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Learning in university: the role of university teachers

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Overview

Earlier literature on teaching international students in higher education focused on helping students to adapt to the dominant ('our') learning cultures (Ballard and Clanchy, 1997ⁱ) and viewed differences between home and international students as deficits. This paper briefly focuses on the later work of contributions to higher education teaching, specifically John Biggs (2003) an educational psychologist and former Professor at the University of Hong Kong, and various other writersⁱⁱ. All of these writers argue that cross-cultural teaching should focus on the universality of the learning process rather than on pedagogical and cultural differences.

The construction of knowledge and university teachers

Constructivist learning theories place the individual at the centre of learning so that learning is not passively received through transmission of information or 'telling' methods of teaching. Knowledge is actively built and constructed, by the learner (Piaget 1959ⁱⁱⁱ). The basis of this view is based on 'schema' theory. Schemas mediate experiences and thinking by structuring the selection, retention and use of information. For new information to be understood, it must link into existing categories of knowledge. Lecturers influence the context of such learning by providing relevant information and learners activate their schemas to connect with new knowledge. Learning is therefore individually constructed, socially sensitive and culturally mediated. However, if learners in unfamiliar social and cultural surroundings struggle to link new with old knowledge schema, this may result in 'cognitive dissonance' or confusion and the learning process may be disrupted. University teachers have a role in helping all learners connect their knowledge schema with new information.

Ryan and Hellmundt (in Carroll and Ryan 2006:14-16) remind us of Bourdieu's (1984^{iv}) work which describes the social and cultural knowledge students bring in their 'cultural capital' and the possibility of using this to drive learning. By encouraging full access through participation and interaction, learners are able to activate their 'schemas', fill in any missing gaps, and adjust to the context in which they find themselves. How may this be done?

Teaching diverse learners: Contribution of John Biggs and others

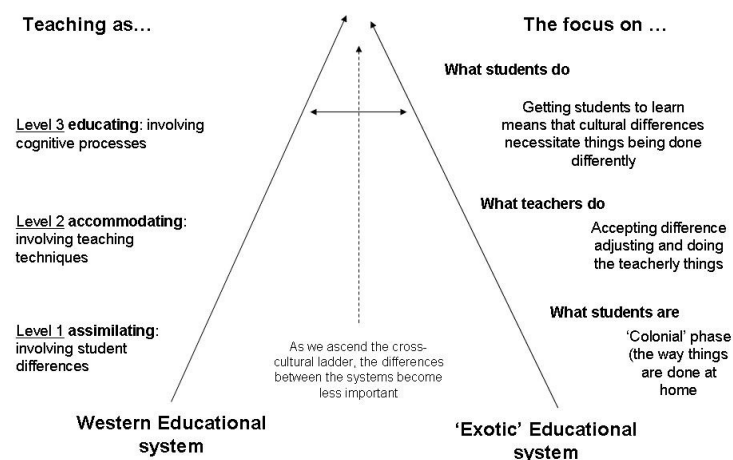
John Biggs is best known for his notion of 'constructive alignment'^v an outcome-based framework for developing university teaching. The model makes use of the SOLO taxonomy which provides a way of describing how a learner's performance develops in complexity when mastering academic tasks. Biggs was also interested in the 'international' student and the perceived cultural difficulties at the heart of learning-related problems many academics reported when teaching them. His work is important because he asks the question, are learning problems (such as those around the teaching of international students) really culturally based? In other words, he raises the possibility that learning problems are simply pedagogical challenges common to all learners and are less usefully perceived as problems rooted in cultural difference. This is an important consideration if higher education teachers are to avoid stereotyping learners.

Designing culturally inclusive learning environments

Expanding earlier work by Dunkin and Biddle's (1974^{vi}) Biggs was interested in broad learning contexts, namely presage (before learning takes place), process (during learning) and product (the outcome of learning) aspects of learning. The SOLO model draws attention to the fact that there are probably three sources of influence which might affect the learning outcome: factors relating to the nature of the cohort (what learners bring with them), what the teacher does (the programme) and the interaction between the two (the learning and teaching process), (Biggs, 2003:20). In his view this results in three 'theories' of teaching and learning:

1. Learning is a function of individual differences between students
2. Learning is a function of teaching
3. Learning is a result of students learning-focused activities which are engaged by students as a result of both their own perceptions and inputs, and of the total teaching context.

Biggs sees these as levels of sophistication as university teachers develop, and that the various theories are held at different points during a teaching career. Importantly, this view of inter-cultural teaching suggests that differences between educational systems are less important the further one moves up the cross-cultural ladder so that the focus is on the 'universality' of the learning process rather than on pedagogical differences.



Adapted from Biggs, J (2003) The focus on cross-cultural teaching

When at **level 1**, using Biggs' (2003:125-134) framework above, university teachers may find themselves focussing on what appears to be learners' deficiencies, such as dependence on rote memory and lack of critical thinking skills. In addition, it might appear that some learners are passive, reluctant to contribute to learning conversations in the lecture or tutorial. Perhaps the fact that many learners appear to be obsessed with assessment criteria is of concern. There might be concerns about the lack of shared understanding concerning plagiarism between lecturer and some students, or lecturers might find themselves overvalued by some students so that this interferes with the need to develop a critical view in student learners. When operating at level 1, university teachers might find themselves assuming that learning problems are rooted in cultural differences. It would obviously be quite wrong

however, to assume that these problems and perceptions are to be associated with learners from different countries of origin.

Operating at **level 2** views the main agenda in teaching as accommodating the cultural context of learners and to do this university teachers must be familiar with the cultural backgrounds and associated learning approaches of their learners. In many university lecture rooms today, this is impossible given the range of student backgrounds. Clearly some accommodation is important including addressing language difficulties. This may be straight forward such as avoiding colloquialisms, allowing tape recordings, providing visual backup etc which will not only assist international learners but will assist any students with dyslexia.

Teaching at **level 3** means lecturers are focussed on what learners do, rather than what the lecturer does or what the student is. The task is to seek to activate learning processes to achieve the required objectives, the means of which may differ from context to context.

To conclude, teaching at levels 1 and 2 in the above model are deficit approaches, focussing on who the learners are or aren't. Teaching at level 3 is contextual, broadly activating learners to achieve outcomes and therefore is inclusive teaching. The importance of the model is that it highlights when teaching is actually assimilation (level 1), when it is accommodation (level 2) and when it is truly educative (level 3).

Note on Teaching Confusion Heritage Culture (CHC) learners (Biggs (2003: 125-138)

Confusion heritage Cultures include China, Korea, Japan, Hong Kong, and Singapore. Cultures from these world areas have clearly been strongly influenced by Confucianism, and much has been written about such influence (Lee 1996^{vii}). But as Louie (in Carroll and Ryan 2006:21^{viii}) point out it is possible to describe the ideals of Confucianism education for the last two thousand years as though it has remained consistent, thus failing to see how CHC countries have changed over the past three decades. She argues that Asian students are, "thanks to the writings of the neo-Confucian philosophers, often seen in stereotypical ways such as having respect for learning and having filial feelings for the teacher". The 'deficit' view of 'international' students is apparent in such stereotyping, and western university teachers may take such views uncritically when encountering the very different learning cultures brought by CHC learners to western university classrooms.

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ⁱ Ballard, B and Clanchy J. (1997) Teaching International Students. Deakin, ACT:IDP Education Australia.

ⁱⁱ various writers in Carroll, J and Ryan, J. (2006) Teaching International Students, Improving Learning for All. Tonbridge: Routledge.

ⁱⁱⁱ Piaget, J (1959) The Language and Thought of the Child. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

^{iv} Bourdieu, P. (1984) Distinction: A Social Critique of Judgement of Taste. Cambridge Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

^v Biggs, J. (2003) *Teaching for Quality Learning in Higher Education*, 2nd edition. London: SRHE and Open University Press.

^{vi} Dunkin, M. and Biddle, B (1974) *The Study of Teaching*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

^{vii} Lee, W.O. (1996) *The cultural context for Chinese Learners: conceptions of learning in the Confucian tradition*, in D. Watkins and J Biggs (eds) *The Chinese Learner: Cultural, Psychological and Contextual Influences*. Hong Kong: Centre for Comparative Research in Education/Camberwell, Vic: Australian Council for Education Research.

^{viii} Carroll, J and Ryan, J. (2006) *Teaching International Students, Improving Learning for All*. Tonbridge: Routledge.