

Connecting Two Student Cultures: Using a Blog to Enhance International Marketing Cultural Insights

**Tyler Laird-Magee
Linfield College**

In three weeks how can Chinese undergraduates in central China successfully select, adjust, and approach introducing a Chinese product in America, never having taken a marketing class before? An internet blog proved a good solution as Chinese group members used it as a core learning tool to gather primary data from chosen American student bloggers to complete their Country Notebook assignment. This blog also gave tremendous insights into Chinese culture for both the American students and professor. Cross-cultural assignments, created for this international marketing class, better inform cultural discussions in the author's same course taught in an American classroom.

INTRODUCTION

The People's Republic of China established a Reform and Open Door policy in 1979, initiating international connections with Western countries to establish educational linkages for English instruction enhancement (Gu & Schweisfurth, 2006). Since then the numbers of international students attending American colleges has grown dramatically as Chinese students currently represent the largest country of origin (Chen, 2000; Zhou, Knoke & Sakamoto, 2005; Jin & Cortazzi, 2006; Wadsworth, Hecht & Jung, 2008). Western educators teaching in China have also become more commonplace through joint venture programs between Chinese and Western universities (Ho, 2010) as well as Western professors taking students to China for short-term study abroad programs (Deans, 2011). In one Delphi study, five of 12 participants drawn from a marketing educators group had taught in China (Kelley, 2007).

Whether teacher or student, an individual's culture is the most influential factor in developing a person's values and world view as it shapes how one's cognitive processes operate (Hofstede, 1983, 2001; Hall, 1983; Nisbett, 2003; Triandis, 1995). By definition, culture is "...patterned ways of thinking, feeling and reacting, acquired and transmitted mainly by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievements of human groups..." (Kluckhohn, 1951, p. 10). A cognitive psychologist, Nisbett (2003) identified in his research of American and Chinese students that "...the characteristic thought processes of Asians and Westerners differs greatly...[they] literally see different worlds" (p. 12). Westerners, Nisbett (2003) found through his eye-tracking study, focused on specific items in a photograph while Asians saw the whole picture and the inter-relations between objects (as cited in Frith & Karan, 2007). As an example, a Chinese student observed, "...it seems difficult to communicate. I think that is not just because of the language, it seems we see the same thing in different ways" (Zhou, et al., 2005, p. 287).

Culturally-oriented differences between Chinese and Western cultures can become a distinct classroom challenge, providing cognitive and affective learning opportunities for both student and teacher. This paper adds to the emerging pedagogy literature to better prepare Western teachers to

effectively teach in China; it also offers ways to transfer this experiential understanding into Western classrooms which have a growing number of Chinese students.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In the 1940s Bloom introduced American educators to three high-level domains of learning: cognitive, affective, and kinesthetic. Later, Bloom (1956) developed the cognitive taxonomy to include six levels, visualized as a pyramid, which build on each other as a hierarchy. Chinese teaching primarily reflects the cognitive domain, and, more specifically, the three lower cognitive levels Bloom identified: knowledge, understanding, and application (Wang & Farmer, 2008). In contrast, Western education has focused on the three higher level cognitive skills of Bloom's taxonomy: analysis, synthesis, and evaluation (Bloom, 1956). Researchers have linked affective learning — dealing with the emotions and heart — with cognitive learning (Hall, 2005).

While affective learning is more closely examined in the 21st century (Owen-Smith, 2004; Hall, 2005) its application has been characterized as being the space where both teacher and student can co-create an environment to learn from each other (Palmer, 1998; Hall, 2005). Considering cross-cultural teaching, this understanding is especially important as many differences result from various cognitive world views. To be effective, a teacher must first understand his/her cultural norms and then the students' culture, learning how to bridge the differences (Valiente, 2008). This challenges professors to look for and create different pedagogy strategies to teach more effectively cross-culturally. Perhaps this fact is no more fully appreciated and fundamental than in teaching international marketing, especially when teaching it in a culture that is nearly polar opposite, as with Americans teaching in China (Hofstede, 1983; Triandis, 1995).

Teaching pedagogies specifically used in international marketing courses, as identified by Crittenden and Wilson (2005) through their content analysis of syllabi from 89 colleges and universities, found these traditional approaches: case studies, guest lectures, and term papers/reports. While one professor in their study used a scavenger hunt and another a mix with a study abroad program, their findings were consistent with previous pedagogy leaving the researchers to wonder "...if it is time for professors to develop new, innovative approaches to teach international marketing" (Crittenden & Wilson, 2005, p.99). Close, Dixit and Malhotra (2005) examined 77 academic articles which featured marketing pedagogy and the internet; their specific findings regarding international marketing found a gap in the literature. Citing this as a research need, Hu (2009) leveraged connections with a visiting Chinese professor and developed a virtual team-based project in a global marketing class between American and Chinese students utilizing email, phone calls, and web-conferencing.

Leveraging technology within marketing courses, Levin and Davis (2007) used a Wiki to create a "third place" where students could join discussions to enhance their learning. Other marketing professors also encouraged individual student contributions in a marketing management course (Cronin, 2009) principles of marketing course (Workman, 2008) and promotions management course (Laird-Magee, 2013). Blogging was another internet tool used to build marketing skills (Kaplan, Piskin & Bol, 2010).

In considering these cultural and technology challenges and opportunities, the purpose of this paper is to: (a) Provide a new way to frame an international marketing class for Chinese undergrads; (b) Identify assignments where a blog can be used to create mutual cultural insights and learning outcomes between two diverse cultures; and (c) Draw parallels how this experience can transfer into a Western classroom and better inform cultural understanding.

PEDAGOGY DESIGN

The capitol of Hubei province, Wuhan, is located in central China and is home to 9 million residents and 35 universities, including the one where I taught: Wuhan University of Technology. Its School of International Education maintains several relationships with universities in America, the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia that send professors to teach in English. The goal is to acclimate

Chinese students to the different Western classroom teaching styles before going overseas to study in that country. As a “foreign expert” my focus was to teach International Marketing to 15 International Trade juniors who spoke and wrote English well, but had never taken a marketing principles course before.

Course design is a vital consideration when building any class, but is of even more importance when preparing to teach in a NEM (Clarke & Flaherty, 2003). With three weeks’ time and 40 hours of total instruction, I set the goal for them to create a Country Notebook, the precursor to an international marketing plan, and assess a geographic segment of the American market to introduce a Chinese product. This approach has been used successfully by other international marketing teachers (Crittenden & Wilson, 2005) but does not offer a way to collect primary data (Hu, 2009). To overcome this issue I created a blog which not only enabled primary research to understand American culture and how to adjust their product to fit the market, but it also produced tremendous excitement as no student had done anything like this in class. I put my Chinese students into three groups of five each; five American bloggers — former undergraduate and graduate students — served as a counterbalance which I coordinated before flying to China.

During our first week together we focused on *Who we are*, understanding the role geography and history play in creating a culture’s context. By mid-second week we advanced to *What we’re doing*, examining how to use these cultural understandings to better determine how to market in that country through primary and secondary data gathering; and the last few days we reviewed, *What we learned*, by sharing through group oral presentations and dialogue.

Who We Are

Having immersed myself as best I could to understand Chinese culture before my first trip to China, I conceptually understood Nisbett’s (2003) Asian/Western world view differences. I also learned how important ancestors are within Chinese culture and had an appreciation for eye contact differences between the two cultures (Lee, 2003). I applied all three insights. When I introduced myself at our first class, I began with my genealogy tree, bringing my students from the 1600s in Europe where my ancestors originated, to their arrival in the new world and traced them 200 years across America from Pennsylvania to California. I discussed the four states where I had lived, including Oregon where I now reside, and noted that we have cowboys, since I learned this was a fascinating American culture item (Lee, 2003).

This ancestral and visually stimulating travelogue fascinated them from the start and laid an important affective learning platform. Returning to discuss my parents from my earlier ancestors discussion, I mentioned they were both teachers — a respected Chinese profession — and during childhood my mother would say to me, “Look me in the eyes when I talk with you!” I indicated my understanding of Chinese culture was the opposite, to look away when a teacher or parent looked at you showed respect (Lee, 2003). Through this I indicated American teachers look students directly in the eye to communicate our caring and need to see if they understand and when I did this, that is what it meant so no need to look away. I began this introduction verbally in class and then explained that all five American bloggers also had introduced themselves on the blog and awaited each group to do the same. This was the first time they used the blog, which I set up with emails and passwords for each group prior to arriving in China.

Our second class brought their second blog assignment. I asked both Chinese and Americans, via the blog, to describe a state/province they were very familiar with, including its history, how people are different based upon geography, and what that means in understanding its residents. I provided a class example of the Pacific Northwest, noting how its history, geography, and climate impact people who live there as well as their interests. All three Chinese student groups did this exercise on the blog, introducing three different provinces using these elements. We discussed the similarities and differences between the Chinese provinces and American states and, assuming our role as international marketers, how to apply these insights.

Building on this, the next day we discussed the origins of culture. These included the six social institutions — family, religion, school, media, and government, corporations — and the five elements of culture — values, rituals, symbols, beliefs, and thought processes (Cateora, Gilly & Graham, 2013). To

explore what exactly a thought process is, we shared a cultural saying, where it came from and its meaning within the culture's context. I provided an American phrase: "Good enough for government work." I thought it might be interesting to see their responses, and explained the context, meaning and usage in America. My students found this phrase fascinating and immediately adopted it into their lexicon. As before, my three student groups chose a culturally relevant Chinese saying and explained what it meant within their culture; this was their third blog posting. It was very insightful as all three groups chose Chinese folk lore — e.g., "Ye Gong Hao Long" or "Lord Ye's Love of Dragons" — which carried a cross-culturally relevant meaning: "One always acts as liking something but actually not."

Again, we discussed the similarities and differences and how thought processes carry tremendous insights into understanding a country's culture. The goal of these activities tied with my Chinese students' group project to develop a Cultural Notebook by better understanding how history, geography, climate and the five elements of culture are vital in assessing a new market. As an added exercise not utilizing the blog, I decided to validate the "whole vs. parts" research of Nisbett's (2003) identified earlier and used his example with a picture of a fish aquarium in my PowerPoint. I asked my Chinese students what they saw. Their responses validated his data as they told me a story of all the objects in the aquarium and how harmony existed within this environment. In contrast, when I use this exercise in America my students identify individual elements — fish, rocks, plants, etc. — and never provide a holistic narrative.

Since asking questions to determine if students understand or engaging them in a dialogue during class is not a Chinese cultural norm (Zhang & Zhang, 2005; Jin & Cortazzi, 2006; Van Auken, Wells & Borgia, 2009), I required them to write me questions after each class, thinking this might produce better results. Five minutes before class concluded, I gave each student one 3x5 card and requested they ask me questions if something was not clear. If the student had no questions, I asked for a new insight. This produced the desired effect as at the next class meeting I clarified questions, explaining differently key points not fully grasped.

Two of the many questions I received enabled me to learn more about Chinese culture far more than I could ever have imagined. One student asked, "Can you explain, please, how it is that America has culture since it is only 200 years old?" Another student inquired, "Since China's reform and opening up policy, more and more foreign cultures come into China. But some of our own cultures are fading away and maybe we will lose our culture. What do you think about it and how to deal with it?" Hall (2005) suggests relationships between teachers and students must be established for authentic educational exchange. So being sensitive to cultural differences and concerns, as expressed by these two students, enabled all of us — teacher and students — to share this cultural learning experience and discuss these questions and issues together in class.

What We're Doing

By mid-second week we moved to *What we're doing*. This initiated introduction of the Country Notebook and moved groups to a new level of thinking and application of the prior cultural activities. To increase their experiential learning, I brought three American food products with me — since foods are powerful cultural tools — I didn't believe were marketed in China. I guessed correctly as none of my students were familiar with these Western foods: Pepperidge Farm goldfish crackers, ginger Altoids, and chocolate chip granola bars. Each item hid inside a brown paper bag and as groups selected a mystery product I asked my students to analyze them: What about the product would need to change to make them successful in China?

My hypothesis was if students understand cultural differences from their 'expert' views of foreign products, then they can more fully appreciate cultural impacts of familiar products in foreign markets. Their response to these products was fascinating. The goldfish crackers were a huge hit as a snack, but the idea of putting them on lotus soup was thoroughly disgusting. Ginger is a Chinese medicine element (why I purposefully chose it), thus my students felt this was a medicinal product rather than its Western use. The chocolate chip granola bars were much too sweet and needed 75% of the sugar removed before its introduction to the Chinese market.

This activity was a vital experiential teaching tool as I used it to reflect on their role as "Chinese experts" of these Western products. Leveraging this activity outcome, I challenged group decisions of what Americans would think of their Chinese product they wished to import, wouldn't they have similar issues? Kim (1998) suggests the process of cross-cultural adaptation or knowledge occurs because the environment around the person learning a new culture permits constant interactions with individuals of the new culture. In this situation, my students had me and five student bloggers as "American culture" experts. At this point I introduced the basics of marketing research so groups could begin their primary research on their chosen Chinese products: a new health drink, wooden hair combs, and a silk scarf.

It was my goal for students to become aware of their self-reference criterion (SRC), an unconscious use of one's own culture as a way to make decisions (Cateora, et al., 2013), and understand how this may negatively impact how they address the American market. We worked on questions in class so they could learn from the American bloggers what they needed to research and what, if anything, they needed to change about their Chinese products to more effectively market them in a specific American state. As Collier (1996) notes, competence in cross-cultural friendships — i.e. American bloggers — can affirm the value of both individuals while providing opportunities for affective and cognitive exploration of a differing experience. The back and forth dialogue was the original idea behind the blog's creation and it allowed both sides of the ocean to learn first-hand more about each others' cultures and expanded everyone's understanding. My former American students would many times, unknown to them, validate in their posts key concepts I had taught in the classroom. In a way, they served as secondary teachers; this was not something I had anticipated but as it evolved I saw tremendous appreciation that my Chinese students 'heard' the same thing from American student bloggers.

What We Learned

In three weeks' time my Chinese students learned much about marketing but more importantly, by the last week they fully engaged with me in dialogue in our classroom as we continued learning from each other. Their final oral group presentation via PowerPoint proved they had cognitively, learned much, but also affectively as well. But beyond learning the basics of marketing an unexpected learning outcome — reflected in different ways through their final 3x5 card comments to me — was the fact that working in teams was a new experiential learning activity I had not anticipated.

This unexpected group learning outcome is best summarized in two students' statements: "According to our team, I learned the importance of cooperation and distribution in group work. It is very hard, but it is very important in my future. In the whole three weeks I learned the detail issues about international marketing and the U.S. way of thinking, so thank you very much!" Another student offered, "I learned [if I] take the opinion of more people [it] will increase the level of your opinion. After listening to my group members' opinion, I learn a lot. I learn from our teamwork and that you [must] have the motivation to team well [to help] others learn well."

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

This first teaching experience with Chinese undergraduates provided the platform for my subsequent return to teach five additional times in China. It was this initial experiential learning of making only small adjustments in the Western teaching style, coupled with use of an exciting technology such as a blog, which enabled a successful and memorable learning environment for my Chinese undergraduates. It is interesting to note a quantitative research study (n=296) conducted by Willis (2010) of first year university students in mainland China (including Wuhan) and Hong Kong concluded a parallel insight: "Students in all locations wanted an un-adapted, internationalized, foreign-delivered, English language program...[with] a teaching style to be international with just a little local adaptation to suit their sensibilities" (p. 64).

As identified by others teaching in NEMS (Clarke & Flaherty, 2003; Kelley, 2007) many of my insights or "tips for instructional success" mirror theirs. With a slightly different focus, I offer the following 10, non-exhaustive, teaching insights: 1) Reflect cultural insight by applying the knowledge

gained from polar cultural paradigms of American/Chinese through all teaching visually and verbally; 2) Keep to a 30 minute classroom dialogue and 10 minute break, since the energy involved in learning in a second language is exhausting; 3) Put more words on PowerPoint than normal and make them 10 cent words vs. \$10 words; 4) Integrate a few Chinese examples as case studies, not forgetting they want to hear real-life, Western-focused examples; 5) Speak slowly and with the best diction possible, proactively anticipating the need to read their faces to provide definitions of unfamiliar words in real-time (hand held translation devices looking like calculators are a visual cue to ask for words that need definitions); 6) Ask for questions and wait three times as long for a response as you would in America, still utilizing the 3x5 cards for questions after each class; 7) Never respond to a student in any way — verbally or written — that may cause him/her to ‘lose face’; 8) Learn to ignore climate and technology issues, e.g. no heated or air conditioned classrooms and power outages, as they are normal; and 9) Anticipate the unexpected at all times and if nothing unexpected happens, just wait a little longer since it will. Employing the Chinese philosophy Yin-Yang seems appropriate, since by its very definition it means nothing is ever in stasis but always changing and moving from one state to the other. In many ways this is what teaching in a totally opposite culture is like and requires: total fluidity.

My 10th learning was my biggest and was reaffirmed through my five subsequent teaching opportunities in China: Teaching in China fundamentally altered the way I teach American students and, more importantly, how I relate with and teach international students, specifically Asian, in an American classroom. Using this experience, my first time to visit China and teach international marketing, I returned with many cultural insights, examples and experiences which laid the platform to build my international marketing class in America. All of the previous examples given are now woven into my class as I have, fundamentally, built it identical. After my American students complete their in-classroom activities — description of a state, American phrase, the fish tank observation, and examine Chinese food items — I offer what my Chinese students’ responses were. This experience enables a wonderful cultural learning.

Based upon this experience and subsequent use of these cultural-based activities, any international business class with its core built upon cultural understanding can utilize this approach and in-class activities. Additionally, given my experience in linking former American students with current Chinese students, a natural next step would be for two professors in two totally different cultures to link their students through a blog to step-wise work through an understanding of cultural differences and similarities.

Finally, for professors who have the opportunity to live and teach students in a country with a totally different culture I offer this advice: don’t think twice, take that gift. Embrace it. It is a life-changing experience that will fundamentally change how you teach in that country, but more importantly, it will transform how you approach teaching international topics in your own country.

REFERENCES

- Bloom, B. S. (1956). *Taxonomy of educational objectives*. London: Longman.
- Cateora, P., Gilly, M. C. & Graham, J. L. (2013) *International Marketing*, 16th ed. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Chen, Z. (2000). International students’ preparation for and adaption to the American higher education system: A study of cross-cultural communication. *World Communication*, 29, 25-48.
- Clark, I. & Flaherty, T. B. (2003). Challenges and solutions for marketing educators teaching in newly emerging markets. *Journal of Marketing Education*, 25(2), 118-129.
- Close, A. G., Dixit, A. & Malhotra, N. K. (2005). Chalkboards to cybercourses: The internet and marketing education. *Marketing Education Review*, 15(2), 81-94.
- Collier, M. J. (1996). Communication competence problematic in ethnic friendships. *Communication Monographs*, 63, 314-346.
- Crittenden, V. L. & Wilson, E. J. (2005). Content, pedagogy, and learning outcomes in the international marketing course. *Journal of Teaching in International Business*, 17(1-2), 81-101.

- Cronin, J. J. (2009). Upgrading to Web 2.0: An experiential project to build a marketing wiki. *Journal of Marketing Education*, 31(1), 66-75.
- Deans, P.C. (2011). A framework, learning outcomes and lessons learned for an undergraduate short-term study abroad in China. *Journal of Teaching in International Business*, 22(3), 193-216.
- Frith, K. & Karan, K. (2007, May). Global Visuals: Is a picture worth a thousand words. Paper presented to the Visual Communication Division at the International Communication Association's National Conference in San Francisco, CA.
- Gu, Q. & Schweisfurth, M. (2006). Who adapts? Cultural models of 'the' Chinese learner. *Language, Culture and Curriculum*, 19(1), 74-89.
- Hall, E. T. (1983). *The dance of life: the other dimension of time*. New York: Random House
- Hall, M. P. (2005, Spring). Bridging the heart and mind: Community as a device for linking cognitive and affective learning. *Journal of Cognitive Affective Learning*, 1, 8-12.
- Ho, R. (2010). Assessment of Chinese students' experience with foreign faculty: A case study from a Chinese university. *Journal of Teaching in International Business*, 21(3), 157-177.
- Hofstede, G. H. (1983). National cultures in four dimensions. *International Studies of Management & Organization*, 13(1/2), 46-74.
- Hofstede, G. H. (2001). *Culture's Consequences*, 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Hu, H. (2009). An international virtual team based project at undergraduate level: design and assessment. *Marketing Education Review*, 18(1), 17-22.
- Jin, L. & Cortazzi, M. (2006). Changing practices in Chinese cultures of learning. *Language, Culture and Curriculum*, 19(1), 5-20.
- Kaplan, M. D., Piskin, B. & Bol, B. (2009). Educational blogging: Integrating technology into marketing experience. *Journal of Marketing Education*, 32(1), 50-63.
- Kelley, C. A. (2007). Assessing the trends and challenges of teaching marketing abroad: A Delphi approach. *Journal of Marketing Education*, 29(3), 201-209.
- Kim, Y. Y. (1998). Cross culture adaption: An integrative theory. *Readings in Cultural Contexts*. Mountain View, CA: Mayfield.
- Kluckhohn, C. (1951). *The study of culture: The policy sciences*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Laird-Magee, T. (2013). Teams build a wiki to teach each other four social media platforms. *Journal of Advertising Education*, 17(1), 46-54.
- Lee, C. (2003), *Cowboys and dragons: Shattering cultural myths to advance Chinese-American business*. Chicago: Dearborn Trade Publishing.
- Levin, M. A. and Davis, D. F. (2007). Virtual 'third places' and experiential learning: A case study of blogging in a marketing promotions course. *Journal for Advancement of Marketing Education*, 10, Summer, 18-26.
- Nisbett, R. E. (2003). *The geography of thought: How Asians and Westerners think differently...and why*. New York: Free Press.
- Owen-Smith, P. (2004, Fall). What is Cognitive-Affective Learning (CAL)? *Journal of Cognitive Affective Learning*, 1(1), 11.
- Palmer, P. (1998). *The courage to teach: Exploring the inner landscape of a teacher's life*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Triandis, H. C. (1995). *Individualism and collectivism: New directions in social psychology*. San Francisco: Westview Press.
- Valiente, C. (2008). Are students using the 'wrong' style of learning?: A multicultural scrutiny for helping teachers to appreciate differences. *Active Learning in Higher Education*, 9, 73-91.
- Van Auken, S., Wells, L. G. & Borgia, D. (2009). A comparison of Western business instruction in China with U.S. instruction: A case study of perceived program emphases and satisfaction levels. *Journal of Teaching in International Business*, 20(3), 208-229.
- Wadsworth, B. C., Hecht, M. L. & Jung, E. (2008). The role of identify gaps, discrimination, and acculturation in international students' educational satisfaction in American classrooms. *Communication Education* 57(1), 64-87.

- Wang, V. & Farmer, L. (2008). Adult teaching methods in China and Bloom's taxonomy. *International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, 2(2), 1-15.
- Willis, M. (2010). Reaching out to the West: An assessment of Chinese students' views regarding foreign-delivered university of programs in China. *Journal of Teaching in International Business*, 21(1), 53-68.
- Workman, J. P. (2008). Wikis in the classroom: Opportunities and challenges. *Marketing Education Review*, 18(1), 19-23.
- Zhang, Q. & Zhang, J. (2005). Teacher clarity: Effects on classroom and communication apprehension, student motivation, and learning in Chinese college classrooms. *Journal of Intercultural Communication Research*, 34(4), 255-266.
- Zhou, Y. R., Knoke, D. & Sakamoto, I. (2005). Rethinking silence in the classroom: Chinese students' experiences of sharing indigenous knowledge. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 9(3), 287-229.