

The Middle Way: East Asian masters students' perceptions of critical argumentation in U.K. universities.

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Abstract

The paper explores the learning experiences of East Asian masters students in dealing with Western academic norms of critical thinking in classroom debate and assignment writing. The research takes a cultural approach, and employs grounded theory and case study methodology, the aims being for students to explain their perceptions of their personal learning journeys. The data suggest that the majority of students interviewed rejected full academic acculturation into Western norms of argumentation. They instead opted for a 'Middle Way' that synergizes the traditional cultural academic values held by many East Asian students with those elements of Western academic norms that are perceived to be aligned with these. This is a relatively new area of research which represents a challenge for British lecturers and students.

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Introduction

The number of East Asian students coming to the U.K. to undertake postgraduate courses has been steadily growing over the past decade and comprises a large proportion of the international students at masters level in the U.K. Given the importance of East Asian postgraduate students to the income and culture of UK universities (Sherlock 1995), it is important to research the difficulties and challenges they encounter in adapting to Western academia. The aim of this research, therefore, is to explore how these students perceive Western academic norms and expectations as regards critical thinking and argumentation (the use of the term East Asian is rationalised below).

Research has shown that differences in academic expectations have resulted in misunderstanding and some confusion for both Western lecturers and East Asian students studying in the West (Jin 1992; Jin & Cortazzi 1996; Cortazzi & Jin 1997; Robinson 1992, Torkelson 1992, Block & Chi 1995; Prior 1991; Leki 1995; Casanave 1995; Tanaka 2002; Ryan 2000). However, little research has yet been done in the U.K. on the process of adjustment for masters East Asian students with reference to critical thinking and argumentation.

One of the key questions currently needing to be asked is to what extent U.K. university culture

expects the type of critical thinking expounded by traditional critical thinking theorists (Paul 1982, 1993, 1994; Ennis 1962, 1984, 1987, 1996; Siegel 1988). Moreover, by advocating 'Western style' thinking and academic writing do U.K. universities thereby neglect the cultural diversity of international students, resulting in a mismatch of academic expectations between U.K. lecturers and these students?

In this study an inductive interpretist approach was taken in order to explore the following research questions:

1. What are the key differences in academic discourse expectations between the U.K. and East Asian cultures, with particular reference to critical thinking and argumentation?

What do East Asian students understand by the term 'critically evaluate'? This is a term frequently used by lecturers to denote critical thinking and analysis, and it contains bedrock assumptions that underpin academic writing practices in the West.

2. What cultural influences facilitate or hinder the understanding of, and attitude towards, Western-style critical thinking and argumentation?

What aspects of academic study in the U.K. do East Asian students identify as causing them the most challenges, and what are their lecturers' perceptions of the difficulties they face?

3. How can the Learning Experience of East Asian students be described in terms of an adaptation process and learning outcomes?

Are there identifiable stages to this journey, can entry and exit points be identified, and how do the students themselves perceive this process? How can U.K. lecturers best facilitate this process?

Prior to the main discussion, the use of the terms 'East Asian' and 'the West' need to be clarified. In line with many cross cultural scholars (e.g. Woodward, 2002, Lim 2002, Trompenaars 1993), the term 'West' is used throughout the thesis to include Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand, as referring to traditions of thought and practice and an historical trajectory. However, there are difficulties in monolithically describing cultures as 'Eastern' and 'Western' (Said 1995), which terms suggest commonalities and homogeneity among particular group members, whilst ignoring their differences; the U.K. today is indeed multicultural. Thus, although cultural boundaries in this research have cultural significance, these offer only one way of interpreting and understanding the culture of a person.

The term East Asian is used in this paper as an umbrella term for the six targeted cultures in the research study. This is not to suggest that these cultures are not very different from each other in many ways – social, religious, historical, educational. However, there does seem to exist a sufficiently identifiable core of rhetorical traditions which will allow for the use of the singular label 'East Asia' (Jensen 1992), and to group them together for the purposes of contrasting them with the U.K. Furthermore, East Asian researchers themselves group East Asian cultures together when contrasting cultural academic expectations (e.g. Tanaka 2002 (Japanese), Morita 2002 (Japanese), Park 2002 (Chinese), Coward 2002 (Taiwanese)). From the researcher's extensive

teaching experience, supported by substantive literature (e.g. Hofstede 2001; Trompenaars 1993; Hall 1976; Ting Toomey 1999; Cortazzi & Jin 1997; Tanaka 2002), it could be assumed that students coming from East Asian countries may experience common challenges in adapting to Western academic expectations.

National culture, therefore, is not to be viewed as a characteristic of individuals or nation states, but of a large number of people conditioned by similar background, education and life experiences (Doney, Cannon & Mullen 1998). With this in mind, the use of these terms in this paper are not intended to suggest stereotyping, nor to obscure differences.

Methodology

Selection of Case sites

A grounded theory, case study approach was followed, as being the most appropriate for the research topic. Two universities in the U.K. were selected as case sites, and a third case site was a university in China. The choice of U.K universities, Schools and subject disciplines for the case sites depended on three criteria:

- Large numbers of East Asian students recruited onto their masters programmes;
- Course assignments that demand a high level of critical thinking and evaluative writing;
- Ease of access.

For practical and financial reasons it was not possible to visit all the target East Asian countries represented in the sample and so a prestigious Foreign Language university was selected, primarily because the researcher already had teaching contacts there who acted as 'gatekeepers' and who gained access for her. Also, the recruitment of Chinese students to masters courses in the U.K. is predicted to increase (Chan & Drover 1997), and so it seemed pragmatic to address this trend. Final year students intending to study in the U.K. for a masters were interviewed at this university.

Sampling choices

Over a four year period students and lecturers were interviewed at the three case sites. Using a non-probability sample, 42 East Asian students were interviewed in the U.K., The range of nationalities was determined by the students recruited onto the masters courses (23 Chinese; 7 Taiwanese; 7 Thai; 3 Japanese; 1 Korean; 1 Indonesian). A further 18 Chinese students were interviewed in the Chinese university. In addition, sixteen interviews with lecturers at the three sites were conducted (five Chinese and eleven British). Six British students in one of the U.K. universities were also interviewed for comparison and triangulation purposes.

Given the language of the interviews was English, the participants needed to have sufficient competency in English oracy in order to express their thoughts clearly, and so only those with a minimum of IELTS 6.5 were selected. Although interviewing in their second language may be seen as problematic, as English is the medium of study in U.K. universities, this is arguably a suitable research medium for this study.

Analysis of the data

All the interviews were audio-taped, transcribed and initially analysed using open coding (Corbin & Strauss 1990). Then using the Constant Comparative Method (Glaser & Strauss 1967), emerging themes and categories were identified, and the data interpreted to generate theory (see 'The Middle Way: Figure 1).

Findings and Discussion

The data suggest that the majority of the students interviewed reject full academic acculturation into Western norms of argumentation, which is characterised by rigorous, 'strong' critical thinking (Paul 1982,1993,1994), polarised, linear logic, and 'wrestling' debate. Instead, many of them opt for a 'Middle Way' (Figure 1), which synergizes those elements of Western academic norms that are perceived to be culturally acceptable, with the traditional cultural academic values held by many East Asian students. Before discussing this 'Middle Way' in depth, however, the characteristics of Western academic argumentation will be examined. The next section explores the characteristics and critiques of Western style academic argumentation, before going on to discuss this 'Middle Way'.

Western-style academic critical argumentation

According to critical thinking theorists, this involves rigorous debate, an aggressive search for truth and a discerning of error, bias and contradiction (Paul 1982, 1993, 1994; Ennis 1962, 1984, 1987, 1996; Siegel 1988). In the West, the practice of academic argumentation and debate is rooted in the Socratic/Aristotelian pursuit and discovery of 'truth' through the disciplined process of critical thinking. Objective truth is sought through logical evaluation of the weaknesses and strengths of a theory, statement or proposal, and comparing and contrasting it with alternative views or explanations. These critical thinking theorists advocate Socratic dialogical thinking as the highest form of reasoning for all humans world wide. However, critics argue that this is an ethnocentric view, and that different cultures employ and value different styles of reasoning (e.g. Gee 1993,1994; Street 1984,1993,1994; Thayer-Bacon 1992,1993; Orr 1989).

The traditional view of Western critical thinking has been described by Thayer-Bacon (1992, 1993) as 'the battlefield mentality' which results in polarized critiques, with theories and ideas rejected or accepted on the basis of supporting evidence and logical argument. It is based on the premise that evidence should be held in doubt and subject to scrutiny until it can be proved legitimate and truthful. Indeed, this is reflected in the notion of the 'Null Hypothesis' of quantitative data analysis:

The spirit of critical thinking is that we take nothing for granted or as being beyond question. In academic debate, arguments are analysed to find inconsistencies, logical flaws or evidence to the contrary.
(Walkner & Finney 1999: 532).

A need for explicitness is one characteristic of the low context communication of Western culture (Hall 1976), together with an acceptance of free expression and of direct, public disagreement. Teamwork and open discussion encourage brainstorming of ideas, with a readiness to reject any that do not stand up to critical analysis. It can therefore be described as 'wrestling' debate (see

Figure 1).

Paul's main arguments are that critical thinking is a universal skill, achievable and to be pursued by all human beings regardless of culture and gender; that it is superior to all other forms of thinking, demanding fairness, discipline and creativity; and that it is the key to full personhood and self realisation. It demands a deliberate and conscious examination of assumptions and beliefs, which can be an uncomfortable exercise:

Critical thinking is complex because it involves overcoming not only intellectual barriers to progress, but psychological barriers as well. We are comfortable, as a rule, with our ideas, our belief structures, our view of the world. Certainly, if we thought our ideas were flawed, irrational, shallow, or biased in an unfair way, we would have already changed them. When questioned about the validity of our ideas or beliefs, particularly the foundational ones, we typically interpret the question to be a challenge to our integrity, often even to our identity. (Paul 1993:ii)

To engage in such thinking a certain amount of intellectual humility is required i.e. a critical thinker will be prepared to recognise the weaknesses and limitations in his or her own position:

When one becomes aware that there are many legitimate points of view, each of which - when deeply thought through - yields some level of insight, then one becomes keenly aware that one's own thinking, however rich and insightful it may be, however carefully constructed, will not capture everything worth knowing and seeing. (Paul 1993:23)

Siegel (1988:13) describes critical thinking as 'skilled skepticism', where the thinker seriously questions his or her deepest beliefs and assumptions, challenges them and identifies contradictions and inconsistencies in his or her personal and social life. Siegel acknowledges that in order to be a critical thinker one has to have the attitude of a 'seeker of truth', passionate about intellectual honesty and justice to evidence. This will inevitably result in 'contesting points of view being brought into rational conflict' (Paul 1982:3). For some students this may appear threatening:

If you are critical all the time about everything and everyone, it may just make you upset since you see the 'truth' of the things, and how the world really is clearly.
(Chinese student interviewee)

The development of critical thinking is a stated aim of undergraduate, and to a greater extent, postgraduate courses in Britain. This can be seen in the calls for 'rigorous arguments' and 'critical analysis' in the Quality Assurance Agency's generic assessment criteria for masters level. This research study sought to discover how East Asian students view Western critical thinking. Do they agree or disagree with Paul's (1982) definition that it is acultural and is the 'key to self realisation'?

Critique of critical thinking theory

Many who would argue with Paul, Ennis and Siegel on the majority of their beliefs would, however, agree on one point - that all humans are capable of higher order cognitive skills. What they disagree on is how thoughts are *expressed* in the context of a diversity of cultures and across gender:

All humans who are acculturated and socialized are already in possession of higher order cognitive skills, though their expression and the practices they are embedded

in will differ across cultures. (Gee 1994:189)

Street (1993,1994) and Gee(1993, 1994) criticise Paul's viewpoint as being ethnocentric and blinded by cultural and social assumptions and bias. They claim that the type of thinking advocated by the Critical Thinking movement is narrow in that it represents male oriented, Western logic; in Hofstede's (2001) terms, it reflects the 'masculinity' and individualism of Western cultures. Street and Gee believe that 'nurture' i.e. the social and cultural context, rather than innate 'nature', determines how these higher order cognitive skills are expressed. In other words, cognitive expression, especially through literacy, is integrally linked to culture and social communication, and in some cultures the type of logical, explicit reasoning used in the West is not culturally acceptable:

Asian culture believes that a higher level of communication is communication without language. In Chinese everything is implicit. You can get the message behind the language. There are a lot of ambiguities; you have to sort it out yourself.
(Chinese lecturer)

In Western style writing when you want to write about cause and effect, you will write about the cause first and then the effect, or if you want to say something about the effect then you will state clearly what's the cause. It's linear. But in Chinese sometimes you just write about the effect. The readers themselves think about the cause ... the readers will get the hidden message behind the language - they will know what are the causes by just looking at the effects themselves. In Western style writing you have to state it very clearly and everything has to be in logical sequence.
(Chinese student)

It is not that some cultures are unable to use some patterns of reasoning, but that they prefer certain patterns above others e.g. diffuse thinking above specificity (Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars 2000). If Street and Gee are correct, then East Asian students will have very different notions of argumentation and evaluation from Western academics. They will employ different communication strategies when expressing disagreement, criticism, or when arguing a point, if these activities exist at all:

It is very hard to confront with ourselves, it is a struggle to write. Thinking in English is like arguing with another person. I am not allowed to confront or to conflict with myself in Chinese. (Taiwanese student)

Typically in East Asia, maintaining harmony and avoiding offence or confrontation appear to be of greater value and importance than the search for absolute truth (Hofstede and Bond 1984). Hence, any evaluation of ideas would be based on the premise of first accepting all contributions with a view to conciliatory accommodation and dialogue (see figure 1). In these high context cultures, inference rather than explicitness is preferred.

Another argument put forward by feminist opponents of the Critical Thinking movement, (such as Thayer-Bacon 1993, Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule 1986, Bailin 1995, Orr 1989, Nye 1990) and by other writers (e.g Tannen 1990, 1998), is that men's logic is different from women's logic, the latter accepting experience, emotion and feeling as valid sources of evidence. Orr claims that formal logic is dominated by masculine preference for polarised argumentation: "The

West's conception of mind and rationality are overwhelmingly male" (1989:2). Bailin (1995), likewise, claims that formal logic was developed by white Western males and is biased because it excludes the practices of some groups. She argues that it reflects masculine styles of interacting and that their standards are made universal as the only legitimate mode of understanding. This mode can be characterised by aggression and confrontation, individualism, logic and a lack of emotion - the 'battlefield' mentality - as opposed to the more 'feminine', intuitive reasoning. A more collaborative, interpersonal context for discussion and debate, she argues, is more suited to many groups: 'different groups in society have employed different methods in constructing knowledge, but those in power have privileged their own ways of knowing' (Bailin 1995:194).

Orr (1989) contends that women, on the other hand, prefer conciliatory reasoning (informal logic), where differences are accepted and not polarised, although she also points out that women, once allowed education, have proved to be as able as men to use the masculine mode of reasoning, but that empathy and subjectivity can also be useful tools in reasoning. Hofstede (1991:82) found that in there is a 'masculinity' tendency in Western societies for men to take on a more assertive role: 'focusing on material success whereas women are supposed to be more modest, tender and concerned with the quality of life'. East Asian societies, in contrast, demonstrate more 'femininity', where 'social roles overlap (i.e. both men and women are supposed to be modest, tender, and concerned with the quality of life)' (Hofstede 1991:83). This may in part explain why a more nurturing, less aggressive approach to debate may be more appealing to East Asian students:

British students have been encouraged to challenge – too much. Rebellious! Sometimes the challenge makes no sense! (Chinese student)

Thayer-Bacon also argues that dialogical or critical thinking is a relational and social process and not an individualistic endeavour:

We develop our thinking skills as we develop our communication skills and our social skills, by being in relation to others (...). Our thinking improves the more we are able to relate to others and discuss our thoughts with them. (Thayer-Bacon 1993: 337)

A relational model of thinking emphasises people working together – solving problems through conversing and debating together, valuing all opinions and suspending judgement. Like Vygotsky (1962/1994) and many educational linguists (e.g. Bruner 1973, Graves 1978, Bakhtin 1984), Thayer-Bacon believes that 'our thinking improves the more we are able to relate to others and discuss our thoughts with them' (1993:338). Similarly, Scardamalia and Bereiter argue that conversation can promote the growth of thinking, especially when 'controversial partners holding different opinions strive to reach a mutually agreeable position and in the process advance beyond the level of understanding that either partner possessed at the beginning' (1994:297).

Thayer-Bacon advocates *constructive thinking*, which she defines as making every effort to fairly consider and to understand people's ideas in order to find the best solutions to problems. She argues that one cannot separate the self from the object, the knower from the known, personal knowledge from expert knowledge (1993:324). In other words, reflective problem-solving thinking, which requires judgements, decisions and choices, must involve the whole person and not just the mind.

Sensitivity, she argues, is essential if one is to be truly open-minded and 'fair' to others' arguments. True critical thinking (or *constructive thinking* as she prefers to call it) requires one to know oneself and what one contributes to the knowing, in other words to be self-reflective.

Relational skills, she argues, are necessary to help open not just one's mind, but one's heart:

A constructive thinker attempts to believe the other(s) to make sure understanding has taken place, before she uses her critical thinking skills to doubt and critique. Judging and assessing are vital parts of constructive thinking, but so are caring and awareness of one's own personal voice (...) Caring is value-giving, whereas blind justice tends to be absolutistic and silencing (Thayer-Bacon 1993: 327,328)

In other words, one gives value and worth to the other person when one respects them enough to listen and try to understand their meaning before opposing, dismissing or trying to silence their viewpoint:

Sometimes when you are talking they (the British/European students) will stop you in the middle with disagreement. That makes you very embarrassed and scared. They should listen, at least until people have finished talking. (Chinese student)

Caring is an essential ingredient in critical thinking according to Thayer-Bacon: "Without caring, one cannot hope to be a good / constructive thinker. Caring is necessary to be sure ideas have been fairly considered and understood" (1993: 323). She defines *caring* as being receptive and respectful to what another has to say, being open to hearing the other's voice more completely and fairly, and deeming it to be of value, of interest and worthy of close inspection. The notion of caring as an integral aspect of education is found in the Confucian heritage. A person could not be educated in the absence of strong, caring relations, and without developing the heart ('jiao ren), as much as the mind. It also relates closely to the notion of 'face' (Gao and Ting-Toomey 1998), and to Ting-Toomey's notion of 'mindfulness' (Ting-Toomey and Kurogi 1998), where participants in an interactive discourse take conscious care and are mindful of the other(s)' face. In a debate, East Asian students would be more concerned with preserving the 'face' of the other, and direct disagreement or challenge would be seen as arrogance, presumption and inconsideration:

If you make mistakes, people point them out secretly, try to avoid losing face, try to avoid embarrassing you. Also they may tell you in a very indirect way. But Westerners are very direct. (Chinese lecturer).

This is in contrast to the academic 'argument culture' in the U.K.:

The whole educational environment and society in the U.K. encourages one to ask questions and query things without being 'sat on'. I felt very well prepared for this masters course, although I realise there is still plenty of scope for improvement. We've all been institutionalised into the argument culture. (British student)

In East Asian academic discourse there is an emphasis on listening to others, exposition of accepted fact, and restraint in expressing personal opinions, especially when these are contrary to the common consensus. Likewise, relationships among team members are more important than task completion, and critical evaluation of team members' ideas to achieve the best solution carries less weight than maintaining harmony (see figure 1). East Asian students, coming from

cultures that score higher in Hofstede's (1991, 2001) femininity dimension than Western cultures, may therefore be disadvantaged by the educational practice in the West. They may find it more natural to engage in the type of constructive, conciliatory and sensitive dialogue that these feminist writers advocate. The question then arises as to whether it is possible, or indeed appropriate, for Western academia to consider *adapting* the Western style of critical essay into a style of essay writing which encourages and values more conciliatory reasoning. One way of doing this might be to move towards the 'Middle Way' approach.

The Middle Way

The 'Middle Way' combines the two different approaches of 'conciliatory dialogue' and 'wrestling debate' (see figure 1). Although characterised by constructive dialogue (Thayer-Bacon 1993) which is inoffensive and which involves empathetic listening to the other's viewpoint, the Middle Way nevertheless does allow some challenge. This, however, is indirect and the focus is on reasoning which aims to bring together, rather than separate. Participants are therefore very 'mindful' (Ting-Toomey 1999) of their use of language and are sensitive and circumspect in their use of explicitness in positing an idea. The aim is not to battle between two polarized positions, as in the Western adversarial approach to debate, but to sustain a more conciliatory approach which allows ample space for diversity of opinions. In this 'gentler' approach to critical debate, one of the top priorities is to maintain relationships and preserve the dignity and integrity of all participants. The Middle Way thus begins the search for truth with an 'agnostic empathy' towards all views presented. The term 'empathy' here, is used in line with Thayer Bacon's (1993) definition of it, to describe a sensitive 'openness' to another's viewpoint, a determination to listen fair-mindedly and delay judgement and critical evaluation until the other's position is fully understood and 'entered into' in a sympathetic fashion.

The evidence from this research suggests that the majority of East Asian postgraduate students ultimately reject full acculturation. That is, they do not fully accept and internalise the academic norms and values of the U.K., regarding critical thinking and argumentation. On the contrary, the students in this research opted for the 'Middle Way' in preference to going on to the full acculturation stage. To them, Western critique is perceived as too insensitive and unnecessarily offensive, not only in the Western academic sphere, but also in the Western media and in society generally:

A girl in our class from Hong Kong holds the view that we should think more and talk less, and she told us that she was really taken back by the English way of jumping out and saying things, and coming out with things loudly, and jumping in. And she almost thought we were a bit rude, and strange and a bit arrogant, and it wasn't her way. So there's definitely a marked difference in the way we see things. (British student)

They feel uncomfortable when they see critical thinking and debate degenerate into hurtful cynicism. This is in agreement with Tannen's argument that 'the scale is off balance, with conflict and opposition over-weighted' in Western debate (1998:6):

It is hard to judge the line between critical and cynical, because sometimes people may just cross the line and become cynical and sarcastic instead of looking at things critically. Also it is 'safer' to do it critically in the aspect of academic research since it does not harm to anyone or yourself. It may also hurt people around you if you are critical all the time. (Chinese student).

So they utilise their developing Western-style critical thinking skills to evaluate, and in part reject, Western critique as being unattractive in light of their own cultural values:

According to my own experience, the Western teachers give students uncertainty. Non-Western teachers usually give you everything explicitly, directly. Personally speaking I prefer the Chinese teachers' way. Maybe all Chinese students prefer the Chinese teachers' way. (Chinese student)

However, they do appreciate some aspects of this type of critical thinking, and strive to combine the best elements of this approach with their own traditional values. What they appear to be rejecting is the confrontational, battlefield approach, which is doubt orientated, and which emphasises an aggressive search for truth. Instead, they favour the more empathetic, 'constructive' thinking advocated by Thayer-Bacon (1993), and the conciliatory reasoning which values maintenance of relationship above the need to push forward one's own opinion on others (Orr 1989).

The Middle Way also synergises the U.K.'s stress on low context explicitness with East Asia's preference for high-context inference, resulting in what I am terming 'sensitive explicitness' (see Figure 1). This kind of sensitivity towards others' feelings and 'face', merges with a search for truth in the Middle Way, so that one can be true to oneself and honest, without being offensive. This would also mean a moving away from having to always infer, or guess at what people are really thinking which, as one Chinese student admitted, can "be very tiring and difficult".

Moving across from the East Asian traditional mindset to this Middle Way may well involve a change in self identity (Hird 1999). Western-style public disagreement, for instance, assumes a separation of a person's ideas from the person themselves, knowledge from the knower. Siegel (1988:41) argues that strong critical thinkers are 'capable of distinguishing between having faulty beliefs and having a faulty character', and are able therefore to be 'emotionally secure' in their response to personal academic criticism. By this is meant that Western debate assumes that another's view can be refuted and critiqued without involving psychological and emotional implications. Critical thinking is seen as detached, impersonal and transcending social interactions. This, however, is a very 'masculine' and individualistic perspective towards enquiry. The West tends not to view academic enquiry as a social activity but instead elevates isolation, separateness from others and individualistic speculation 'at the expense of the collective wisdom of the community' (Hird 1999:39).

In contrast to this, an inter-dependent relationship is developed between speaker and listener in collectivist cultures, and the reactions of each party are closely monitored by the other. In oral debates East Asian student will tend to empathize with the other participants; to reject or challenge ideas is to risk a personal insult to the originators of these ideas. The notion of adopting an identity of individualism is 'quite foreign to his/her notion of a collective, relational sense of self-identity, and involves a reversal of acceptance, 'face' and politeness behaviour' (Hird 1999:33). As Doi writes, students from collectivist cultures tend to demonstrate 'a reluctance to carry rationalism to the point where it will make the individual too aware of his separateness in relation to people and things about him' (1981:9):

At the beginning I was very brave to give my opinion, but later I thought it was not that good to be so prominent in the class. Other students felt unhappy and they don't want

people so outstanding in the class. Some people will stare at me, black-mouth me afterwards, to say I'm ambitious or something. It makes me quite unhappy. So when I realised, I reserved my opinion.

(Chinese student)

Traditional mentality of the Chinese is to be safe and to be stable. To conform. They don't want to take risks. They want to be safe or take the middle way. They don't go to extremes. (Chinese lecturer).

Similarly, Matsumoto also writing of his own culture, thinks that the Japanese tend to demonstrate 'an unwillingness to be cast into a world of objective reality' if that world isolates them from the collective consensus and mind (1988:407).

Future research may show that some East Asian masters students in the U.K. do proceed to 'Full Acculturation', but in this research none were found to do so. Even as full acculturation was incomplete, so full deculturation did not occur with these students. By the end of the course many of them had rejected aspects of Western style debate, and they had no desire to leave aside their encultured ways so as to fully embrace the new mindset. Another possible reason for not moving towards acculturation is that it involves great risk and the students might have drawn back believing that, pragmatically, there was no long-term purpose in pursuing it. They may have made the conscious decision that, as they were only transient and would be returning home to fit back into their own culture, it would be a futile, and even detrimental exercise. They may, on the other hand, have recognised that they did not have the time in one year to fully adapt, and that further experimentation would not further their main goal of achieving the degree award. As stressed throughout this research, individuals within a culture differ, and different students are motivated by different reasons for their choices.

However, the findings indicate that many choose the Middle Way as a means of retaining those elements of the new mindset which they accept, and believe can be accommodated with relative ease within their traditional cultural boundaries, and which pose less risk and uncertainty on return home. Traditional basic values, such as maintaining harmony are apparently retained, basically in tact, and are not deconstructed at all. Synthesized into them, however, are aspects of the Western mindset which expand or complement these values. For many students, it would appear that the adaptations can be detached, if and when necessary, and do not constitute an inward transformation of self-perception and identity:

I am not sure if this kind of critical thinking will fade away or not after I go back home. But if I don't do any academic research like this in the future, or apply this kind of thinking to other general things, I think it will fade gradually. After all, it's just like you don't use it, and it's gone, because since it can be 'developed', I think it can be 'undeveloped' as well. (Chinese student) .

Other students may wish to go further in the adaptation process, but in this research only one student consciously rejected some aspects of his culture in favour of the new, and his case was unusual in that he had previously spent eighteen months in Australia, completing a first masters course. The majority seemed to reach a point in the adaptation journey when they decided 'thus

far and no further'. The extent of adaptation depends on many factors: how far students are willing and able to engage in reflexivity; their attitude to the host culture and their social mixing with host nationals; their competence in the host language; and the amount of support they receive from lecturers and fellow students. Unlike previous cultural adaptation models (White 1976, Kim 2002, Van Oudenhoven & Eisses 1988), there is no inevitability about the tendency towards acculturation. Students act autonomously and exercise their individual right to terminate the process when they feel they have gained what they personally want from it.

Is this Middle Way then, as Tannen (1998) and Thayer-Bacon (1993) suggest, a more creative and caring, more ennobling and humane way of managing opposition and disagreement, and in the search for 'truth'? Or does it go too far in attempting to avoid conflict and in emphasising harmony and conciliatory dialogue, for Western educational goals? Tannen (1998:12) argues that truth is often 'a crystal of many sides', a complex overlapping of different perspectives, all of which are legitimate and are to be respected. The reforming founders of Western democracy, on the other hand, claimed that there are absolutes to the truth and that it cannot, and should not, accommodate all perspectives. If indecisive and unacceptable compromise is to be avoided, they argue, then conflict and polarisation of views is inevitable. The question arises, then, as to whether this Middle Way approach can work in practice and whether it could have a place in Western higher education. Is it possible, appropriate, or even desirable for universities in the West to adopt such a constructivist approach to critical thinking and debate?

The evidence from this research suggests that lecturers in the West could also develop their own 'Middle Way' which does not lose the rigorous 'quest for truth', even if it results in polarized viewpoints, and even offence to some. This new 'Middle Way' could, however, also integrate the caring, more holistic and empathetic emphasis of East Asian cultures. This would soften the masculine, linear logic of the Socratic dialectic tradition, and bring more conciliatory reasoning into the often cynical scepticism of post modernist thinking in the West. This need not lead to what I call 'agnostic empathy' (see figure 1), however, where no firm convictions or convincing evidence underpin and drive an argument, and where direct challenge is avoided. This 'Middle Way' for lecturers would therefore be a merging of the best of both conciliatory dialogue and 'wrestling' debate, whilst leaning more on the heritage of the West - even as the 'Middle Way' of East Asian students' leans more towards East Asian traditions and belief systems. In this way, U.K. lecturers and East Asian students could move closer together in their expectations and thinking, without either group abnegating their unique cultural identities and beliefs.

As more U.K. lecturers enter into dialogue with each other, and with their students, regarding these issues, a way may be brokered for university educators to develop a new 'Middle Way' which need not result in reducing the rigour of academic critical thinking, but rather, one could argue, enhance it by making it more humane and holistic. Perhaps, however, some intellectual humility is required for this kind of mindshift, and this in itself requires a willingness to begin a journey of ongoing learning.

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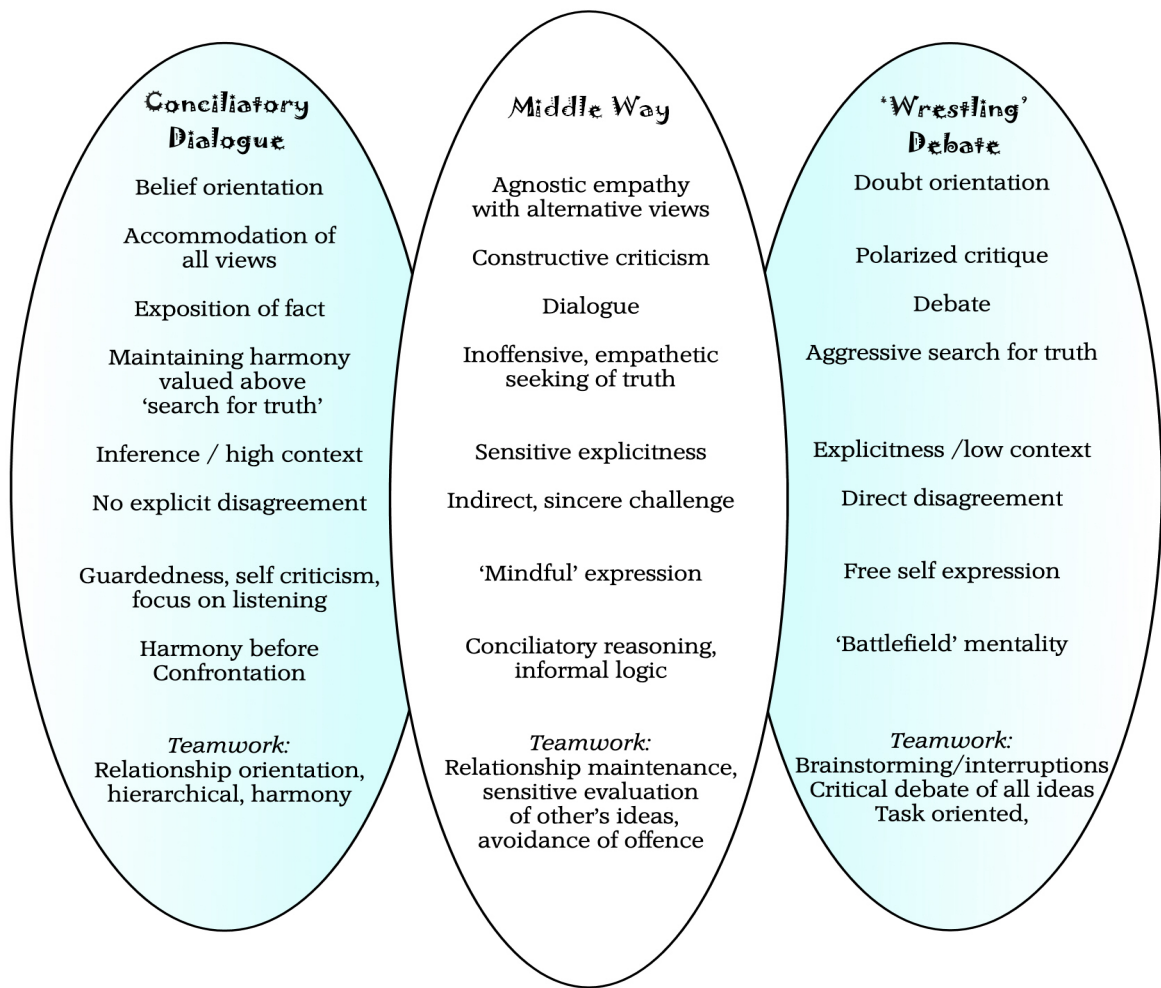


Figure 1

Figure 1 : The Middle Way