The Enhancing Series Case Studies: International Learning Experience

Critical Thinking: Discussion from Chinese Postgraduate International Students and Their Lecturers

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Summary

The ability to undertake critical thinking is required for a student to do well at university in the UK; Asian students are regularly criticised by lecturers because of their lack of critical thinking skills. This project seeks to understand Chinese postgraduate international students' experience of critical thinking while they are studying for their Masters degree in Tourism and Hospitality Management at the University of Plymouth. It investigates the students' perceptions of critical thinking and the problems they might have in applying critical thinking skills; meanwhile it evaluates educators' suggestions on applying critical thinking in tourism and hospitality subjects. Eventually it is intended to develop a strategy to facilitate the students' experience. Several general conclusions are drawn from this study. Firstly, due to the students' differing backgrounds, they have a different understanding of critical thinking and corresponding difficulties in applying it to their studies. Secondly, lecturers who are teaching the students have different views on critical thinking therefore they produce different procedures for the students to apply critical thinking in their work. However common procedures can be drawn from lecturers' suggestions. Based on those common procedures, a strategy is developed to facilitate the students' use of critical thinking skills in their study.

Keywords: Critical thinking, Chinese international students, tourism and hospitality education

The Research Aim & Objectives

This project is an attempt to understand Chinese postgraduate international students' experience of critical thinking during their masters degree in Tourism and Hospitality Management at the University of Plymouth. There are four main objectives:

(1) to investigate the students' perceptions of critical thinking
(2) to assess the students' problems in applying critical thinking skills
(3) to evaluate lecturers' suggestions about applying critical thinking skills in tourism and hospitality subjects
(4) to develop a strategy to facilitate the students' experience

Rationale

The provision of education and training services for people from overseas has become an increasingly important source of income for certain countries, including the UK (Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002). There is a trend towards the universalisation of the education practices of Western countries, since it is mainly the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada and Australia who are instrumental in the internationalisation of education,.

The majority of international students who study for a UK qualification come from Asia and especially from China. The UK's popularity amongst Chinese students has grown since America tightened visa regulations after the terrorist attacks in 2001. The UK has become the most popular destination for Chinese students, ahead of America, the previous most favourite, and Germany where higher education is virtually free (Bird and Owen, 2004). International, and especially non-EU, students inevitably attract large amounts of attention from educational administrators and academics in such subjects as education, economics, and business.

Chinese students come to the UK with expectations that come from their past experiences in China and, whether they realise it or not, they must learn to adapt to new circumstances in order to succeed academically (Turner, 2006). This includes incorporating priorities formulated by the UK education system and often adapting to new ways of studying and preparing assignments (Lowes, Peters and Turner, 2004). Problems arise when UK academics are confronted with what appear to be differences between the standards and expectations of academic staff and those of the Chinese student (Huang, 2004).

The Chinese style of learning has long been influenced by Confucianism. Confucius's approach to education promotes a number of significant concepts that are still evident in the psyche of Chinese culture (Redding, 1990). The key among these is the possibility of perfecting the person through self-cultivation, where it is felt that fundamentally all persons are able to be educated. In addition, the universality of education, where education is seen as a right for all, regardless of status or class, is an underpinning philosophy. Equally the significance of the role of the teacher is important. In Confucian cultures the teacher's role is not only to impart wisdom to students but also to act as a moral role model.

Typical Chinese classroom activities are dominated by lectures with limited questioning or discussion, because students prefer not to express their opinions in public (Chan, 1999).

Problem-solving ability is also largely neglected with student achievement assessed mainly through written examinations, which are not designed to test ability to work with others and solve practical problems (Huang, 2006). In addition, Chinese students may be more concrete and pragmatic in evaluating ideas than their western counterparts, but they may also suffer from a lack of creativity, as well as being less likely to explore new, unaccustomed directions (Harding, 1997). The problems are more pronounced when Chinese students arrive at western universities for the first time, and they are then faced with learning styles and approaches that are alien to them (Vandermensbrugghe, 2004; Egege and Kutieleh, 2004). However, it should be stated that the underlying educational philosophy does include critical enquiry as part of its core value system (Kim, 2003). Exacerbated by often authoritative political systems, the contemporary result has tended to be that students in some Asian countries including China are in practice discouraged from critical engagement (Turner and Acker, 2002).

Literature shows that in spite of the unitarist knowledge traditions of their home societies, students from China who draw heavily on Chinese educational traditions can compete well with their Anglo-European counterparts, especially in numerate and scientific subjects: the so-called Chinese Learner Paradox (Biggs and Watkins, 2001). Equally difficulties emerge when attempting to evaluate deep- and surface-learning approaches and performance among groups such as Chinese students. Within much of UK higher education, stereotypes about Chinese students persist; especially in the social science subjects where stylistic conventions are intimately integrated into forms of intellectual thought (Brown, 1998). The perceived lack of the capability of critical thinking is frequently indicated as a key factor undermining students' ability to perform successfully, particularly in the context of short, intensive postgraduate programmes. Samuelowicz and Bain (2001) argue that in spite of the fact that lecturers acknowledge that the difficulties Chinese students have with critical thinking may stem from cultural differences in the style of education, they continue to ascribe any failures in learning capacity to stylistic and language issues.

The idea that the ability to think critically is required to do well at a university in the UK is widespread, but the concept is vague and does not seem to have the same meaning to all people in every circumstance (Vandermensbrugghe, 2004). There are many strands of thought in both the social and philosophical literature that can be labelled 'critical'. Vandermensbrugghe (2004) divides existing definitions of critical thinking into two categories:

(1) The ability to develop a capacity to reason logically and cohesively
(2) The ability to question and challenge existing knowledge and social order.

According to Wacquant (2001) (cited in Vandermensbrugghe, 2004) it is necessary to bring these two categories of definition together, so that the capacity to reason logically can be used to broaden critical thinking and allow the freedom to think about the world beyond the restrictions imposed by dominant interpretations of it.

It can be seen that the theory of 'critical thinking' is not clearly defined. Because the concept of critical thinking is very broad and non-specific, it gives no clear indication of what needs to be taught. Egege and Kutieleh (2004) argue that there is an assumption that academics, from whatever background, can reliably ascertain the presence of or lack of

critical thinking skills in a piece of work. The lack of clear guidelines makes the general teaching of critical thinking problematic and also makes it difficult for students to know what requirements are entailed in practice.

In the face of the difficulties surrounding critical thinking as a concept, criticising international students for not intuitively being capable of thinking critically is not acceptable practice. It should be noted that critical thinking is also often problematic for Anglo-Saxon students (i.e. Pascarella, 1999; Daley et al., 1999), despite their having the advantage of a better understanding of the language and context (Egege and Kutieleh, 2004; Turner, 2006).

Study

To investigate this further, a combination of data collection methods was chosen. In-depth interviews were chosen as they allow for the combining of the flexibility of the unstructured interview with that of the comparability of key questions, and thus achieve the objectives of this research. The following two questions were asked:

(1) What is your perception of critical thinking?
(2) What kind of difficulties do you have when you apply critical thinking in your study?

From February to April 2006, eight students were interviewed.

Focus group discussion allows a number of respondents to be gathered in one place and time, to discuss a specific topic, under the guidance of the researcher. As the lecturers are all in the author's group and this group tends to have lunch together, it was very convenient for questions to be asked at that time. Each individual was free to agree, disagree, question, and discuss the issues with others in the room. As such it was clear that it was likely that focus group discussions could be used to meet most of the data requirements of the research. In May 2006, two focus group discussions involving eight lecturers were organised at which two questions were put forward:

(1) Within your knowledge, what does critical thinking mean?
(2) How do you apply critical thinking in your work?

A few observation sessions were also conducted in order to get an insight into the experience of some Chinese students when they are applying critical thinking skills. Observation ensures that the researcher is unlikely to lose contact with the students being studied, as is possible in the non-participant observation method. It also allows information on the subjects' real problems and issues to be collected, unlike non-participant observation. When the students were observed, the researcher always bore in mind the question, "What kind of difficulties do the students have when they are doing their assignments with requirement of critical thinking?"

Data analysis overlapped with data collection to build a coherent interpretation. Using a manual process, the researcher made an interview transcription immediately after each interview and carried out the analysis simultaneously. Strauss and Corbin's microanalysis (1998), a line-by-line analysis to generate initial categories and to discover the relationships

among concepts (Strauss and Corbin 1998), was used. The rigour of the analytical procedure depends on its adequacy and transparency.

Findings

The researcher interviewed ten Chinese students and all five of their lecturers. The interviews conducted during the study are numbered CIS1-10 and also L1-8. Throughout the discussion of the results, these numbers are given in brackets following each excerpt. The profile of interviewed Chinese students and also their lecturers is as shown Table 1 and 2 below.

Table 1: profile of interviewed Chinese students

CODE (CIS)	GENDER	First degree in English (Y/N)
1	F	Y
2	F	Y
3	F	Y
4	F	Y
5	F	Y
6	F	N
7	F	N
8	M	N
9	M	N
10	M	N

Table 2: profile of interviewed lecturers

CODE (L)	GENDER	Years in teachings	Subject groups
1	M	20	Tourism
2	M	17	Tourism
3	M	14	Tourism
4	M	10	Tourism
5	M	10	Hospitality
6	M	12	Hospitality
7	F	8	Tourism
8	F	5	Hospitality

The Students' Perceptions of Critical Thinking

As far as the students' perceptions of critical thinking are concerned, different views were identified. Their views fall in to the following three categories:

(1) Critical thinking means thinking about the advantages and disadvantages of every theory used

Based on their experiences of their undergraduate studies in the UK, four interviewees summarised that critical thinking means thinking about the pros and cons of theories or findings that they have used. The following quotations from the transcripts reflect their understanding:

"After finishing my degree in business management here, critical thinking in my mind means advantages and disadvantages of theories you used". (CIS4)

"I clearly remember that my lecturer told me that critical thinking means thinking critically, that is positive and negative side of every stories you heard". (CIS5)

(2) Critical thinking means being critical of the research process

Two interviewees discussed their understanding of critical thinking based on their experiences of writing their independent projects during the final year of their study for a degree. They recalled that their lecturers told them that critical thinking means doing things logically, and placing emphasis on the research process. They stated the following:

"Originally I was not sure of the meaning of 'critical thinking'. But after discussing the matter with my supervisor, I got an idea that to be critical meant thinking and writing in a logical manner, and also reasoning every action I take". (CIS3)

"At the beginning I thought that critical thinking meant to criticise the theories you used or findings you got. But my supervisor told me that the emphasis is on research process." (CIS6)

(3) I don't understand what critical thinking means

Because of a lack of knowledge or practice in the skill of critical analysis, two postgraduate interviewees who were 'direct entry' students from China, felt confused and depressed. For example:

"I have been told by my supervisor that my work lacks critical analysis. I really don't know what critical analysis means"' (CIS1)

"When I began writing my dissertation I did not have a clear understanding of the skills required to write from a critical approach, I really suffered when I read my supervisor's feedback about my literature review. I thought I did a good job, but my supervisor asked me where my opinion was." (CIS2)

The Students' Difficulties on Applying Critical Thinking in their Studies

When the students were asked what kind of difficulties they had when applying critical thinking in their studies, their concerns and anxieties can be summarised as follows:

(1) language barriers

A majority of students report that they understand what critical thinking means but their insufficient English language skill makes it difficult for them to apply critical thinking in their coursework or exams. As two interviewees frankly admitted:

"I don't think my English is good enough for postgraduate studies. I am struggling to read books and journal articles that lecturers recommended…being critical, I need to read a lot of materials but my English really stops me being critical" (CIS8)

"Being critical means I can construct my arguments logically. But I can't as my vocabulary and grammar skills are not good enough to form clear sentences. Most of time I know how to argue in Chinese but not in English" (CIS6)

(2) lack of clear understanding of critical thinking

Several students also complain that because of their unclear understanding of critical thinking, they find it very difficult to apply it in their coursework.

"Different lecturers tell me different things when I ask them what critical thinking really means. These really confuse me when I write my assignments." (CIS9)

"As I have never been told by any lecturer how to apply critical thinking to my study, I am not sure whether I used it when I wrote my assignments. Low marks for my coursework possibly mean I did not use it"' (CIS1)

As the author is international student tutor for the Business School and also a lecturer on the Tourism and Hospitality Management programme, she was always consulted when the Chinese students were preparing their assignments for different modules. The findings from the authors' participant observations of four Chinese students when they were preparing their assignments for two different modules (Tourism- Modern Synthesis; and Research Methods) are very similar to the results from semi-structured interviews.

Although the four students obtained their undergraduate degrees from the UK, they were still unfamiliar with the concept and application of critical thinking in their work. This can be supported by the students' observation on their marks for their assignments. The four students said though they prepared their assignments in similar fashion as they did in their undergraduate studies, they got a much lower mark for their masters assignments. The students complained that their lecturers took it for granted that the students should know what critical thinking means. As they have never been taught how to apply critical thinking in their study, they were very unsure of this requirement. They reported that they applied critical thinking according to their own understanding.

The Lecturers' Perceptions of Critical Thinking

The research findings issuing from discussions with the five lecturers involved in teaching the postgraduate degree in Tourism and Hospitality management are interesting, as the lecturers hold different views on critical thinking.

As Lecturers 1 and 2 are responsible for the 'Research Methods' module, their emphasis on the students' logical research process is obvious, shown by their statements below:

> *"For me, critical thinking means you can develop your argument logically and cohesively" (L2)*

> *"You can easily find definitions from textbooks about critical thinking. Critical thinking means thinking critically on the research content and also the research process to produce the content you read" (L1)*

Lecturer 3 is the module leader for 'Tourism – Modern Synthesis'. This module is an introductory module to this subject area for the masters student, which emphasises different theories used in different sub-sectors of the tourism industry. Lecturer 3's statement below reflects the aim of the module clearly.

> *"When I assess students' assignments, critical thinking means broad reading and critical discussion on different theories and findings" (L3)*

Lecturers 5, 6 and 8 are all involved in the 'Strategic Hospitality Management' module. For them, although there are some differences in terms of wording, their understanding of critical thinking is similar to that of Lecturer 5:

> *"When I ask students to be critical, it means you should not just copy what others say but also make some comments. Yet your comments needed some evidence to support." (L5)*

The Lecturers' Solutions for the Students

The researcher asked whether the lecturers outline the procedures for the students to follow when applying the process of critical thinking in their studies. The lecturers agreed that critical thinking is a cultural practice instead of a universal practice, so because the Chinese students have a different cultural background to their lecturers, they should be encouraged to learn a different way of thinking. In terms of procedures for the students to follow, the lecturers are very careful to add to each other's lists.

> *"I think that when students apply critical thinking to their studies, they should read a broad range of research materials about the topic that they are studying, then they should identify the opinions offered by different authors. Finally the students should develop their own opinions together with the students' reasons for that opinion." (L3)*

> *"This requires a self-conscious reflection on the process of critique and the subsequent construction of knowledge claims, using a specific kind of argumentation"* (L2)

> *"Including critical thinking in their work requires the students to show a broad and in-depth understanding of the topic, and then clearly argue their own opinion on the topic researched."* (L4)

Overall, both the students and the lecturers have different views on critical thinking. The students' problems with the application of critical thinking are due to their language barriers and also their unclear understanding of the skill of critical thinking. The lecturers tend to have different emphases on research content or research process. In terms of solutions provided by the lecturers, common threads can be drawn.

Discussion

The research findings suggest that the Chinese students have different views on critical thinking. These findings are consistent with the observation of Lowe et al (2004) on the academic experiences of international students in the UK. The finding that language barriers cause students to have problems in applying critical analysis during their studies is consistent with the findings of Huang (2006) that Chinese postgraduate students in tourism and hospitality have difficulties in being critical due to insufficient language skills. The students' lack of a clear understanding of critical thinking causes difficulties in application; this is similar to Vandermensbrugghe's (2004) argument that Chinese students experience difficulties when they are faced with approaches that are alien to them. Wong (2004) also supports this argument.

The research findings also reveal that different lecturers have different understandings of critical thinking. These findings reflect Mingers' (2000) conclusion that the concept of critical thinking is vague, and different educators have different views on this matter. The lecturers' consensus that critical thinking is a cultural practice, is broadly supported by researchers in this area (Egege and Kutieleh, 2004; Turner, 2006; etc.).

Development

Although the lecturers have different definitions of critical thinking, the solutions provided by them on the application of critical thinking in the students' studies can be summarised in the following steps.

Students coming to study in the UK should:

(1) acknowledge that different cultures have different learning approaches. Critical thinking is an approach used in western societies such as the UK to aid knowledge acquisition;

(2) read broadly and in depth on the topic to be researched

(3) identify different opinions from the reading and construct their own arguments with self-conscious reflection on the process of critique.

These steps are likely to be beneficial to international students who have difficulties over the use of critical thinking for their studies.

Conclusion

Critical thinking is a vital part of teaching students how to think and write while they are studying at UK universities. Although this is a small-scale project, it offers a Chinese students' perspective on critical thinking, as a counterbalance to the dominance of the academic perspective and a focus on indigenous students. The research findings suggest that the students have different understandings of critical thinking. Due to this lack of clarity and also to language barriers, Chinese students have difficulties in applying critical thinking during their studies. Although the lecturers interviewed have different definitions of critical thinking, what they say could be beneficial to the students and offer some solutions to the problem.

There is significant scope for further research in this area, particularly related to perceptions of critical thinking in Chinese students who are studying other subjects in the UK. In addition, a comparison of Chinese students studying in different countries would be valuable to assess how the perception of critical thinking varies according to location and culture. Equally important, further research into the understanding and application of critical thinking among UK lecturers is needed (or over an even wider geographic area, for example in English-speaking countries). Such research would provide a much needed fuller understanding of critical thinking in general and possible assist in the provision of better support for Chinese students in particular.

Study Limitation

Care must be taken in explaining the results of this study as it only included Chinese students on a postgraduate degree in tourism and hospitality management from one university. Therefore the results may not be representative of Chinese students in other parts of the UK, so limiting the general applicability of the study findings.

Biography

Dr. Rong Huang is a lecturer in tourism marketing and an international student tutor at the University of Plymouth (UK). Her teaching interests focus on introduction to tourism, tourism and hospitality marketing, and also heritage tourism. Her research interests focus on aspects of the tourism phenomenon, including student travel, food tourism and tourism education. Rong has been awarded the Prime Minister Initiative Pilot Project Award and also Higher Education Academy HLST Network funding for a pedagogical research and development project around facilitating the experience of international students in the UK. Plymouth Business School, University of Plymouth, Plymouth, UK, PL4 8AA
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