



The Teaching-Research Nexus

A guide for academics and policy-makers
in higher education

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Examples from Australian universities

Research into Cultural Influences on Learning Styles

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Broad discipline area:

Education

- Applied Linguistics: Second Language Teacher Education

Year level:

- Postgraduate

TRN strategy:

- Teaching-informed research
- Conducting and drawing on research into student learning to make evidence-based decisions about teaching

NOTE: This is a good example of pedagogic research that is also discipline-based research in the field of Education.

Teaching and learning context:

- Small group teaching
- Intensive course delivery mode
- Course evaluation

Brief description of the initiative:

The increasingly multicultural make-up of student groups prompted this academic to conduct research on student learning to investigate the possible influence that cultural background has on learning strategies. To study this, the lecturer conducted the same interactive intensive course (6 hours a day over 4 days) with small groups of postgraduate English language and linguistics students at two international universities. One group of 14 students was based in a Central European country (the Western group). The other group of six students (the Eastern group) was based in a South-East European country.

The six-hour day began with an interactive lecture introducing new concepts, terminology, and theory. This was followed by a workshop designed to apply the theory to texts and to develop a deeper understanding of the new material. There were two assessment items:

- Interactive student-designed and led workshops, worth 30% of the overall mark: Students chose their topics, which were linked to the lecture topics, before the course commenced and undertook extensive reading and research prior to their presentations. Workshops further developed students' understanding of new concepts through discussion and shared application of concepts to concrete examples.
- Analytical essay, worth 70% of the overall mark due two months after completion of the face-to-face delivery.

The data sources for this academic's research were:

- ongoing formative student feedback during the intensive program
- a daily reflective diary
- data collected through an end of course questionnaire requesting student perceptions regarding:
 - course design, materials, delivery and attitudes towards intensive courses;
 - students' learning preferences;
 - students' opinions about cultural differences in learning

The results revealed that:

- interactive lectures, assessments, student-led workshops and the intensive course delivery mode were new experiences for both groups;
- it was the first time that the Eastern group had undertaken course evaluation;
- there were no significant differences between groups in attitudes towards the course design, materials, and delivery style;
- students in both groups showed characteristics of both individualistic and collectivist learning styles, suggesting that the subdivision into collectivist versus individualist societies is problematic;
- the Eastern group had a more traditional view of knowledge and education than the Western group;
- due to the extensive use of technology in education, the students' learning experiences were globalised. They read the same literature, referred to the same sources and consequently their knowledge was shaped by the same ideas;
- the geographic location in which the students gained their early education appeared to have had a stronger influence on their learning strategies than their ethnic background or other individual components of their personality.

The findings of the research impacted on the researcher's understanding of how geographic origin and early educational experiences affect learning. She decided to increase her efforts in collecting as much data as possible about her students, their culture and their educational experiences. These holistic student profiles will assist her in optimally meeting her international students' needs. The intensive use of technology in organising the program and her experiences with the delivery prompted the researcher to develop more extensive lecture notes and web materials. These materials will further improve her long distance students' learning experience and the quality of her off-shore course delivery.

Reference:

Dobrenov-Major, M. (6-7 July 2006). *Same pedagogic approach, two different cultural contexts: Student perceptions*. Paper presented at the 4th Annual International Conference on Cognition, Language and Special Education Research. Peabody College of Education and Human Development, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, TN.

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