, nd), combines the characteristics, personality, knowledge and skills employees should possess. These qualities may need to be considered by Chinese curriculum developers.

A 2008 survey of CUFU-VU graduates in the Chinese workplace (McWilliams et al., 2009) asked respondents to rank qualities required of their current roles. Again, personal attributes like motivation, being open minded and hard working were ranked highly. Overall, the authors suggest: “High morals are valued while high marks are not”. Chinese employers are seeking graduates who are broadly employable: “the employment market has become more competitive and graduates need a competitive advantage in their job search” (ibid.: 8). Most students thought that PD would be useful in the workplace although one student was unsure: “*I have no experience of working so I don’t know*”. All students, however, thought the unit was “*very good for professional English*”.

Employability skills are not apparent in Chinese business education (Li, Zhang & Matlay, 2003). In China, students and teachers alike complain about a teacher-centric, exam-oriented education system (Guo & van der Heijden, 2008: 291). The direct teaching methods prevalent in China contrast with the intensely communicative Western teaching methods employed in PD1. Chinese students can regard teaching methods “like games, ice-breakers, or discussion as a waste of time” (Woodley, 2006: 28). Chinese colleagues have said:

“Teachers are supposed to talk the whole time. For students to talk amongst themselves, to correct their own work or read in class time, this would not be allowed. It is unbelievable” (Woodley, 2006: 28). So PD1 – which begins with a theme-related icebreaker and which sees students chatting, reviewing each other’s work and reading articles online – may well look chaotic, unscholarly and too much fun for serious-minded students. And, given that these activities are dependent on English language proficiency, how do Chinese students fare?

Teaching Methods PD1 is distinctive in how it is taught. Lectures and tutorials have been replaced by a 3-hour, collaborative seminar with a multi-disciplinary mix of students from across the Faculty. Delivery of PD takes place in purpose-built learning spaces with a range of technologies that support collaboration and communication. The PD1 classes have 40 students sitting at kidney-shaped tables of 8-10 people, one computer per team of 4-5 students and projector capacity for students to share their computer work with the class on up to five 52" LCD monitors around the room. Facilitators control all LCD monitors (including three LCD monitors for facilitator display) but transmission of information from facilitators is discouraged while communicative and constructivist activities are encouraged. Teachers know that discussion, debate or Socratic teaching approaches are based on communicative philosophies of teaching and learning which may be unfamiliar to Chinese students. Moreover, these students may not have “proficient English language levels to successfully participate in ...highly verbal activities” (Woodley & Wenjie, 2008).

Student comments confirm these concerns about language and learning activities. The PD learning spaces are equipped with glass whiteboards and students have a range of whiteboard markers, Post-it notes and other media to present information, create mind maps or comment on other students’ board work. Low-tech technologies are very popular with many team activities and students take photographs of team mind maps, Duncker Diagrams or brainstorming efforts and upload images into PowerPoint or other documents. All students

thought that these learning activities and assessment tasks were very useful and that the team work and language requirements of each task were “*challenging*” but mostly beneficial.

What students think

Despite the difficulty of the set reading compounded by the “*word levels*” and “*too many new words*”, students said that they found PD1 topics, such as climate change, interesting and relevant. They liked “*the cultural stuff*” and recognised the importance of intercultural knowledge and skills for business graduates. The number of oral presentations was “*terrifying*” but “*good practice*”. Overall, students say assessment is “*relevant*” and the unit provides a “*useful*” educational experience. Amid warnings that first year students may feel especially alienated in large classes, it was heartening to hear that students felt a real sense of belonging which they attributed to several factors: including the facilitator - “*my teacher knew everyone’s name*”; the use of ICT - “*Common Forum was really useful – made me feel like I belonged*”; and team work – it was “*motivating to be in a group*”.

Online discussion supports students socially and academically. The sheer quantity of postings suggests that both the whole-of-unit Common Forum and the Seminar-specific Discussion provide a valuable space for students to communicate, collaborate and “*belong*”. A survey of over 1500 postings for semester 2, 2009 shows international students are overrepresented in the number of postings compared to local students. Topics range from assessment or administrative questions, general anxiety about study, exchanges about Harvest Festival and informal chats featuring emoticons like >_<, @_@, and even 55555555 (“*every young Chinese person knows what this means*”). Students’ comments confirm that the social dimension of learning is crucial and several students said that they looked forward to attending PD1: “*PD...is the only subject where I can be myself...I feel like going to PD*”. Another student distinguished between learning from texts and learning from peers: “*I learnt*

about culture...not only from books by also friends in PD1". The social dimension of learning is promoted in the team-based approach to assessment and class activities.

Developing communication skills is a key learning outcome of PD1 and students said that because of PD1 they feel that they know "*how to communicate*". Moreover, the unintended outcome frequently expressed by Chinese students is that they know "*how to communicate with locals*". The PD class compels students to practise interpersonal interaction. PD1 was designed to focus on students' communication skills; but the capacity of PD1 to develop English language proficiency of international students through interaction with locals had not been anticipated.

Reflective journals are revealing about students' views on team work and speaking English. Chinese students expressed a common concern - often an anxiety - about English levels alongside a determination to practise. Importantly, students see PD as a place, space and reason *to* practise. One student said in PD she learnt to "*be brave*" in presenting her ideas to the class. Confidence and bravery are difficult to measure but they recur in journals entries.

VU's approach to internationalising the curriculum is based on several principles that espouse inclusive curriculum and a respect for diversity; in fact, teaching methods should "not disadvantage any student" (Woodley & Pearce, 2007). That said, it is difficult to know and accommodate each student's ways of learning. The best that teachers of PD1 can do is to be explicit about how they teach, what they expect students to do and why they teach the way they do. PD1 represents a shift from transmissionist teaching methods to an extreme communicative teaching approach. PD teachers believe that students learn by doing, by talking, by discussing, by practising, by getting feedback, by reflecting. But is such an approach truly student-centred? PD1 teachers need to be mindful that the communicative approach is only one way to teach and that the effectiveness of learner-centeredness is culturally determined. How effective are Western teaching methods to Chinese students?

How do Chinese students cope with the often chaotic busyness of the PD1 classroom? Focus group participants were positive about the teaching approach. Journals also suggest it is an educationally valuable experience. But is it also quite a trial:

- *What I have experienced and learned in twelve weeks...is just like a dream. It is fantastic but also makes me very tired and crazy. This subject is very...different to other subjects.*
- *Instead of re-studying a pure knowledge business subject, doing PD1 is a meaningful yet difficult experience.*

Early journals entries convey anxiety over English language levels. This is a common theme and students describe working with local students in particular as evoking fear, as creating “barriers in communication” and as “rather difficult”; mostly, as one student says, “*Because everyone's English is excellent and they all speak fluently, I cannot communicate with them*”.

How accurate these students’ negative self-appraisals are is a matter for further research. It may be the case that the perceived fluency of local students is overstated and that their own sense of their English levels is too harsh: “*I found it was quite difficult to communicate and catch up with the local students though I had learned English for nearly 10 years. What a big joke! I always remained mute when the group members spoke to me with perfect LOCAL accent*”. This entry was during the students’ first week in Australia. While she may have been overly harsh in her self-appraisal, the fact is, nevertheless, that students’ perceived English proficiency impacts on their ability to participate in team work and contribute to class activities – whether overstated, understated or accurate: “*When I came up with an idea, I had difficulty to explain it well to other members*”. All students vowed to practice English and the key method of their practice invariably involved locals: “*I really want to practice my English, and I also want to talk to the locals to practice*”. The need to communicate for team assessment is a motivating factor: “*Learn English by heart; especially practice speaking regularly, in order to participate in team work*”. One student’s priority “*is to practice my English again and again thus I can learn...more techniques and professional skills within PD1 class...with my helpful classmates.*”

In just a few weeks, the journals show that students' anxieties are traded for a determination to practise English, strategies for practising English and examples expressing relief and pleasure after successful English language activities in class. One student was initially "worried [her team] can't understand me" but she became confident and "brave". This is a typical pattern in the journals which frequently show improved confidence over time. The presence of the "local" student both encourages and challenges many Chinese students:

- *It was...harder for me to do a 3-minute talk without preparation. But I gained courage from my colleagues. They were curious to know something about China which really gave me a lot of inspiration.*
- *It is a challenge for me to do the presentation in front of this class, because most of them can speak English fluently and some of them are local students. However, I have done it which makes me very happy.*
- *When it was my turn to do presentation, I was a bit nervous. I tried to control myself to... calm down. After completing my presentation, I was relieved and took a deep breath. [The team's] leader...said to me: "Well done!"*

By week 12, students do improve and reminisce about their old nervous selves:

- *I still remember how nervous I was in talking to other students with English. But after plenty of teamwork and some meetings, I can express my own views when members are discussing and that is really a big step for me.*

The benefit to English language development might be summarised by one student who was adamant that the interactive seminar with multiple activities "provides me with a better environment to exercise my English skills than sitting in a big class with many other Chinese students". Most students report improvement but one student was dismayed:

I am really very upset! In fact, I work very hard and try my best to improve my level, but it doesn't make any sense!...I still cannot understand everything in class very well.

VU teachers need to be mindful that many Chinese students are mystified by Australian teaching methods and plagued by the English levels required to participate in class.

Disadvantage caused by culturally-bound teaching methods can be mitigated with support strategies such as explicit pedagogies, Learning Support sessions, workshops on oral presentations and plenty of online discussion.

Teams

In China, assessment is highly individual and exam-based. Teamwork is not common. The mix of local and international students in PD1 teams is a challenge for all students and journal postings mention many problems, assumptions and prejudices. English proficiency is the single biggest concern of Chinese students who express real frustration when they cannot make themselves understood. English, simultaneously a cause of much anxiety (one student is hesitant “*of providing my ill-defined opinions*”), still emerges as a positive aspect of team work for Chinese students. One student was “*very nervous*” but when her English improved and “*team members ask, ‘What do you think?’ ...I became confident to give my opinion.*” Diversity of motivation in a team can also create anxiety for Chinese students if their drive for high grades is not shared: “*I like an international group. We have paid more money. We cannot fail. It is a waste of our time and money. Our visa will be cancelled. We also want...a high mark.*” Unsurprisingly, Chinese and local students alike have mixed views about working in teams. Students complain about members doing nothing, being absent and writing poorly: team work “*can be motivating and fun but [it can also] be really unfair sometimes*”.

Conclusion

Employability of business graduates is a global concern. Chinese students are excited about a subject that motivates them to practise English: a key skill which will enhance their employability in China. They also value PD1 because it bolsters confidence, develops public speaking skills and provides spaces and reasons to work in teams, meet local students and hone problem solving skills. PD1 must create spaces and supportive strategies for Chinese students who can feel stressed and excluded when oral communication is central to the teaching methodology. As one student warns, “you have to be quick in mind and quick in mouth or the opportunity [to participate] goes very quickly.”

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