Research Proposal: The Role and Expression of Face in a

Chinese, Computer-Mediated Environment

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Table of Contents

Part I: Context

Introduction

E-learning is a growing, popular worldwide trend in higher education (Wang, 2006). It provides a number of affordances such as improving the quality of teaching and learning, flexibility, affordability, and access (Bates & Sangra, 2011). China's involvement in distance education began in the early 1950's with correspondence courses (Ding, Gu, & Zhu, n.d.). In the late 1990's, these courses began to utilize e-learning (Li, 2009). In a country where in 2007, 9.5 million students took the university entrance exam with only 5.9 million gaining access (Li, 2009), distance education through e-learning is increasingly being seen as the solution to meeting the under-serviced higher education sector, as well as the needs of life-long learners. It is hoped that e-learning will provide educational equity in a vast land (Li, 2009), subsequently decreasing the pressure on the education system (Ding, Gu, & Zhu, n.d). It is a rapidly developing sector both locally and internationally, with many overseas companies and institutions offering their educational resources to the Chinese market (Li, 2009).

Currently, national e-learning in China is used largely for the purpose of access. The format mimics the traditional classroom transmission-of-knowledge style with pre-recorded or satellite lectures, accompanied by print publications and CD's (Wang, 2006). Through classroom managements systems, students are provided with a variety of online communication tools to access tutors, however use is generally teacher-centered, rather than collaborative. Academics in China express the desire and hope that e-learning will develop in the Chinese context to fully utilize the collaborative tools, creating a community of learners that exchange ideas (Chen, Chen, & Wang, 2009; Ding, Gu, & Zhu, n.d.). As more Western educational entities move into the Chinese e-learning market, they must first gain an understanding of Chinese culture,

communication, and learning preferences (Chan, 1999). This in turn will lead to the design of culturally appropriate and ultimately effective e-learning programs.

One of the main tools available to create a collaborative exchange of ideas is that of the discussion forum. Students are invited (and usually required through participation marks) to articulate their thoughts on a topic and respond to others. The discussion forum is based on the idea that students will freely share their thoughts and opinions, engaging with others in agreement or disagreement in order to develop thinking and knowledge. There are however, a number of issues with this assumption for any student, regardless of background. Students may or may not feel comfortable participating in a forum such as this for a variety of reasons ranging from personal preference to cultural values.

In the Chinese context, the concept of "face" is one, which is deeply ingrained and affects relationships and communication. "Face" stems from the Confucian value of "social order and harmony" (Ramsay, 2005, p. 264) and generally results in the subordination of individual needs for the sake of the group. In order to keep others from looking bad, group members give "face", and seek to maintain "face" themselves by fitting in, thus eschewing shame (Chan, 1999; Ramsay, 2005). Additionally, a hierarchy in relationships dictates how one behaves around certain people. This cultural concept then has implications for communication in the online context and may hinder the establishment of a community of learners that can freely exchange opinions and ideas.

Statement of the Purpose

This qualitative study seeks to examine the role and expression of "face" in a Chinese computer-mediated learning environment. The study will focus on one cohort of 15 Chinese students who are participating in an online course for the first time.

Key Words and Concepts

The terms computer-mediated learning or environment and e-learning assume a contained, online collaborative, and interactive course. The term "Confucian heritage" (Ramsay, 2006, p. 263) is found in some of the literature and refers to a system of educational values found in a number of Asian cultures. For the purpose of this paper, it is used interchangeably with Chinese. The Chinese students in some of the studies came from a number of different Asian countries.

Personal Connection

My interest in e-learning in the Chinese context stems from my involvement with a charity that provides theological education for Chinese migrant workers in Mandarin. Students currently study in face-to-face courses, however, as this medium is limited, e-learning can provide the flexibility and access to quality, international education resources in their field of interest. In order to design culturally appropriate courses, we must first understand the cultural and communication preferences of this particular context (Speece, 2010).

Statement of Guiding Hypothesis

Research shows that e-learning "design, usages, and effects are deeply shaped by culture" (Ess, 2009, p. 20). Therefore, it is expected that the Confucian concept of "face" which shapes communication and relationships in a Chinese context, will also effect the communication among the students as well as between students and instructors in a collaborative e-learning environment (Olaniran, 2012).

Part II: Literature Review

Introduction

Chinese researchers acknowledge that e-learning in China currently perpetuates a traditional transmission model of teaching (Wang, 2006), and express a desire that it will develop into a more constructivist environment, promoting collaboration and the sharing of ideas (Chen, Chen, & Wang, 2009). As a tool, a discussion forum can offer the means to affect this desire, however, it is recognized that the usage of e-learning tools will be shaped by culture. One such a cultural aspect is the Confucian concept of "face."

In my search for related literature, I utilized Google Scholar and the ERIC database, using the keywords "Chinese," "China," "e-learning," "distance learning." Perusal of the reference sections of some key authors also led me to further studies. Most of the research reports focus on Chinese learners in e-learning programs conducted in the West: Australia, USA, and Canada. A limited number were located in China and available in English. I could not find any literature specifically focused on "face." Due to the language issue, it is not known how much this topic has received treatment in China. To fully understand the literature on this study, it is necessary to find a research partner that reads and speaks Chinese.

The studies in this review focus on Chinese students from various countries. In some cases they are defined as "Confucian-heritage" students (Ramsay, 2005). I will first summarize and analyze the research, followed by a critique. I will then highlight emerging themes, and point out any gaps in the literature, indicating suggestions for future studies.

Summary and Analysis

While there is a growing propensity for higher educational institutions to use e-learning to overcome issues of flexibility, access, cost, and quality education (Bates & Sangra, 2011),

there is also an increasing awareness that "one size does not fit all" (Morse, 2003) when it comes to e-learning design and usage. This realization has come as student diversity in Western educational institutions has increased leading specifically to research that explores the issues affecting online participation from the perspectives of various cultures.

Several studies and papers reveal that cultural factors do influence Chinese student participation and their use of tools in an online context (Ku & Lohr, 2003; Morse, 2003; Ramsay, 2005; Smith & Smith, 1999; Speece, 2010; Tu, 2001). These studies draw heavily from the works of Hofstede and Hall who offer frameworks with which to view and understand cultural differences. The researchers applied these frameworks to online learning, comparing the experience of "Confucian-heritage" students (Ramsay, 2005) with Western ones in an English medium context. While Ramsey (2006) and Ku & Lohr (2003) found no significant difference in students' attitudes towards online learning, they and others have found that participation and engagement were affected by cultural aspects such as low/high context (Morse, 2003; Ramsay, 2006; Tu, 2001; Speece, 2010), face (Ramsay, 2006; Tu, 2001; Wang, 2006) power distance, individualism vs. collectivism, masculinity vs. femininity, and uncertainty avoidance (Ku & Lohr, 2003).

Most of the studies focus on cultural frameworks to understand the Chinese in online learning. However, in a study conducted with students in two e-learning programs within China, Zhen (2011) sought to challenge the "oversimplification of the application of cultural theories" (p. 6). Based on Archer's work in reflexivity, he found that while culture is present in student background and course design, students are agents of their own learning and are not bound by culture. They may exercise governance in how they interact in the online setting. This confirms

the view of Speece (2010) (although his work focuses on a multicultural e-learning environment) that online participants can establish an alternate culture that supersedes cultural differences.

"Face" is identified as a specific value affecting the interaction of Chinese students in an online context (Ramsay, 2006; Tu, 2001; Wang, 2006). Citing findings from a number of studies, Wang (2006) reported that Asian students tended to remain silent in the online context. They preferred not to communicate with instructors directly, particularly in a public space due to worries about losing face in front of teachers and other classmates. In an Australian comparative study of 34 Western and 18 "Confucian-heritage" students, Ramsay (2006) found that "Confucian-heritage" learners do worry about face, and participate less in online discussion, however they did feel less likely to lose "face" over their opinions in a computer mediated setting rather than a face-to-face one.

The exchange of ideas and opinions desired by Chinese educators requires the freedom to be frank and honest in communication. This however, goes against the Confucian values of social order and harmony. Wang (2006) and Zhao & McDougall (2008) found that students preferred to avoid conflict instead of resolving the issues. Tu (2001) discovered that students were more willing to express disagreement with someone they knew. In addition he found that students experienced nervousness when invited to an unexpected synchronous, session, particularly from an instructor. However, recent examples of student-instructor interactions seem to indicate that students are becoming more willing to challenge authority and express opinions in an online context (Tu, 2001).

Critique

While most of the studies did acknowledge other important issues, such as language, learning preferences, and educational background, these were incidental and not explored. All

but one of the studies (Zhen, 2011), focused on Chinese learners studying in Western countries

in an English medium, which brought its own unique set of issues. In the studies conducted in

Western contexts, all but one (Ku & Lohr, 2003) used an English medium for data collection

instruments, which depending on the level of English, could have had an effect on the results.

Furthermore, there are conflicting results in some of the studies (Wang, 2006) where student

perceptions differ from actual practice, or where practices are changing as Western approaches to

education influence students. Finally, as Smith & Smith (1999) warn, studies that find

considerable difference in one group should not be mistaken to mean that the presence of a

particular characteristic is not present in the other group.

These issues indicate that culture is indeed a complicated topic (Ess & Sudweeks, 2012).

Individual students are a composite of experiences collected throughout their lives. While

cultural frameworks can act as a guide and starting point, these are simulated, and researchers

must be open to alternative explanations. Since culture is not static, learners should not be forced

into a static mould (Morse, 2005), for they can both be affected by and affect their environment.

Synthesis

The literature reveals a number of ways that "face" expresses itself in the online context.

Preserving Personal Face. This is expressed by silence and non-participation, as

Chinese students tend to be observers rather than participants in an online context (Tu, 2001;

Wang, 2006). While students were generally positive about online learning (Ku & Lohr, 2003;

Ramsay, 2005), they preferred not to express views, or contribute to class discussions (Ramsay,

2005), expressing anxiety about having to voice opinion publically. A number of reasons were

given, all with a cross-cultural implication: language ability, cross-cultural uncertainty, lack of

familiarity with Western education, and difficulty understanding the course framework. Rather

than risk feeling shame, students chose to observe rather than participate. This is not to suggest, however, that Chinese do not value collaborating and working together. Organic collaboration often happens outside of the classroom (Chan, 1999; Zhen, 2011) where uncertainty and shame are likely to be avoided.

There were some students however, who felt the lack of a physical face to be a freeing aspect (Ramsay, 2005; Thompson & Ku, 2005). One student wrote, "They don't know who I am or what I look like so I don't feel embarrassed' (Thomson & Ku, 2005). Additionally, given adequate time, Chinese students in an English environment were more likely to participate in discussions. It would be interesting to note if there is any difference in participation when some of these language and cross-cultural issues are eliminated.

Giving Face to Worthy Others. A second way face expresses itself is in the hierarchy of relationships. In Chinese culture the teacher is an "authority figure" (Thompson & Ku, 2005) and holder and dispenser of knowledge. Children are raised to respect the "wisdom, knowledge, and expertise" (Chan, 1999, p. 298) of those in authority, including teachers, and not to challenge them. In a Western online context, a teacher is a facilitator and dialogue is encouraged. One student observed about her Western online learning experience, "Because we think the teacher is an authority figure, we want to know what his thoughts are instead of discussing among ourselves blindly" (Thompson & Ku, 2005, p. 42). Chinese students may not participate in discussion because they do not see other students as having valuable and authoritative views. This extends to the students' own personal opinions as well, with the feeling that learning is "ineffective" (Chan, 1999) when not coming from the teacher. A didactic teaching approach is preferable in order to maintain harmony and avoid shame (Chan, 1999). New evidence does support the fact that students are increasingly willing to disagree with an instructor (Tu, 2001),

however this is only one study and further updated studies are necessary.

Maintaining the Face of Others. A third expression that emerges is the desire to keep social harmony. Chinese students prefer to avoid conflict, and were found to post "more conservative and less critical opinions" (Thompson & Ku, 2005). Thompson & Ku (2005) found that students preferred to say, "I agree", than "I disagree" (p. 43), although Tu (2001) observed that students were more likely to disagree with someone if they already knew that person. Chinese students were noted to welcome group work, and expressed surprise at others who did not participate equally. However, they would rather complete the work themselves than challenge a recalcitrant group member (Wang, 2006). Further work needs to be done (such as personal interviews with students) to understand the motivation behind not wanting to confront because there are likely students from other cultures who also eschew confrontation. While this may be an overarching issue of "giving face," there are possibly other motivations such as personality, or even upbringing.

Conclusion

While it has been demonstrated through the literature that culture, and specifically face do play a role for "Confucian-heritage" students in a computer-mediated environment, there are gaps in the literature. Ramsay (2005) cited the need for a more careful study of the "role and expression" (p. 271) of "face" in the computer-mediated environment. Smith & Smith (2006) while acknowledging that the application of narrow cultural frameworks should be viewed with caution also acknowledged that to ignore these issues in design is akin to acting as "new colonialists" (p. 77). They suggest further studies are needed in regards to cultural issues within the home countries of Chinese students that are enrolled in distance education.

E-learning exists in China, but is primarily used in much the same way as the traditional classroom. Educators desire to see e-learning used to its full potential in creating a forum for discussion and exchange of ideas. The investigation of the role and expression of face in a Mandarin online learning course can contribute to the understanding of communication patterns and best practice for design in a Chinese context.

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Part III. Research Proposal

Introduction

Purpose of the Research

The purpose of this study is to investigate the role and expression of "face" in a Chinese, computer-mediated course context.

Framing the Study

I chose this topic because I am interested in understanding how communication occurs among students as well as between students and teachers in an online setting with a view to designing effective interactive environments appropriate for Chinese students. I want to understand the issues that promote or hinder an open, exchange of ideas among participants.

Current use of e-learning in China follows a traditional classroom model of transmission (Wang, 2006). The use of computer mediated courseware to promote dialogue and sharing of ideas is a new and relatively unexplored, and inquiry into how it may effectively work in this culture is a valid topic of research. Originally, I focused broadly on communication in general but after some initial research I have narrowed it down to a more manageable and specific focus.

Initial Research Questions

It is expected that "face," which effects face-to-face communication in Chinese culture will have some effect in the online context. However it is not clear to what extent. Initial research indicates that a virtual environment may reduce "face" anxiety compared to face-to-face classroom settings (Ramsay, 2006; Thompson & Ku, 2005; Zhao & McDougall, 2008), allowing for more open communication. The research will focus on the presence and/or absence of the

roles and expressions of "face" as indicated by interactions such as deference to elders/teachers, conflict avoidance, willingness to share opinions, and levels of agreement and disagreement.

Review of Related Literature

I have reviewed a significant number of research articles related to the topic. Three papers focused specifically on the state of e-learning in China. I discovered that it is largely utilized for access and takes the form of traditional, classroom modes. There is a desire on the part of educators for e-learning courses to begin to take advantage of the collaborative, interactive nature of e-learning tools. This has confirmed that the offering of such a design is a valid and welcome approach from a Chinese perspective. Additionally it confirms that research into the factors affecting communication can contribute to this fledgling educational issue.

The remaining articles focused on Chinese in an online context. All but one were studies concentrated on Chinese students in a Western, English speaking context. These studies examined factors that appeared to relate specifically to "Confucian-heritage" students in a computer-mediated course context as opposed to Western students. It emerged from the literature that "face" is one of those aspects.

Two of the studies delineated further research needs, one on the "role and expression" of "face" (Ramsay, 2005), and the other for research to be conducted in a Chinese national setting rather than in a Western one (Smith & Smith, 1999). This gave further credence to the value of my study.

Research Procedures

Overall Approach and Rationale

This study will use a qualitative, ethnographic approach to understand the role and expression of "face" in the context of a Chinese computer-mediated course within Moodle. The aim of this study is to observe and understand how the Chinese concept of "face" affects the communication of Chinese students in an online context. This is a narrow approach, which makes it more manageable than an open study focusing on a broader topic of communication. The characteristics of "understanding" and "observation" make it a good candidate for a qualitative, ethnographic approach, whereby the communication of a small sample of students and an instructor is observed, in this case through written materials.

Sample and Site

I have chosen participants for this qualitative study, based on purposive, homogenous sampling (Gay, Mills & Airasian**,** 2009). The students and instructors meet the desired targets of the study, the relatively small number allows for the manageable collection of data, and I have access to them because of my involvement in this project.

The participants in the study are one cohort of 15 students between the age of 18-35 who are part of a BA program, and are participating in an online course for the first time. The course runs for 13 weeks beginning the second week of January 2014. All the students are Chinese migrants from various villages in the countryside, but living in Beijing and are involved in the same kind of work. Some are already known to each other. All have had at least one year of post-secondary level courses, before joining this BA program. The language of the program is Mandarin. The break down of male and female students will not be known until enrolment is complete in December. There will be one instructor who is Chinese, residing in North America, and has completed seminary training in the West.

Initially, I will focus on all 15 students, however as the study progresses, this number may become more refined. The interview portion of the study will focus on a smaller selection of students identified as representative of all students, once the study is underway

Researchers' Role

Both a Chinese researcher and myself have access, and are known to many of the course participants already through our charity. We are both trusted and respected. My fellow Chinese researcher will conduct all of the face-to-face student contact. These sessions will be in Mandarin, the native language of the participants. I will liaise with the instructor who will already know me through our pre-course interaction.

Data Collection and Management

The primary source of data will be the weekly discussion forum interchanges. As part of the course work, students will be required to contribute their own opinions and understandings of a related weekly topic, as well as respond to their classmates. Both the original post of the individual student (11 in all) and the subsequent discussion will be collected, and translated on a weekly basis. Course emails between students and instructors and students and students, along with student personal reflection journals will be collected at the end of week 13, and subsequently translated. Finally, individual interviews will be conducted with a select group of students. The interviews will be recorded, transcribed and translated. Analysis of all the data will be conducted from June – August of 2014.

All the data will be collected in Mandarin and translated into English by a fellow Chinese researcher who has a Master's degree in Education from the US and is fluent in English. For security and confidentiality, the data will be stored in Beijing, in a locked safe within the confines of the charity's office. The data will remain in the office at all times.

Data Analysis

Once the data is translated, I will analyze and interpret it for indications of the role and expression of "face". In addition, the Chinese researcher will examine the original Chinese data for the same aspects.

Trustworthiness Features

Triangulation of discussions, emails, journals, and interviews will help confirm the findings, contributing to the validity of the research (Gay, Mills & Arasian, 2009).

Time Frame and Potential Cost

I expect this research and subsequent paper to take approximately one year to complete. The Chinese researcher will be hired to work from December to November. She is already an employee of our organization, but an additional stipend will be added in view of the extra work and expertise that is needed for this project. She will be located in Beijing (where she lives) and be the one who has contact with the students. She will meet the students at the beginning of the program to gain consent, and then begin translating the data as soon as it is available (the second week of the course), and conduct the subsequent interviews. Her work will be part-time until the end of June, when I will join her on my school holidays to work full time on analyzing the documents for a period of five to six weeks. My cost will be accommodation and food for the summer, along with a stipend for the work. Appropriate rates still need to be determined and negotiated. Following the analysis, we will work on a research report for the remainder of the year, which will be presented in both English and Chinese.

Ethics

Both the students and the instructor will be approached before they begin the course to gain consent to review their online communication, as well as to record interviews. The study

will be explained to them, and they will be assured of confidentiality for all materials and findings. Names will be changed in the final report. Additionally, they will be asked to commit to keeping a journal throughout the 13 week course to record their observations and feelings as it relates to their communication in the online forum. Permission will be obtained to make copies of these journals. They will be asked to sign a consent form covering all aspects of the study (see appendix).

Potential Contributions

The use of a collaborative, interactive computer-mediated course is a new and developing approach to education in China. The findings in this study, although not generalizable due to the small sampling and specific nature of the study, will be able to contribute to what will become a growing body of knowledge on this topic in the Chinese context. The report has the potential to become the basis for further studies on the topic. It will be of interest to both local and foreign educators as they seek to develop the full potential of e-learning in China, and can offer insights into effective course design.

Limitations

There are a number of potential limitations for this study. Participation is always voluntary, and some of the 15 students may prefer not to be involved. Secondly, there is always potential for students to drop out for various reasons such as family and sickness. An added issue for this course is the fact that this will be the first time that this group of students has experienced online learning and some may find it too difficult. Every effort will be made to support these students in terms of training for the use of technology, as well as an understanding of learning in this environment. Students will also be closely monitored and scaffolded through an academic advisor who is accompanying them through the whole program.

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Appendix

Journal Focus Instructions

As you proceed through the program, we would like you to keep a reflective journal about your communication online. You will be asked to create an entry after each week's discussion is over. You may also comment on your email communication. Here are some possible questions but feel free to include your own. You may keep this journal in any form: written or online. You will submit for the study at the end of week 13.

Questions:
Were you able to say what you thought? If not, what hindered you?
Did you experience any feelings of embarrassment or shame during your communication?
Was there anyone that you had difficulty communicating with? Why do you think this was the case?
How does this online discussion experience compare with being part of a discussion in a classroom setting?
Which do your prefer and why?

Interview

A small number of students that are representative of a cross-section of the 15 students will be chosen for interviews at the end of the course. These interviews will be unstructured and follow up on the students' journal entries. The interviews will be for the purpose of clarification and further probing of the students' experience.

Time Schedule

	December 2013	January – March 2014	April – May 2014	June- August 2014	Sept – Dec 2014
Explain study Obtain Student permission	X				
Collect and translate discussion data on weekly basis		x			
Complete translation of journals and emails			x		
Analysis for themes				x	
Preparing Report					x

Sample Consent Form

(Adapted from www.cs.ubc.ca/~cs544/Fall2005/Ethics/CS544_consent.doc)

December 20, 2013

A Study into the Role and Expression of Face in Online Communication

Investigator

Joy Penner, Master's Student UBC

Project Purpose and Procedures

The purpose of this study is to observe the role and expression of "face" in online communication. The ultimate goal is to determine a culturally appropriate design for online learning. You will be asked to keep a journal of personal reflections during the 13 week program regarding your online communication. Upon completion of the course, five participants will be chosen to participate in a follow up interview in the week following the course. Additionally, copies of online discussions and emails will be collected and analyzed for evidence of "face" behaviour. The project will be completed one week after the course end date.

Confidentiality

Your identity will be kept confidential, and you will remain anonymous. The physical data collected will be kept in an office, and locked securely in a safe when not being used. The soft copy of the files and research report will be password protected along with the researchers' computers.

Remuneration/Compensation

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. This is voluntary, and you will not receive any remuneration for your participation.

Contact Information About the Project

If you have any questions or require further information about the project you may contact Joann Fang at 010 13141428531.

Contact for information about the rights of research subjects

(Will need to find the Chinese equivalent)

Consent

Your participation is voluntary and you may withdraw at any time during the study.

Your signature below indicates that you have received a copy of this consent form for your personal records.

Your signature indicates that you consent to participate in this project. You do not waive any legal rights by signing this consent form.

I, _____, agree to participate in the project as outlined above. My participation in this project is voluntary and I understand that I may withdraw at any time.

_____
Participant's Signature   Date

_____
Investigator's Signature