

Notions of Value and Care in Transnational Education: Contextualizing Theory to Practice with Fashion Media Students in Hong Kong

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Abstract

This paper draws on the experience of teaching a Top-Up degree programme in Hong Kong, China. The course, with a focus on fashion media, contextualised practice within a framework of cultural studies theory. Taught by staff from both London and Hong Kong, it sought to develop practitioners who could confidently operate in the fast-paced, global fashion industry. Perhaps unsurprisingly, however, it became evident that the cultural theory, assessed through an 8,000-word dissertation written in English, would prove especially challenging for some of the students. The one-to-one tutorial scenario, the teaching format for the delivery, appeared to compound this challenge, as it seemed to leave some students feeling exposed. It was important that the staff team addressed this issue promptly, as students were at risk of not attending due to lack of confidence and a subsequent lack of motivation. Through an action research project, staff considered verbal immediacy, ego support and tutor confirmation as strategies to support students with these challenges. This paper reports on findings that demonstrate that these methods (which specifically consider the emotional needs of students) were effective in motivating and facilitating confidence in the students who were struggling with the demands of the course. Furthermore, it discusses student perceptions of value and care and how these differ and are dependent on the needs of the student. It goes further, to report on interviews with alumni who discuss the value of critical thinking and of contextualising practice, and how these attributes can facilitate students as life-long learners who are able to live and work successfully upon graduation. It identifies further opportunities for research, which consider additional cycles in the reflective and intervention cycles of the action research process.

Keywords: transnational education, fashion media, value and care, tutor immediacy, ego support, tutor confirmation, Hong Kong

Introduction

From 2011 to 2015 the London College of Fashion (LCF) delivered the top-up degree courses BA (Hons) Fashion Styling and Photography and BA (Hons) Fashion: Hair and Make-up at the Hong Kong Design Institute (HKDI) in Hong Kong. The courses were validated by LCF, whose visiting lecturers taught a third of the delivery in country, with the remaining two-thirds delivered by the HKDI staff team. The course was delivered and assessed in English.

In 2013, the course was revalidated to map to the equivalent course delivered at LCF in London, and now included an 8,000-word dissertation that contextualised practice within a framework of cultural and historical studies. It was recognised that this change would offer a challenge for both students and the course team, due to the necessity to write academically in English and to engage with the predominantly-western theoretical concepts foundational to this project. Preparatory work included discussions between both staff teams in order to unpack the theory, and pre-empt particular elements that might prove problematic in cultural interpretation. A course reader was designed to support the delivery and texts were identified in the HKDI library catalogue that could offer an additional view of the topics from a Hong Kong perspective. All staff were trained to support the new course structure which consisted of: 20 credit Final

Major Project proposal (delivered in term 1), a 40 credit Cultural and Historical Studies Dissertation unit (delivered across terms 1 and 2), and a 60 Credit Final Major Project unit (delivered across terms 2 and 3). The cultural exchange was seen as important to all parties and staff from both London and Hong Kong were challenged to extend their own knowledge base in the process. This exchange of knowledge is indicative of the opportunities afforded by the delivery of a course across two cultures; however, it highlighted the significant challenge that this might pose for students, particularly those studying an art and design discipline.

The Course Leader in Hong Kong noted low attendance at the first timetabled tutorial sessions for the dissertation unit. This poor attendance contradicted feedback from the first term pastoral tutorials, where students commented that they were concerned at the limited number of individual tutorials offered in support of the unit. It transpired during discussions that students were afraid to attend the dissertation tutorial for fear of receiving negative comments. Furthermore, it became apparent that the project was seen by students to be extremely challenging. The first tutorial for the dissertation unit was delivered early in the first term, and took the form of a one-to-one meeting with a dedicated supervisor from both the Hong Kong and London team. It became clear through discussion that it was not only the content of the unit that the students found challenging but also the format of the delivery, as it required students to show and discuss their work and ideas with their tutor in an intimate setting. This approach left the students feeling vulnerable. It was important to rectify this feeling of insecurity as it put the student at risk of not attending. This was also the format, alongside presentations and critiques, for the Final Major Project unit delivered later on the course.

Immediacy

The Course Leader responded to these comments by designing an action research project that considered immediacy. Further staff development sessions took place immediately, whereby staff explored how they might adapt their approach to working with students in order to be more positive and encouraging.

Frymier and Houser (2000) outline immediacy as a closeness between persons. They discuss how in an educational setting this can take the form of verbal immediacy, which includes encouragement and praise, as well as asking students about themselves and giving value to the student opinion. It can also take the form of non-verbal immediacy evidenced in ‘behaviors such as smiling at students, making eye contact, moving about the classroom and using vocal variety (ibid).’ There is evidence to suggest that immediacy impacts positively on student engagement and motivation and improves not only the student experience but also their learning (Christophel, 1990; Kearney, Plax & Wendt-Wasco, 1985). They unpacked this further by suggesting that affective learning, learning that reaches the emotional registers and that taps into the belief systems of the student, has been proven to improve cognitive learning. The Course Leader identified a lack of confidence in approaching the dissertation unit, which seemed to have paralyzed the students to the extent that they had decided not to attend the tutorial session. It was the work of the course team to convince the students that, whilst empathetic to their concerns, they had every belief that they could pass the unit. Furthermore, they needed to motivate the students and make clear how engagement with the theory would enhance and breed confidence in their experience as a practitioner and so improve their work on the practice units. It was important to establish this relationship of trust with the students at this early point in the course to engender a confidence and belief in the students that they could not only pass but excel on the course across all units.

Teacher Confirmation

Further, it was agreed that tutors from London would be more explicit with students about their own interests in the project. These included a genuine interest in the student experience of living in Hong Kong and how the theory could be adopted and used to explore the students own lived experience. Through this intervention, all staff would declare the value of the student voice to the project, working with them to better understand the lived experience of being a student and a practitioner in Hong Kong. Ellis (2004) defines teacher confirmation as ‘the process by which teachers communicate to students that those students are valuable, significant individuals’ (2004:1). She develops the work of the philosopher, Buber (1957) who discusses these ideas in the broader scope of being human and the significance of the individual in this quest. Further work by Laing (1961), discussed by Ellis, states that ‘confirmation is the process that includes actions on the part of others that cause one to feel “endorsed” “recognized”, and “acknowledged as a

unique human being” (Ellis, 2004:2). The London team saw great benefit in this exchange of knowledge and how this could enrich their own practice, both as creative practitioners and in their teaching back in London. It was hoped that this would translate to students understanding this as care in the student-staff relationship. This notion of teacher confirmation was extended to the delivery of all units on the course. The objective, therefore, was to implement a teaching and learning strategy that communicated this interest to the students as sincerely held. In addition, we wanted to emphasize to the students the value of their voice in this endeavor.

Ego Support

As mentioned, the Course Leader had noted low attendance for the first tutorial for the dissertation unit. The unit is delivered as seven individual tutorials with a dedicated supervisor, three spread across term one and four in the second term. The Final Major Project Proposal unit is delivered concurrently during the first term but as lectures, workshops and group tutorials. The dissertation tutorial was therefore the first occasion that the student was asked to discuss work on an individual basis. The notion of a one-to-one conversation and the particular challenges of the unit resulted in the students feeling exposed. It became ever more important to adopt an approach that considered the affective registers of the student.

Ego support is acknowledged as a communication skill that taps into, and supports, the emotional needs of the student in order to encourage motivation. Keller (1987) suggests that in addition to receiving content from teaching staff, ‘students want teachers to help them feel good about themselves [...] When instructors provide ego support, they are helping students to succeed and to feel worthwhile’ (Frymier & Houser, 2000:216). It has been noted that this support promotes a feeling of competence which empowers and motivates students to not only engage but to believe that they can succeed.

Teacher-student relationships in transnational education

Chory (2007) discusses successful relationships between students and teachers from a communication skills perspective. She considers that ‘effective teaching requires personal communication between students and instructors, as well as the traditionally recognized characteristics of instructor expertise and effective delivery’ (2007:90). They suggest that these relationships take skillful negotiation in relation to communication practices and that this is particularly important when the environment, curriculum or the student situation is complex or challenging. Transnational education, although rewarding, could be described as both complex and challenging. Wong (2001) outlines the differences between Eastern and Western approaches to education, and the inherent values and beliefs that underpin them. This notion was central to the challenge of delivering the course, but also offered an opportunity for staff and students to explore these differences from the alternative perspective. Wong (2001) goes further to note the impact of globalisation on the diversity of the workforce, and the opportunities, but also the challenges of this phenomenon. In particular, he references the characteristics of an organizational culture, suggesting these are determined ‘to a very large extent, [on] how people in the organization think, feel and act. They set norms for appropriate behaviour’ (2001:124). Top-Up degrees delivered in Hong Kong by international universities were initially developed to meet the demand for higher education and, in so doing, offer opportunities for Higher National Diploma and Associate Degree students to convert their award to an undergraduate degree. There have, however, been claims that the Top-Up award is seen as inferior to those awarded abroad or in UGC-funded universities. Further criticisms have challenged the notion that the Top-Up experience offers an embodied international experience and suggests they lack facilitation of the cultural capital afforded as a “component of a much revered ‘international experience’” (Waters & Leung, 2013:610). This point is illustrated in a paper by Waters and Leung through a quote from a student who suggests ‘Foreign lecturers flew in to come, but they only gave lectures, but it was like only they spoke, and not really communicated with us’ (Waters & Leung, 2013:613). This point is reiterated in the text which suggests ‘[s]everal students and graduates stressed the difference between being lectured to and being taught’ (ibid). As a course team, we were mindful to address these issues in the delivery of our courses. The London team worked closely with the local team in Hong Kong to promote a sense of continuity and to show the positive relationships that had been developed. The knowledge exchange between the staff in relation to cultural practices and ideas were also openly discussed. The intervention as part of this project included making these communications more explicit to students and to also impart how valuable the students were in this exchange of ideas.

Methodology

The distinctive power of action research lies in its participatory process, which includes both action and reflection in order to facilitate practical solutions for issues concerning people. This method has been widely adopted in social sciences studies (Brydon-Miller, Greenwood & Maquire, 2003; Somekh, 2006; McNiff, 2002, 2010) but is gaining attention in the field of education, as intervention activity is beneficial to students and improves teaching practice (Nolen & Putten, 2007; Reiersen, et al., 2013).

The framework for this study concerned student motivation and confidence in their abilities to successfully engage with the course. The objective of the project was to engender in the students a belief in their ability to write a dissertation and to feel comfortable discussing their ideas in a one-to-one tutorial. This was particularly important as this mode of delivery, alongside a critique of their practice, was also foundational to the Final Major Project unit delivered across terms 2 and 3 of the course. An intervention that specifically considered teacher immediacy in this situation was therefore devised.

Immediacy refers to certain explicit expressions of human interaction that can be observed by recipients. Gorham (1988) noted that verbal immediacy can be measured in a student focus group scenario and identified categories such as a teacher's use of humour, compliments, or self-disclosure. The teaching and learning strategies designed for the course ask the students to discuss their ideas and to present their work in a number of ways. It became clear that the students found it challenging to present their work, particularly so early in the course, in a one-to-one tutorial setting. Conversations with the students in pastoral tutorials noted them being particularly sensitive to the verbal comments they received from tutors. Verbal immediacy, acknowledged as facilitating a caring teacher-student relationship, would therefore be the main focus for this intervention.

Both staff teams would be mindful to make explicit their interest and support of the student voice. This would be particularly important with the London team who would declare their interests in learning more about the lived experience of being in Hong Kong. This would extend to the both practice and theory units.

The Intervention

Data collected by the Course Leader during pastoral tutorials made clear the importance of the tutor comments and how overly critical comments could impact on the attendance and engagement in tutorial sessions. Hence, an intervention was identified that would result in an expression of the tutors care for the students.

Intervention action

The Course Leader met the teaching team to discuss the situation. The team agreed that the tutors would pay more attention with regard to verbal immediacy when conducting their tutorials with students, and try to use more positive words when giving verbal responses. The choice of words was therefore identified as the intervention of action. The team agreed to avoid using 'negative' words, such as 'weak' or 'poor', or comments that suggested they were making a judgment of the student, as opposed to the work, i.e., 'you are not working hard enough', or 'this shows a lack of effort'. Instead they would use positive verbal comments that address the student's effort; they would re-phrase this as, 'I believe you could do better than that'. The communication style varied between individual tutors, as there was not a strict obligation for tutors to use specific words or phrases. The intention was, however, to promote a positive and encouraging reaction that would empower and enable the student to achieve the objectives for the unit.

Time Scale for the project

The intervention of teacher immediacy was implemented over a three month interval, between the staff development session with the teaching team and the second pastoral tutorial. During this period, several one-to-one tutorials were conducted offering tutors opportunities to work with this positive approach to the tutorial delivery. The time constraint for the project meant that the scale of the study was framed by the exploratory action research stage and the research was limited to only a first cycle 'plan - action - observation - reflection' (Reiersen, et al, 2013; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2008). This meant that only one level of intervention was imposed, and the study was completed when an improvement in motivation in learning was observed.

Measurement and analysis

A qualitative approach to measurement was adopted. This study focused on student motivation, a primary indicator of this was the student's attendance of the one-to-one tutorial sessions. Hence, this study utilized a semi-formal interview or focus group as a method to obtain the students' opinion of the effect the tutors' verbal immediacy had had on their motivation to attend their tutorials. The second pastoral tutorial, at the beginning of term 2, offered an opportunity to conduct this feedback. Finally, follow-up phone interviews were conducted with alumni from the course in order to collect a reflection on the overall teacher-student relationship during their learning experience.

The analysis adopted the approach of inductive research and the list of codes were constructed according to the principle by Lincoln and Guba (1985), the coding was then analysed in three steps: open coding, axial coding and selective coding in order to identify the emerging themes (Daengbuppha, Hemmington & Wilkes, 2006; Iglesias, Sauquet & Montana, 2011).

Ethical considerations

As both staff and students were involved in this work, ethical concerns were raised regarding issues of informed consent (Nolen and Putten, 2007). The teaching team were involved in the intervention of the action research project and so informed and were included in the design of the research project. Consent was also obtained from students at the beginning of the pastoral tutorial session in term 2 to participate in this study. They were given the option of 'opting-out' of the project. Students' identities were also disguised to ensure confidentiality (Nolen and Putten, 2007).

Results and Discussions

More than half of the student cohort attended the pastoral tutorials; of thirty-five students in the programme, eighteen students attended the tutorial and agreed to participate in the project. Five students preferred the format of an individual tutorial, in which case discussion was conducted as a face-to-face individual interview. The rest of the students were gathered into five groups with two or three students per group, the grouping was according to students' own preference, thus these tutorials were conducted in a focus group format. The discussion focused on students' motivation to attend their tutorials and the relationship to their tutor's verbal immediacy.

Students responded to questions in relation to their own experience, and information based on their observation of their peers. For the last stage, three graduates participated in a phone interview where they discussed their experience of the course in relation to perception of their tutor's care. All students' and graduates' names were disguised for the purpose of confidentiality.

The findings explored how the teaching team supported the needs of the student in the one-to-one tutorial sessions through adopting the actions discussed in the intervention, and the success of these in promoting student motivation. This work considered the following three themes:

- 1) Understanding how students feel
- 2) Ego support as effective intervention
- 3) Alignment of tutor's care to student's needs

1. Understanding how students feel

In general, students fed back that they felt that the relationship between teacher and student was not an influential factor on attendance at higher education level. The reasons the students gave for not attending sessions varied between individual students. However, the majority of students expressed that it was the perceived effectiveness of the session that influenced their decision to attend. They understood that the purpose of the tutorials was to discuss their progress; where there had been little in the way of progress, they were concerned about receiving negative feedback and so absented themselves from the session.

Student A: "I think that it is because some students were not able to show any output or progress to tutors, and they will feel embarrassed, and sometimes afraid to receive criticism. Therefore, they avoid coming to the tutorials." Student B: "I

skipped those sessions because I think that my work was not up to standard to show to tutors, I am afraid that my idea will be banned, or I may be required to change my direction.”

Student C: “Sometimes I won't show everything I have done to the tutors at the beginning, I will first listen to the tutor's feedback, if it is positive, and I felt that my work fall on track of tutor's direction, I will continue to show more; otherwise, I will hide away the rest of the work.”

It is worth noting that the most frequent feedback from students on teacher response was fear of a ‘negative comment’ in response to ‘lack of progress’, or ‘work not being up to standard’. The perception of teacher verbal immediacy was highly related to students’ perception of their own work. Statements reflecting students’ critical self-evaluation were frequently mentioned in describing themselves, or in explaining why they did not attend the tutorial session. A ‘lack of confidence’ emerged as a common self-assessment among students, statements included: ‘some students were afraid to be challenged’ ‘I feel embarrassed not able to show any progress’ ‘maybe my confidence level is low’ ‘my work is not up to the standard’.

Although there was no specific discussion around details of verbal immediacy that the students noticed, general comments suggested that a judgment on the student’s effort would induce a negative feeling among students, as some students expressed in the first pastoral tutorial. They felt that they had already tried their best, and were frustrated if they were being considered ‘lazy’ or not working hard enough. As the core idea of immediacy is the perceived ‘closeness’ between people (Mehrabian, 1967), the feeling of being misunderstood by tutors would undermine the immediacy between students and teachers. Results also suggested a strong relation between student self-evaluation and teacher verbal immediacy. The students’ responses provided valuable reflection for the teaching team in understanding what the students feel and the reason for low attendance. The teaching team addressed the needs for teacher confirmation as noted by Ellis (2004) to support students’ self-evaluation, and the pressing need in improving teachers’ communication with students in building up students sense of ‘endorsement’, and ‘recognition’.

2. Effective intervention as ego support

Students largely commented that there had been a noticeable change in teacher verbal immediacy. They noted that teachers’ comments were ‘softer’ and more positive, and the students welcomed this change. Some of the students expressed that they felt more ‘happy’ and ‘comfortable’ during the tutorial. When students mentioned this being ‘softer’, they referred to the use of words, tone and manner. Consequently, students expressed that they were more confident to attend the tutorial session and to show their work.

Student D: “Yes, I noticed the change in tutor's communication way with us, and I feel more positive and happy in this way.”

Student E: “I prefer a softer approach for comments, which I would feel more comfortable in expressing my idea.”

Student F: “I feel that the environment is more friendly now, I think that this year, we prefer more positive, friendly environment, and we are happy with more encouragement, but I believe that this depends on each year students ‘personality’.”

Observation of attendance record showed a slight improvement in student attendance to tutorials. However, students did discuss noticing a change in the tutor immediacy and their appreciation of this. They did also discuss an increase in confidence as a result. We were not able observe if this would translate into significant improvements in attendance due to the time constraints of this research project. Thus, the students' comments from the second pastoral tutorial served as the key evidence affirming the effectiveness of the intervention.

These results affirmed the value of care when a subject is perceived as ‘challenging’, this aligned with previous research which focused on the role of caring towards at risk students (Muller, 2001). The intervention of shifting teachers’ verbal comments was proven to be effective in improving students’ learning motivation. The response of students as ‘feeling good’ affirmed the benefits of ego support as outlined in the theoretical framework above (Frymier & Houser, 2000). The frequency of students discussing their confidence level in relation to the subject and in sharing their ideas in a one-to-one session reflected the perceived ‘difficulty’ of the topic and the delivery format. The subject of academic writing

in English is generally perceived as difficult for Arts and Design students, especially for students whose native language is not English. Students who felt they had not produced adequate work before the tutorial were directly affected by the more positive verbal feedback.

3.Alignment of teacher's care to relevant student's needs

It is worth noting that one particular group of students responded quite differently. This group commented that they did not consider the comments from tutors as harsh or negative. On the contrary, they suggested that they would like to hear the 'truth'; it would seem that there was no need to adjust immediacy for these students. This group of students attended all sessions including tutorials, lectures, and workshops, and achieved high results in their academic performance. However, based on their observation of their peers, they agreed that those who skipped classes normally did so due to their lack of progress.

Student G,H,I: "We don't think that the comments from tutors are too harsh or negative, actually we want to hear the 'truth', it is not necessary to praise the work if it is not good. There is no need to adjust for the sake of comforting the students. However, perhaps those students who didn't made any progress of work may feel uncomfortable coming to the tutorial."

The group of higher-achieving students appeared be less influenced by teacher immediacy. Some students suggested that it was in the 'personality' of the weaker cohort to need more encouragement. It would seem that teacher verbal immediacy was most effective with those students who were struggling with producing work and lacked self-confidence in coping with these subjects. It transpired that these students often self-evaluated their own inadequacies and as a result were embarrassed to share their work with tutors. This group especially needed encouragement in tutorial sessions.

Graduate I suggested that it was students who lacked progress who required a more sensitive approach from tutors. He however welcomed the constructive criticism offered as saw it as care. Graduate G saw care as the support and guidance offered to him by his tutors. This suggests that students with different needs see various approaches as care. It seems that students that are having difficulties appreciate a more sensitive approach in terms of verbal immediacy.

Graduate Q: "I was so panic at the beginning of LCF course, as the programme is really intensive. I did not know how to approach my study, and felt very confused. At that time, my Dissertation tutor told me to calm down, and gave me very clear instruction. To me, this was such a great encouragement."

The results of this study affirmed Wong's (2001) notion on Chinese education that 'learning for Confucius is not for vocational purpose, but for character training' (p.132). Alumni working in industry discussed how valuable the course had been for them. They commented particularly on the long-term benefits it offered in creative thinking and autonomy. These they claim they obtained not only as a result of their work on the practice units, but also by studying for their dissertation.

Graduate S: "It was very difficult at the beginning, but still I enjoyed working on it, because I have learnt a new mode of thinking and learnt to investigate an issue from a variety of angles..... the greatest benefit to me was the ability of independent thinking and planning for my life."

Graduate I: "This course has trained me to engage in analytical thinking, and even up to now when I am working in the industry, I will do more research in order to come up with a theme... I think that the influence of teacher on students (future pathway) would be quite profound."

Graduate Q: "my study has laid a good foundation for my future job.... The practice in test shot, organizing shooting in our study has been helpful to my job (fashion journalist) as well, my colleagues commented that I don't perform like a new comer to the industry!"

Transnational higher education, where a team of teaching staff from a mix of Western and Eastern cultural backgrounds come together in support of students is of benefit to all concerned. The result of this study suggests there is value in considering the emotional needs of students particularly in the notion of care. The form this takes is dependent on the particular needs of the students but is to the principle of student-centric pedagogy.

Conclusion

This study reviewed the notion of value and care as being essential components of teaching practice in Higher Education, this particular study showed this value in the context of a transnational education in the discipline of fashion media. Student motivation, manifesting in low attendance was resolved with an action research intervention; the teaching team adjusted their practice to be more positive in verbal feedback and to recognize the students' voice. The notion of tutor care was reviewed and repositioned as essential in the holistic personal development for design students. The value of the dissertation in an Art & Design education is reflected in students' progression from visual-based practice training to analytical research thinking. Graduates valued the UK teaching team bringing a Western perspective of a global fashion school, and the support from the Hong Kong teaching team in contextualizing the Western theories in the local culture. The group dynamic of the teaching team achieved its goal of education to degree level. The success of this was evident in the self-reflection of graduates, who concluded that the most valuable attribute of their education was the development of critical thinking, autonomy, and research skills which they obtained through the course including their learning the dissertation unit, which in turn helped them to contextualise their practice.

While criticism has been raised of Top-Up degree courses delivered in Hong Kong (Kember, 2010; Waters, 2013), this study concludes that there is value in this form of transnational education for design students. The research may unveil the challenge facing students with a lower ability in English language proficiency and does not intend to generalize the result to represent the overall experience of all students studying on a Top Up degree programme in Hong Kong. However, this study portrays a unique scenario and teaching strategy for students who may not have achieved in a traditional examination system but who possess a creative ability. The study affirms that this is alternative pathway for higher education for creative students in the niche area of fashion media.

This study has contributed to an examination and acknowledgment of the value of tutor care and a suggestion of how to support students in challenging situations. Recommendation for further study would be to conduct the action research in further cycles of continuous intervention of action and reflection, in order to measure the relationship between tutor care and the study performance.

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