

## Understanding Chinese Students' Learning Needs in Western Business Classrooms

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This study was motivated by a recognized tension experienced by teachers and students resulting from an increasingly internationalized university classroom. We propose that this tension is exacerbated in business classrooms because of the participatory nature of many of the pedagogical tools used in these classrooms, tools which have been designed for Western students rather than those from Eastern cultures. These pedagogical tools include in-class discussions, student presentations, case analyses, and group work. This study examines the attitudes and opinions of Chinese students enrolled in Western business courses toward these specific pedagogical tools. We believe that this is the first study to look at these issues using a student lens. Three major themes emerge from the study: (1) Chinese students have a strong desire to be prepared for their classes; (2) Chinese students are not averse to participating in class; and (3) Chinese students want help, both academic and social. Our findings add depth to existing research by expanding on what is known about the Chinese learner and create awareness amongst business instructors and support staff to enhance classroom learning and teaching for all students.

Driven by increased global interconnectedness that extends to all organizations and enterprises, universities have for the past decade embraced opportunities to internationalize their programs and institutions. The recruitment of students is a starting point in this increased focus on internationalism. The literature recognizes this and specifically mentions Chinese students: "one obvious impact of globalization within the university sector has been the dramatic increase in international students, particularly native Chinese speakers" (Roberts & Tuleja, 2008, p. 454). In addition to the revenue potential of internationalization, universities are also motivated by increased competitiveness, prestige and the strategic alliances that international relationships bring (Altbach & Knight, 2007).

A 2009 Statistics Canada report paints a compelling picture of the increasing multicultural university: the number of foreign students who came to Canada for post-secondary education rose, on average, 8.9% per year between 2000 and 2006 (Pan-Canadian Education Indicators Program, 2009). This places Canada 13<sup>th</sup> among OECD countries, behind Korea and New Zealand with 30% annual increases, and ahead of countries such as Austria, Germany, the United States and Belgium with 5% annual increases (PCEIP, 2009). The PCEIP (2009) also reports that about 8% of those enrolled in post-secondary education are international students; this places Canada seventh behind Australia (20%), the United Kingdom (15%), Switzerland (14%), New Zealand (14%), Austria (12%) and Ireland (9%). Within Canada, the provinces of British Columbia, New Brunswick, and Nova Scotia record 10% international students while Saskatchewan, Prince Edward Island, and Newfoundland and Labrador register about 6% international students (PCEIP, 2009).

The university in which we work is experiencing robust growth in the number of international students: It is anticipated that within a few years 25% of students enrolled in our business programs will be from China.

It is well established that there are benefits and risks to increased numbers of international students. In a 2006 address, Richard C. Levin, president of Yale University, stated that welcoming foreign students to the United States has done the following:

[It has had] two overriding positive effects: (1) many of the very best stay here and strengthen the nation as immigrants have for its entire history, and (2) foreign students who study in the US become ambassadors for many of its most cherished values when they return home. Or at least they better understand them. In the US as elsewhere, few instruments of foreign policy are as effective in promoting a stable and peaceful world as welcoming international students to one's universities. (Levin, 2006)

A 2005 survey by the International Association of Universities (IAU) supported this: 96% of responding institutions from 95 countries agreed that internationalization brings benefits to higher education and concluded, "The two most important benefits identified by higher education institutions are more internationally oriented staff/students and improved academic quality" (Knight, 2007, para. 6). A previous study by Knight (1997) identified the preparation of globally knowledgeable and interculturally competent graduates, as well as curriculum reform, as benefits of internationalization.

While there is widespread agreement that internationalization brings benefits, 70% of the

respondents to the IAU survey also think that there are substantial risks associated with an internationalization strategy. While many of the risks, such as increased commercialization and commoditization of education programs, are more associated with the “cross-border aspects of internationalization than campus-based activities” (Knight, 2007, para. 2), this is not to say that on-campus activities are without risk. A dramatic and sudden shift in the composition of classrooms such as that experienced in Canadian universities over the past decade is certain to have an impact on classroom activities and pedagogy. One response to the challenges of the changing classroom culture is that instructors adapt their teaching approaches to try to satisfy the learning needs of the incoming students (Bartlett & Fischer, 2011), and this often causes “considerable grumbling across campuses” by instructors (Roberts & Tuleja, 2008, p. 474).

This paper presents the findings of a study which examines attitudes of Chinese students towards pedagogical tools commonly associated with teaching a business curriculum in a classroom. These pedagogical tools include discussions, student presentations, case analyses, and group work. Speece and Valentine (2002) and others have confirmed that while these tools are used in other disciplines, they are especially fundamental to business classroom learning. Specifically, we focus on how Chinese students with particular culturally-influenced learning styles respond to these specific pedagogical tools. While other studies have examined how Chinese students learn in Western classrooms, we believe that ours is the first to look specifically at the business classroom using a student lens.

First, we present a review of current literature that examines student learning and cultural issues affecting learning. Second, we describe our use of focus groups. Third, we present what we learned from the focus group participants regarding the use of standard business classroom pedagogies. Finally, we draw conclusions and make observations regarding the use of these tools in the classroom, and we discuss opportunities for future study.

### Literature Review

A shift in the demographics of the business school classroom represented by an increasing presence of international, often Chinese, students has led instructors to reconsider the use of particular pedagogical tools traditionally used in their Western business schools. An important driver for change in teaching methods is the difference between the learning styles of Chinese and Western students and adaptation to address the needs of Chinese students. There is a comprehensive literature that looks at the differences between the learning styles

of Chinese and Western students (Bodycott & Walker, 2000; Holmes, 2004; Huang, 2005; Jones, 1999; Mooney, 2006; Roberts & Tuleja, 2008). Chan (1999) describes the influence of Confucianism on education, in particular the “observation of human relationships within a hierarchically-oriented society” and the “value of harmony, urging individuals to adapt to the collectivity, to control their emotions” (p. 298). The link between beliefs and classroom behavior is demonstrated by the respect of the Chinese student for the wisdom and knowledge of their teachers and their hesitancy to challenge those in authority. Chan (1998) says,

[T]he pressures to preserve harmony, to conform, to avoid loss of face and shame mean that certain styles of teaching and learning is preferred by the Chinese. The participative approaches commonly used in Western teaching may therefore case a problem for Chinese learners. (p. 298).

Further, Tweed and Lehman (2002) explore how culture influences learning, comparing Western (Socratic-influenced) learning with Chinese (Confucian-influenced) learning. They say that both students and educators may under-appreciate how culture affects any given student (Tweed & Lehman, 2002) and that methods of experiential learning (e.g., those fundamental to business school education) and participative activities (Huang, 2005; Jones, 1999) may be the most demanding for the Chinese learner. Chan (1999) agrees and specifically notes that management programs for Chinese students are challenged because of a lack of student participation in classroom activities, a limited use of typical management training techniques such as case studies, and inefficiency of group discussions. If in fact Chinese students have difficulty adapting to these pedagogies, it should be no surprise: they are essentially Western constructs (Speece & Valentine, 2002).

#### Research into Chinese learners

has spawned the following generalizations about Chinese students: They do not enjoy participating in class discussions because they are passive learners; they prefer to learn through memorization and repetition; they value only the instructor's opinion, not the opinion of peers; and they highly value group harmony. (Roberts & Tuleja, 2008, p. 476)

This portrayal of the Chinese learner, if accurate, may provide particular challenges in the Western business school classroom where the pedagogical tools used focus on participation, inquiry, and experiential learning. We suggest that a reactive and unexamined

response to Chinese students will satisfy no one—not the instructor, the Chinese student, the Western student, or the business community and society which the business school graduates will support—and grumbling, as noted by Roberts and Tuleja (2008, see above) is the least significant of the expected consequences. We contend that within business schools there are sound pedagogical reasons for using teaching tools such as case studies, group work, in-class discussion, and student presentations. We therefore want to understand Chinese student learning needs and whether or not Chinese students feel specially challenged by the use of these pedagogical tools. An understanding of these challenges may help instructors address these issues without replacing well-established, successful, student-centered methods of teaching business courses, a situation reported by Bartlett and Fischer (2011). Indeed, as noted by Edwards and Ran (2006) we should not dismiss the “Chinese student’s ability to adapt to the expectations of the new system” (p. 15).

Our study was motivated by an acceptance of the tension between the challenges experienced by teachers and students in the classroom and the desire to internationalize post-secondary institutions. Roberts and Tuleja’s (2008) paper provides a good basis on which to build our study, as does a report by Edwards and Ran (2006) that looked at how the needs of Chinese students could be met in the British higher education system. Roberts and Tuleja (2008) look at the challenges of Western instructors interacting in a classroom of Chinese students located in Hong Kong, and Edwards and Ran (2006) use focus groups of instructors to identify issues. Our study is unique in that it uses a students’ lens to examine the challenges faced by Chinese students in adapting to a highly interactive and participatory Western business classroom.

### **Methodology**

The research approach for this project was two-fold: interviews with relevant university stakeholders, and focus groups with Chinese business students. Initial interviews were conducted with staff in the international student service centers and ESL office at our university to obtain their insights into the learning styles of Chinese students. Consultation with an English department faculty member with expertise in post-colonial literature provided insights into Chinese learning and culture. These interviews provided background information for this study, but the primary research approach for this project was the focus group technique.

### **Rationale for Focus Groups**

Focus groups were selected as the primary research approach, given the research question, the objectives,

and the need for a deep student perspective. Our interest in how business schools can design pedagogy to enhance the learning objectives of their programs for all students, including Chinese students, meant that it was important to gain a deep understanding of how Chinese students experience the pedagogical tools of business education to identify challenges of these methods and to begin to identify solutions to mitigate these challenges.

To meet these objectives, there was a need to elicit the actual feelings, thoughts and experiences of Chinese students in the Western business classroom. The literature supports the use of focus groups for this purpose and with this ethnic group. Asbury (1995) states, “Focus groups are a data collection technique that capitalizes on the interaction within the group to elicit rich experiential data” (p. 414). Asbury (1995) further suggests that if the researcher is interested in understanding some issue from the perspective of a specific population, focus groups should be considered. While focus group research can be used in concert with other research methods, Morgan (1988; as cited in Asbury, 1995, p. 415) suggests that focus groups can be used as the sole research strategy on a project to examine research questions from the participants’ own perspective. Twinn (1998) found focus group research to be an effective method of collecting qualitative data on a range of sensitive topics with Chinese populations in nursing research. In fact, Twinn (1998) encourages the use of focus groups with this ethnic group based on the richness of the data collected in her study and the willingness of participants to contribute their experiences and views.

### **Focus Group Design and Recruitment of Participants**

The research design included four focus groups of 10-12 students each. Groups 1 and 2 were to be made up of Chinese business students with no more than 30 credit hours; groups 3 and 4 were to be made up of Chinese business students with more than 30 credit hours. This design would allow a comparison between recent registrants and those who had been in the program for some time.

Groups 1 and 3 were to be made up of students from a “2 + 2 program” at our university in which students complete two years of business studies in China, followed by two years of business studies at our university. Groups 2 and 4 were to be comprised of other Chinese business students. This design would allow comparison between the students who had previous university experience in business studies in China with those who did not.

An e-mail explaining the research project and inviting students to participate in the focus groups was sent to the appropriate student listserves and a reminder

e-mail was sent a week later. The opportunity to win one of four iPods was used as an incentive to participate in the research study. As the numbers of interested participants were less than anticipated, the researchers identified classes that had a large number of Chinese students and visited the classes to describe the research project and invite participation. Staff in the International Program Office at the Faculty of Business Administration also reminded students about the opportunity to participate in the research project. Still, the numbers of participants were fewer than needed, and we decided to run two focus groups instead of four. Group A was comprised of 12 Chinese business students with no more than 30 credit hours and focus Group B was comprised of seven Chinese business students with more than 30 credit hours. The number of course credit hours completed by each student at our university was checked using the registration system. Of the total students who participated, 11 were from the 2 + 2 program and eight were not.

The researchers prepared a semi-structured interview guide to help focus the discussion. The questions were designed after a review of the literature and consultation with staff in the international student service centers and ESL office. For example, we were told that in-class presentations are an especially difficult class component for Chinese students because students do not make presentations in Chinese classrooms. We were told that everything about making a presentation makes Chinese students nervous. They are shy, they have no background with presentations, and speaking in English is difficult.

Input such as this informed our questions, which were designed to explore Chinese students' opinions on such classroom methods.

### **The Focus Group Meetings**

The focus groups were held in the audiovisual studio of the Business building. This location was selected because it is easily accessible to students, is a comfortable setting, has excellent acoustics for audio recording and has a separate room for the video camera equipment and where the researchers could view the focus group through a glass window to make notes and record observations. A selection of snack foods and beverages also helped create a comfortable environment.

All participants signed an Informed Consent Form at the start of the session, giving consent in writing both to participate in the research and to be videotaped. Participants were also reminded that they could leave the focus group at any time.

A staff member who was from the post-secondary education program at our university and whom the students did not know moderated the focus groups. One

researcher took notes during the sessions. Both focus group sessions lasted two hours and generated responses to all questions posed. While the recording light was on during the duration of taping for both focus groups, the tape used in the second focus group was faulty, and responses to questions five to 14 were not recorded.

During the focus group sessions, the questions were posed by the facilitator and also provided on a flip chart so that participants could read the question as the facilitator asked it orally, in order to ensure students understood the question being posed. Probe questions were also provided to the facilitator by the researchers for use if the primary questions did not generate adequate responses. The questions were vetted through the International Programs Office with a native Chinese speaker prior to the sessions to ensure there were no problems with language nuances.

The interview guide had an initial question to which all participants were asked to respond to about what students expected the classroom experience to be like in a business curriculum. This question was used to bring all participants into the discussion and to suggest that all contributions were equally valued.

Early in the sessions participants prepared a report card to compare Canadian business classrooms and the Chinese university classroom, which they had all experienced. The participants were asked to identify items in the business classroom environment and to assign a grade (A, B, C, D, or F) for each item for each country. The facilitator gave ideas of items that could be evaluated on the report card. Participants worked individually or with a partner to assign a rating to the items they selected for evaluation. Focus group A generated 10 completed report cards, and focus group B provided seven completed report cards. The idea for using report cards was described by Krueger and Casey (2000) and adapted by the researchers.

The completed report cards were not discussed during the sessions but were collected for later content analysis. The results are incorporated into the overall results below. Copies of the interview guide and report card template are included in Appendix A and B.

At the end of each focus group the researchers and facilitator participated in a debriefing of the focus groups. The audio portions of the sessions were transcribed and examined for themes by the researchers. The researchers also reviewed the videos of the sessions for body language cues.

### **Results**

The results of the focus group sessions are organized by what participants said and wrote on their report cards about the four pedagogical tools in which we were interested: in-class discussions, presentations, case analysis, and group work.

### In-Class Discussions

Participants said that the type of subject material influenced the value of in-class discussions. Discussion was not perceived as valuable in courses such as accounting where interpretation of the material was less critical, but in courses such as marketing, "Discussion can relate the course material to real life." Participants indicated that comments from classmates with work experience were most highly valued: "There are some adults who have already got a job, and they can share their career experiences." Otherwise, comments from classmates were not highly valued.

The value that the participants placed on credentials—whether through experience or position—is further supported by comments that emphasize their expectations: "But how can you get information if you just discuss between the students because we are new to the knowledge?" This expectation for factual knowledge to be conveyed is further supported by this comment:

[I]n that course is total discussion and I am totally lost because when there is a problem there is so many different opinions about it and there is no conclusion . . . after the class I don't know what is the answer for every problems.

On the report card, comments such as, "I need to know what I learned from this class," suggest that participants valued explicit delivery of content; the Canadian classroom ranked lower than the Chinese classroom in providing class content that was unambiguous.

In addition to their expectation for the course and the professor to provide answers and their hesitancy in valuing the opinions of their classmates, participants also presented other reasons why in-class discussions were not well regarded. One reason was their inability to understand the comments of their classmates: "I like to hear from them, but sometimes they speak too fast, and the accent [is] hard to understand."

Notwithstanding the qualifications above, there was general agreement among participants that they were not averse to participating in these discussions. However, their participation was hindered by cultural differences and language. Cultural difference relates back to the contradiction between the role of the professor in North American classrooms as a facilitator rather than a conveyor of fact—as is common in the Chinese classroom—and the respect the Chinese students have for the position. Comments included, "I wish to participate but in China [we are] not expected to speak that freely. Here students interrupt instructors," and, "In China [we] want to answer what the instructor wants." Another student said, "Once I answered a teacher's question in the class, and maybe I

misunderstood what he said, so I give the different answers, so it made me embarrassed to find out my answer is not what he asked." Participants noted that these types of discussions are not common in Chinese classrooms: in China the professor formally organizes the discussion on a specific topic, and students wait to be asked for comments whereas, "Here, you just speak out." This opinion corresponded with the report card remarks: "Students here can interrupt the professor anytime," and, "Here more interaction with professor; more freedom." In this regard, Canadian classrooms/professors received considerably better rankings than Chinese.

Commentary on the cultural influence on the student-professor relationship and its impact on participation in learning continued on the participants' report card. A number of participants identified this as a difference between Chinese and Canadian classrooms and generally ranked the Canadian professors higher than Chinese instructors. Comments like the following are representative: "Professors here always respect students' opinions," and, "Canadian professors have more focus on in-class discussions." The only area where Canadian professors ranked lower than those in China related to speech: "Sometimes I cannot read or understand what the professors is [*sic*] writing . . . hard to catch what they are speaking when they . . . write the notes on the board."

Participants felt it was difficult to contribute fully to in-class discussion because of the dynamic nature of such exchanges. Participants noted that in China there was generally time allocated to prepare comments:

Chinese students don't like to say wrong things; they want to be right. So when they are prepared and they have confidence, they would very like to say something. About things we are not so sure we hesitate to speak out.

Participants also noted that the use of local references made their participation difficult:

- ". . . local advertisement or maybe local places they talk about and I don't know what they are and where they are and sometimes I feel I am separated and the Canada people love the hockey so the teacher and students talk about lots of hockey so I don't understand it. And the different culture . . . they talk about the actors or some talk shows . . . so we don't ask."
- "Sometimes when professor raise examples . . . some of the examples are related to the local stores or local things that we don't know much so we cannot fully understand the point."

- “. . . and sometimes we want to share our experience too but it is too hard to explain all the background stuff.”

These views are also expressed in the report card with the comment, “When local companies, famous people, issues, or news [are] mentioned in class it is hard to know what is going on without extra explanation,” as well as the comment, “It is hard for Chinese students [to] join discussion because local students have local knowledge and speak fast.” Canada was rated lower than China in participants' understanding of the context of examples.

Language also plays a role in their hesitancy to participate. Students commented that they struggled to put their ideas into English:

- “Sometimes I like to participate in a discussion because it is interaction with the professor and also with the students you can share your ideas but sometimes we just feel nervous because we cannot clearly express our ideas.”
- “I like to participate but . . . then the professor from their expression maybe they will not understand. I want to end my speech and the teacher say ‘pardon me’ so I am nervous and blushing.”

Although Chinese students find class participation difficult, they acknowledge that this interactive learning practice focuses their attention. Report card comments support this: “Although it is hard to speak out, the classroom environment here still encourages us to take more participation and be more concentrative [*sic*] on the lecture,” giving the Canadian classroom a higher rating than the Chinese classroom on engagement.

### Student Presentations

Focus group participants were also asked to comment on their experience making presentations in class and to compare their comfort giving formal presentations with their comfort in participating in class discussion.

Participants indicated varying levels of exposure to formal class presentations in China. One participant stated, “In China there are very few presentations, so most Chinese students do not know how to behave in the formal presentation.” Another participant indicated that while students made presentations in China, they were mostly in English classes where the focus was on language skills and not subject matter.

Participants generally expressed trepidation about making presentations; nervousness was sometimes attributed to factors such as the occasional use of a video recorder for feedback. However, participants emphasized the amount of preparation required:

[A]lthough the presentations are limited within 10 or 8 minutes, we have to prepare for a long time. We have to read over the materials so we can just better catch the content we learn in class and also during the presentation.

Participants indicated that despite anxiety, skills gained from making presentations are important. Comments such as this were common: “Presentation is the most important skill I want to learn . . . and the presentation skill [will] make me competitive when I come back to China,” and, “The skills will be useful in interviews.” Another comment was, “I think we learn how to make eye contact, how to behave ourselves, the body language, and also how to deliver our ideas more clearly to the classmates, so I think it improves our skills a lot.” Similar comments appeared in the report card, such as, “I like to have presentation here. It can practice me to be more brave and I can know more people in the small group,” and, “Presentations is difficult for us, but the experience gives us a good chance to enhance ourselves and good for working in the future.”

Participants indicated that making a group presentation can cause conflict between the Chinese students and the local students in the group, in that “local students are very familiar with the presentation, they start even in the junior high school to present in front of class . . . they do not need much practice, but I need much practice.” However, other participants indicated that working with a group on a presentation can improve their learning and that over the course of their studies, their opinions on making presentations improved: “I enjoy presentations. . . . Never thought this . . . When I first came I didn't like it. When [I] cooperate with group members, I learn a lot.”

Participants indicated that peer feedback on their presentations was constructive:

My first presentation here was very terrible, and in that class everyone have feedback for you after the presentation, and when I finish I got those feedbacks. I really learned a lot. I learned to speak louder, don't keep reading—that kind of thing.

When comparing formal class presentations with free-flowing discussion, one participant stated, “Formal class presentations were better for Chinese students than in-class discussion because they can't keep up in class discussion.”

### Case Analysis

Participants were asked to comment on the value of using case analyses for learning and their experiences in contributing to case discussions in class. They indicated that they enjoyed doing case analyses, especially if they

were based on real companies, and that they learned from them:

[S]ome of the cases are successful examples of the famous companies; we have learned some experiences from their business and also some of them are field cases, so we have to find out what the problem is and use some of the ideas from the textbook to use in this cases and give suggestions what the managers should do in this situation.

One participant said, "I really like the cases in business courses because it is the opportunity for us to really think and to use what we have learned in the class [applied] to the real business examples." They also indicated that analyzing cases made them feel "professional," allowed them to "use ideas in a logical way," and made them "apply textbook material to case problems."

Participants expressed dissatisfaction with outdated cases: "I think they should more relate to the latest news that we can analyze the real world." They also complained that it can take too much time to prepare the case.

The report cards confirmed these opinions: students commented that "practical case study requires more than lecture-based study, improving analytical skills," and, "Case study [is] good stuff for us to better know information provided by the book or the professor." The case studies provided real-life examples, and the ratings indicated that the case study was considered to be a useful learning tool.

### Group Work

The benefits of group work in promoting learning were also explored with the focus group participants. In particular, participants were asked if working in small groups during class or outside class affected their participation in the large-group case analysis.

Regarding the value of preparing the case in small groups during class, participants agreed that although participating in the small group was easier than participating in the large group, it did not impact the likelihood of their participating in the large group case discussion. As one participant said,

Participating in small group . . . you are more cohesive and more interactive but discussing in a large group you have few chances to get your opinions heard by others . . . Because I like to discuss [in the small group] does not necessary make me more reluctant or more willing to participate in a large group.

However, participants indicated that if they discussed the case with a small group outside class, they would be

more likely to participate in the case discussion in class; this allowed them to test out their ideas with their classmates before committing them to the larger group:

- "[I]t has a positive impact because when we have experience of discussing with the small group outside of class we can figure out what they like and what is more acceptable to them and how they develop their opinions so we can have better control of our discussion when we discuss it in class if we have experience of discussion outside of the class."
- "Maybe it would increase the participation . . . before we would like to say something we have to make sure about opinions so maybe we afraid of the evaluation from a class if we say something . . . but if we have already discussed about with our team members before class, we like to share."

Participants felt that the small group discussions were more culturally consistent with their experiences in China. One participant said, "It is the tradition for Chinese students to be low key [rather] than to be on the spotlight." Another voiced a similar view: "Because there are fewer Chinese students than Canadian, sometimes when we are asking questions all focus will be on us, everybody is looking at us, so I'm nervous to be the focus."

Participants noted another reason why Chinese students who are open in expressing ideas outside class may hold back from talking in class: the class discussion is too fast-paced to allow them to formulate their ideas and express them in a second language. "My classmates in class speak really fast. I know the pace is fast and sometimes time is tight . . . it will be stressful for me to express my ideas." Also,

When in class if kids say pardon me, I will think that is a waste of time for the whole class but in a small group if they say pardon me, there is just a few people and they will say slowly and clearly, it is . . . not easy to make the whole class speak slowly and clearly.

The relationship of the student and professor in Canada is also different from that in China and this was noted as a barrier to classroom interaction:

Chinese people don't want to talk with the professor directly and they want to share their opinion with their friends and classmates. . . . Maybe because of the cultural difference because in China only the smart questions will be appreciated by the professor and sometimes . . . if you ask some silly question you are very embarrassed and all the students will laugh at you.

In the next section we will summarize these results into our primary observations and conclude with some suggestions from focus group participants and our discussion of these.

### Discussion and Conclusions

Three major themes emerge from our analysis of both the discussions and the report card feedback from the focus groups. Firstly, Chinese students have a strong desire to be prepared for their classes. Secondly, Chinese students are not averse to participating in class. Thirdly, Chinese students want help, both academic and social. These themes are consistent across the two focus groups. Our findings have implications for the classroom: we suggest that an awareness of how Chinese students perceive and behave in the Canadian classroom can help instructors design learning activities and feedback mechanisms to address challenges of the Chinese student. As well, our findings add depth to existing research by expanding on what is known about the Chinese learner. Finally, we contend that our findings are relevant to disciplines where pedagogical tools similar to those used in business schools are used. Our study also prompts researchers to explore whether there are differences between how Western and Chinese students approach other pedagogical tools that may be Western-centric.

#### Chinese Students Want a Chance to Prepare

Participants noted that the differences between the Chinese and Canadian classrooms are significant and that the differences surprised them when they first arrived in Canada: the Canadian classroom values spontaneity and input from students, not just the professor, and students are expected to contribute to class discussions, group work, and other in-class activities. This is in contrast to the Chinese classroom where the instructor presents the material to the students in one-way communication; participants describe the classroom approach in China as, "Most of the time we just listen to the lectures."

Not only is the Canadian classroom in contrast to the Chinese classroom, but the structure of the lessons in the Canadian business classroom reward students who exhibit creative and quick thinking and can integrate concepts. In contrast, in China students are rewarded for preparation and performance on exams. It is therefore not unexpected that focus group participants valued those activities where they could prepare in advance, such as preparing case analyses and, most surprisingly to us, making formal presentations.

Our review of the literature led us to expect that cultural influences would negatively impact Chinese

students' appreciation of making presentations. However, our research showed that although participants felt that making presentations was hard work, they valued the skills they gained. And, when participants compared formal class presentations with discussions, participants preferred the former as they felt that they are unable to keep up in fast-paced class discussion. We also found that students valued working in groups outside class: this allowed them to prepare their ideas—vet them with their peers, choose correct language—before expressing them in class.

#### Chinese Students are not Averse to Participating in Class

Our findings provide insight into earlier research which suggests that Chinese students "do not enjoy participating in class discussions because they are passive learners; they prefer to learn through memorization and repetition" (Roberts & Tuleja, 2008, p. 474). Our findings clarify the passive nature of Chinese students: we heard that they do enjoy the free-flowing nature of the Canadian classroom, specifically noting that they enjoy the "freedom of the classroom" and that they want to participate as long as they are prepared and consequently feel confident. We suggest that they are only passive when circumstances dictate; when they are prepared they enjoy participating.

This was reinforced by report card ratings. They rated the classroom atmosphere in the Canadian business classroom more highly than in China. Comments included that they enjoyed interacting with the professor and the casual, friendly classroom environment that encourages students to share their opinions.

It should be noted that the exclusive use of local examples detract from their enjoyment of class discussions: their lack of knowledge of context can, as de Vita (2000) notes, cause references and examples to "end up as yet another item in his or her already long list of vocabulary searches" (p. 171).

Our research supports previous findings (e.g., Chalmers & Volet, 1997; as cited in de Vita, 2000) that students may be hesitant to participate because they feel that if they are not easily understood this would waste the class's time. Also, they did not want to use examples from their own culture because it would waste class time to explain the context of the examples to the class.

Our research did not support previous studies that suggest that Chinese students value only the instructor's opinion, not the opinions of peers (Roberts & Tuleja, 2008). Participants in our focus groups attributed value to their classmates' opinions if the classmate was "credential-ized" (i.e., if they had relevant work experience or were mature students).



### Chinese Students Want Help

Our experiences as educators led us to believe that in general students do not want to be singled out in the classroom. In contrast, our focus group findings showed that Chinese students want the instructor to provide help to direct their contribution to the class discussions. Specifically, they want to be called upon in class to offer their contributions rather than interjecting into the fast-paced class discussion. They also want the professor to ask them explicitly for their opinions, and especially to have the professor ask them for examples from their country. While they suggested that they did not want to be the focus of attention, we surmise that their desire to perform well supersedes their desire to be out of the spotlight.

Although we acknowledge that participants were encouraged to provide suggestions for improvement, we are surprised at the volume and nature of suggestions the participants provided on areas where assistance could be given. (see Appendix C for a list of areas for improvement as suggested by participants). For one thing, we know that resources are already provided to facilitate their integration into the program; this suggests that the expectations of Chinese students for support may extend beyond our capacity to provide resources. More important, we wonder if some of their suggestions may contravene the integrity of a university education by reducing ambiguity to the extent that students are not challenged to explore alternatives to issues. For example, they suggested that the instructor provide opportunities to contribute to class discussion using the online forum where they would have time to prepare before making a contribution. They wanted the instructor to provide background information on companies and case material. They suggested that the instructor provide instructions on how to start group activities. While none of these suggestions is in itself indicative of any trend, it appeared to us by the enthusiasm and quantity of the comments that these Chinese students would very much like more structure, clearer guidance, and less ambiguity in their classes and in the course content. An explanation by instructors that sometimes uncertainty is purposefully used as a pedagogical tool may soften some of the student demands.

Focus group participants also expressed that they would like more assistance in integrating into the community in a social sense. They acknowledged that an ancillary benefit of the interaction with their classmates was that this provided opportunities not only to ask their classmates for help in coursework, but also to learn from them about social activities, cultural nuances, and language clarification.

### Limitations of the Research

Participants in our focus groups knew one another by virtue of being Business students. It has been

suggested by some researchers that it is preferred if focus group participants do not know one another prior to the focus group; however, this is not always possible, and research has confirmed that it should not be an obstacle to the effective use of focus groups (Asbury, 1995).

However, there were a number of limitations associated with the study. The first was that only two focus groups instead of the four we originally planned were completed. This does not allow us to compare the views of Chinese students in the 2 + 2 program with the views of other Chinese business students. However, we are able to compare the opinions of students with no more than 30 credit hours with those of students with more than 30 credit hours. This was the comparison in which we were most interested, as this would allow us to identify any cultural adaptation over the program.

Associated with the small sample size was the limited number of completed report cards. In addition, during the completion of the report cards, participants discussed their opinions. This may have led to results being consolidated rather than representing individual opinions, yet the results indicate distinctions between perceptions of Western business classrooms and those in China.

The second limitation was the failure of the tape in the second focus group. This resulted in an incomplete transcript of this group. However, detailed notes taken by the researcher and the information from the debrief session still allowed analysis of the session but limited the availability of quotes from the second focus group participants and minimized the comparisons between the two groups.

### Future Research

Our research has generated ideas for future research. First, we would like to use a survey tool to validate these focus group findings across a larger sample of Chinese students. Second, we would like to conduct further focus groups to compare the opinions of other participants in the classroom—Canadian students and the instructor—with those of the Chinese students in these focus groups. Third, we would like to conduct a quantitative analysis of Chinese student performance in business courses. Fourth, we would like to complete an examination of best practices for supporting foreign students in other institutions as we believe it would provide our university with information on how best to address challenges and issues uncovered by our research. We also hope that future research would inform professors how to best engage all students in classroom learning.

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#### Acknowledgements

This study was funded by an Instructional Development grant from Memorial University Vice-President's Research Fund.

Appendix A  
Focus Group Questions

1. Tell us your name and when you took your first business course at Memorial University?
2. When you first started taking classes in the Business Faculty, what did you expect the classroom experience to be like?
3. How has your classroom experience in your business courses been different than you expected?
4. What do you believe is your role as a student in a business classroom?
5. What do you believe is the role of the instructor in a business classroom?
6. Do you like to listen to what your peers have to say in class discussion? Why or why not?
7. Why do you believe Chinese students are reluctant to participate in class discussion?
8. Do you feel that English-speaking students in the business classroom understand you when you contribute to class discussion?
9. In your opinion, is classroom discussion a useful way to learn material in a business course?
10. How do you feel about making formal presentations in a business course?
11. Is your comfort level with formal presentations different than your comfort level with spontaneous class discussion? Explain.
12. What do you like about using cases to learn material in business courses?
13. Have you experienced any problems in business courses that use cases for learning material?
14. Does working in small groups in class to discuss case questions impact your likelihood of participating in the large group discussion?
15. What do you believe are the reasons why some Chinese students who are very open in expressing ideas outside class hold back from expressing their views in case discussion?
16. What has been your experience with group work in your business courses?
17. What steps might an instructor take to engage Chinese students in class discussion?
18. If you had a chance to give advice to the Associate Dean in charge of undergraduate degree programs in the Faculty of Business Administration about how to improve the learning environment for Chinese students in business classrooms, what advice would you give?
19. Is there anything that you wanted to say about the use of in-class discussion, group work, formal presentations or case analysis in business courses and how these impact your learning that you did not get an opportunity to say that you would like to tell us?
20. If there was one thing that instructors could do to improve the engagement of Chinese students in the business classroom, what would it be?

Appendix B  
Report Card Template



**Memorial University of Newfoundland**  
Faculty of Business Administration

# Report Card

Please evaluate the business classroom here at Memorial and the business classroom at your university in China. Select the areas that you would like to grade and then assign a letter grade (please see the performance scale below to assign your grade). When selecting the areas to evaluate, pick things that you consider to be important to your overall classroom experience. Provide some comments to explain your chosen criteria and the reason for your letter grade.

<b>PERFORMANCE SCALE</b>				
A – Excellent	B- Good	C – Satisfactory	D– Unsatisfactory	F- Failure

	<b>Letter Grade</b>	
	CANADA	CHINA
<b>CRITERIA 1:</b>		
Comments:		

<b>CRITERIA 2:</b>		
Comments:		

<b>CRITERIA 3:</b>		
Comments:		

<b>CRITERIA 4:</b>		
Comments		

### Appendix C What Chinese Students Wanted

- The professor to assign students to groups, and the assignment should be random.
- The instructor to ask students to write their opinions to help when spoken participation is difficult.
- The instructor to ask students specific questions. One student said, "Maybe the professor can have some question like this situation in other countries and who would like to join in or they can ask me about this situation in Asia." Another student said, "Maybe he can ask me directly what I think or maybe he can talk to me after class or send e-mail to me to ask me to contribute more to the classroom."
- The professor to "provide more information on the background of the company, especially local. Give a lead in to the case with extra background on the company.
- To be able to work with their small groups or a study partner to check out their analysis of cases prior to the in-class discussion.
- To be signaled out and asked for their contribution rather than having to try to get into the conversation
- To contribute about their personal experiences by having the instructor provide some questions about situations in other countries to draw on their experience.
- The instructor to provide information on how to analyze a case so they could be certain about the expectations for preparing the case analysis.
- The instructor to provide clear instructions on how to start a group activity so that they would know where to begin.
- To have a help center where they could go to get assistance with making presentations, like the writing center where you go to get help with writing in English
- To have improvements to the ESL program (the nature of these improvements were not identified)

Other findings from the focus groups that are not germane to the research question, or that may be specific suggestions for improving their learning experience within Canada:

- It was identified that some classrooms are too small for all classmates to sit in Canada
- Textbooks are too expensive (the book may be 100 times more expensive in Canada given the exchange rate) and too heavy in Canada, but good quality
- Students value having a class schedule for the semester and a class agenda where the classes end on time
- Students value confidentiality and keeping all scores confidential
- Students value homework assignments that are a different type and style, for example reports and research papers, that will improve their understanding of class material
- Students valued the co-op system and opportunities for work experience and internships
- Students valued having more than one final exam to measure their understanding and knowledge of course materials