

EMBEDDING EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING IN THE CURRICULUM: TUTOR AND INTERNATIONAL STUDENT CONTRIBUTIONS AND REFLECTIONS IN AN ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT.

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ABSTRACT

This article presents part of a five-year participatory Action Research project at a UK university, addressing curriculum re-design and development by evaluating the views of key participants: support and specialist tutors as well as students. Three main themes addressed are: student performance; interaction between international and domestic students; and academic engagement. Juxtaposition of interview comments, from tutors and international students, highlights the validity of differing views from each stakeholder group. Findings confirm the benefits of integrating academic and language support into the formal curriculum, higher levels of student engagement when embedding a large-scale business simulation, and the effectiveness of experiential learning pedagogies in mixed-nationality classrooms.

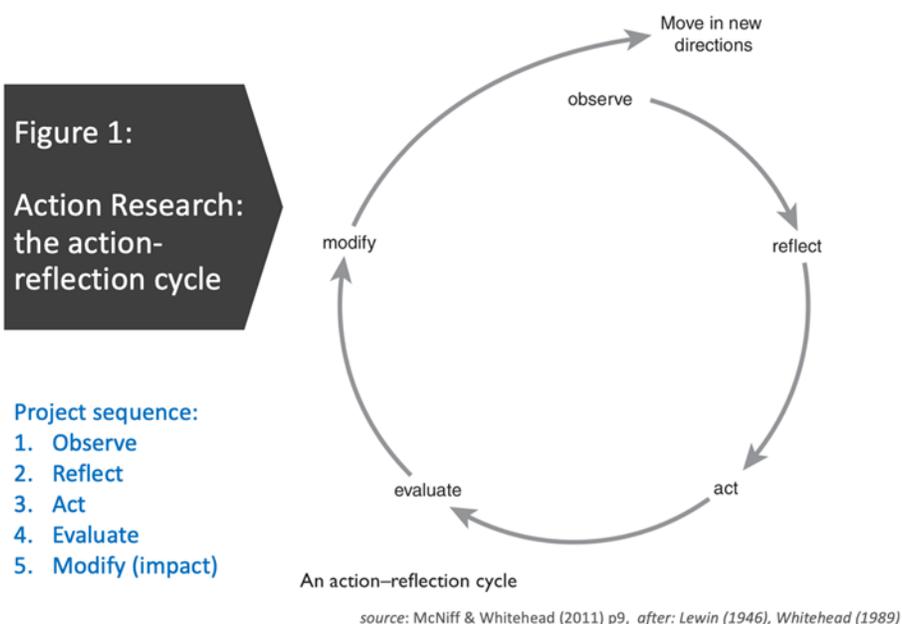
Keywords:

Action Research; Business Simulation; Chinese students; Experiential Learning; International Student; Mixed-nationality classrooms; Pedagogies; Student Engagement

INTRODUCTION

A previous co-authored article (Kerridge & Simpson, 2019) reported on our five-year action research [AR] project conducted with mixed nationality student cohorts that were engaged on a capstone strategic management module at a UK university business school. That paper addressed attainment differences between 'traditional' didactic methods and application of constructivist (active learning) pedagogies based around an embedded business simulation.

Over the course of that study, a narrowing of the performance gap between the international (mainly Chinese) and the domestic students became evident. This contrasted with views of several scholars (e.g. Bache & Hayton, 2012; Rajaram & Collins,



2013) who have indicated that constructivist pedagogies are more challenging to students from Confucian Heritage Cultures.

The study and findings now being presented report on the perspectives and views of teaching/ support staff and students involved in the first phases of that AR study, with a particular focus here on exit interviews conducted with international students from China. The outcomes of those interviews proved integral to a redesigning of the module curriculum and the incorporation of more experiential learning activities in the delivery of that and related undergraduate and postgraduate programmes for mixed nationality cohorts.

METHODOLOGY:

The project adapted McNiff and Whitehead’s (2011) model of Action Research in five steps: *observe, reflect, act, evaluate* and *modify* (see Figure 1).

Observation: for this initial step, the course team analysed previous grades and students’ module evaluations and sought the views of subject and support tutors. In relation to the international students, several institutional and cultural issues were identified, including inconsistent class attendance; low levels of interaction with ‘domestic’ students; lack of engagement with academic and language support staff activities; weak grade results (often related to insufficient grasp of theoretical aspects of the curriculum).

Reflection then involved a series of semi-structured interviews (40-80 mins) with eight faculty members and four academic/ language support staff. These constituted a first data set and are reported in the Findings section.

Action was based around developing the structure and delivery of a strategic management module for final year undergraduates, to take account of the observations and reflections. Key changes – not all introduced concurrently – included incorporation of a large-scale business simulation over several weeks; targeting of [non-optional] language and academic skills support at designated stages of the module; participation of international teachers (with capabilities in students’ own languages); self-selecting of student working/ project groups; move to assessment primarily by written portfolio (rather than by exam); a final assignment requiring reflection on team-working dynamics and decision-making effectiveness.

Evaluation: this part of the AR project was based on a review of annual grade attainments and on results of a detailed questionnaire (completed by most of the students) plus structured exit interviews, usually lasting 20-30 minutes, with students who had been nominated as representatives by their working groups. Those with 23 Chinese students constitute a second data set for this paper, also reported in Findings below.

Modification was the iterative process of responding to the outcomes of those four preceding steps to make further, incremental changes to the module design, delivery and supports. This is discussed below.

Project design and samples: questionnaires and interviews.

Demographic data was obtained from a questionnaire survey given to two consecutive cohorts (response rate 94%, n=322). The gender split for respondents was 59% male, 41% female; median age 22 years (97% were between 20 and 25); 50% were international students. Being by far the largest identifiable sub-cohort (38%, n=123), it is the Chinese students that constitute the main data source for analyses presented in this paper.

The simulation element took place over an eight-week period in the module’s second semester, during which students worked in groups of four or five members. An example video sequence from an early cohort is available via this [link](#) (UoG, 2014). In addition to completing the questionnaire survey at conclusion of the simulation, each group was invited to nominate a representative to participate in a recorded ‘exit interview’. Of the 73 working groups across the two cohorts, 64 (88%) engaged in

TABLE 1:
Comparison of Interviewees and Cohort (Cohorts 1 and 2)

Students	Cohorts	%	Interviews	%
UK	160	49.7%	30	46.9%
Europe	26	8.1%	6	9.4%
China	123	38.2%	23	35.9%
Other	13	4.0%	5	7.8%
totals	322		64	

notes: 88% of the seventy-three groups participated in exit interviews
missing/declined: 4 x UK; 1 x China; 1 x Eur/UK; 3 x other/mixed

those structured interviews, which were subsequently transcribed and analysed. There was a close correlation between the origins of the interviewees and those of the cohort in general, as evident in this Table 1, with UK/domestic students being 47% (vs 50% of cohorts) and Chinese international students 36% (vs 38% of cohorts):

The exit interviews were standardised for all students (domestic and international) and therefore included some questions not relevant to the theme of this investigation, for which we analysed answers to only twelve of the questions [details are in full version of this paper].

With the questionnaire and interview analyses, we could juxtapose faculty and student views on three major issues requiring attention: performance; interaction between international and domestic students; and academic engagement. A simple content analysis technique (Cohen *et al.*, 2018) was used to identify the main themes and compare tutor vs. student views, enabling us to evaluate the success of the curricular changes and assess to what extent further changes were needed. Since our sample was purposive rather than representative, we did not assume that frequency of mention was directly indicative of significance but we did seek to identify ‘core categories’ of views e.g. that had the greatest potential to explain the identified blockers and enablers of student engagement. Using this technique, we were also able to explore differences between the ways in which our groups conceptualised those core issues.

OBSERVATIONS AND DISCUSSION

We present extracts and overviews of the data sets derived from interviews with the tutors (12) and from exit interviews with Chinese international students (23) from two consecutive year cohorts. In both cases, three main themes are addressed: (a) *Performance*; (b) *Domestic and International Student Interactions*; (c) *Academic engagement*. Short summaries are given below:

1st data set – tutor interviews: *Performance*-related comments from the tutors were part of the initial observation and reflection steps, obtained before curricular changes were implemented or the business simulation incorporated. Language and poor academic practice (influenced by cultural perceptions?) were consistent themes. On *Interactions* between Chinese international and domestic students, key issues were the tendency to gravitate into ‘silos’ of shared nationality, culture or friendship groups; encouraging international students towards more verbal communication; a need for more learning activities that necessitate cross-cultural engagement, sharing and negotiation; aversion to written examinations (that were perceived to favour domestic students for language reasons). Teachers’ perceptions on *Academic engagement* related to the limited effectiveness of academic and language support services for the international students – with recommendation that these become more tightly focussed and less optional; patchy attendance at lectures and (to a lesser extent) seminars; lack of appropriate study skill development e.g. note-taking or reflection.

2nd data set – international student interviews: these structured exit interviews were with the Chinese students who had been nominated as representatives by their working groups. Since these participants had expert knowledge of the dynamics and levels of engagement of their working groups, they constituted an effective purposive sample. Analysis of the transcribed interviews (and the questionnaire responses) let us assess the extent to which the module redesign addressed the identified issues and enabled us to design further *modifications* and enhancements. One particular aspect that was evident in the students’ comments related to practical (rather than cultural or academic) obstacles that affected all three of the main themes being considered.

In the full version of this article, illustrative responses are presented indirectly or verbatim, juxtaposing tutor and student views for each of the main themes.

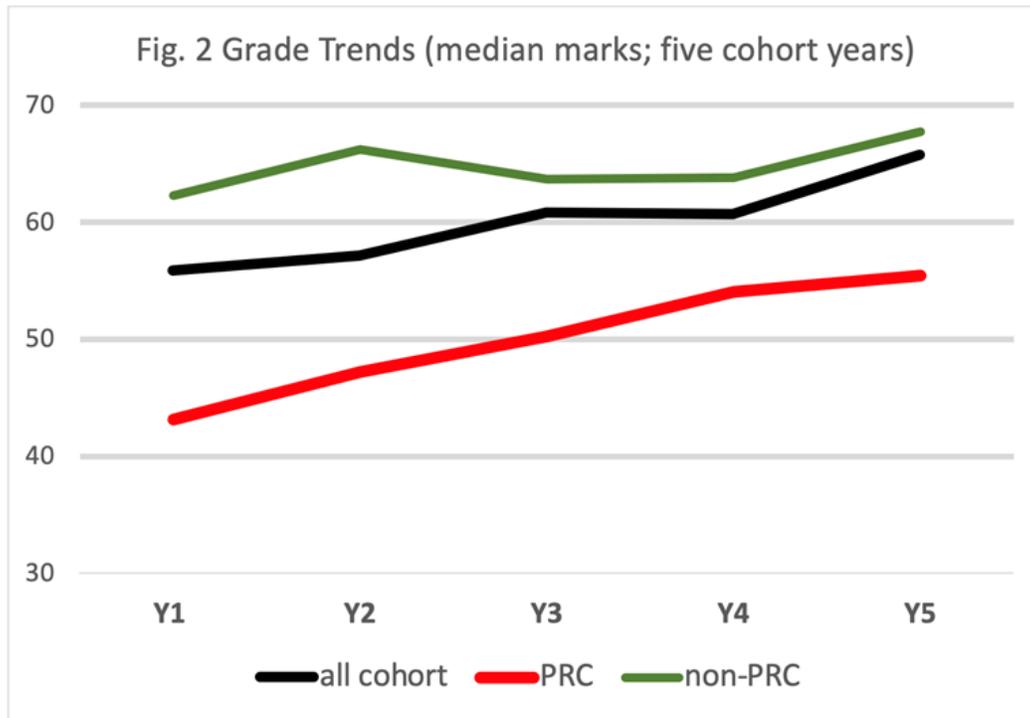
FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

The juxtaposed tutor and student comments drew attention to several differing perceptions of challenges facing international students in mixed-nationality higher education contexts.

Exit interviews with the international students provided evidence that adoption of a large-scale business simulation, involving a series of experiential learning activities, was viewed positively: engendering higher levels of engagement and, for a proportion of the respondents, increased opportunities for interaction with domestic students – and with faculty teaching staff. The embedding of language and academic support within the formal curriculum (rather than as voluntary ‘remedial’ activities!) was also considered favourably: resulting in enhanced academic engagement and encouraging deeper understanding of theoretical concepts. There were several insights on group-working aspects and opportunities, not least on the need to ensure a *process* of peer-/group-learning that includes planning, monitoring and evaluation. Other pertinent student comments signalled that the synthesising of management decision-making was considered a valuable contribution to personal development and employability; and that working through the business simulation had made the learning process ‘fun’!

International students’ comments in this study also support the view that experiential learning through business simulations can contribute to reducing the performance differential versus their domestic peers, by enhancing their ability to grasp and apply the theoretical content of their course (Loon *et al.*, 2015; Kerridge, 2019). That conclusion is further supported by our reported comparison of student grades over the five cohort years that the module was redesigned and iterated, confirming a narrowing of the performance gap between domestic and international students (Kerridge & Simpson, 2019), even though both showed grade

improvements (see Figure 2).



PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS AND LIMITATIONS

A key element of this AR study was the involvement of academic and support tutors at all stages of the project. This facilitated the process of embedding language and academic support within the timetabled activities of international students likely to benefit from it. The success of the blended course redesign for this module has also encouraged colleagues to consider inclusion of experiential learning pedagogies in other course deliveries. It is recognised that further research is needed to assess the transferability of this type of blended learning delivery to other areas of business management education and to more diverse cohorts of mixed-nationality classes.

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