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Developing and Enhancing Creativity: A Case Study of the Special Challenges of Teaching Writing in Hong Kong

Abstract
The internationalisation of higher education and, especially, the provision of off-shore teaching and learning activities, come with a range of special challenges and opportunities for both teachers and students. This paper explores a number of the issues involved in teaching writing in English in Hong Kong, by utilising a case study of how one Australian teaching team handled the dual challenge of both embedding student-centred learning activities in a series of intensive writing classes and realising an aim of enhancing students' creativity and creative thinking. As such teaching and learning practice contradicts widely held stereotypes about Chinese language students' lack of creativity and preferred learning styles, this case study offers food for thought for all those engaged in providing learning opportunities for such students. [note 1]

Introduction

The internationalisation of higher education and, especially, the provision of off-shore teaching and learning activities, comes with a range of special challenges and opportunities for both teachers and students. This paper explores a number of the issues involved in teaching writing in English in Hong Kong, by utilising a case study of how one Australian teaching team handled the dual challenge of both embedding student-centred learning activities in a series of intensive writing classes and realising an aim of enhancing students' creativity and creative thinking. The motivation for attempting to meet these challenges lay in my deep belief in both student-centred learning and the importance of enhancing creativity to optimise students' future opportunities. Moreover, as such teaching and learning practice contradicts widely held stereotypes about Chinese language students' lack of creativity and preferred learning styles,[note 2] this case study offers food for thought for all those engaged in providing learning opportunities for such students.

Background

During the past decade, the higher education system in both Hong Kong and China has been in a period of considerable expansion, with a doubled number of bachelor degrees granted and almost as large an increase in the number of postgraduate degrees conferred (Bishop 2005: 5). With an increased, and increasing, number of government, private and overseas education suppliers providing input into the system, traditional systems of teaching and designing curricula are changing, but higher (as other) education is still for the most part highly structured, formalised, didactic and teacher-centred. The conventional lecture remains the most usual form of content delivery. Students can progress through their primary, secondary and tertiary education engaging in much rote learning in their classes and completing many hours of (memorisation) study and unassessed homework outside of the classroom (see, for instance, Chan 1999). Content-based examinations are still the usual mode of assessment, with the single 100% competitive exam at the end of a unit or course of study the norm.

In February 2005 I co-taught a unit developed at the University of New England (UNE), Australia, to students in Hong Kong. The unit, *Writing for Work: Styles and Contexts*,[note 3] is compulsory in the BA (Communication and Management) (UNE) degree co-delivered with the School of Continuing and Professional Education (SCOPE) at the City University of Hong Kong in Kowloon, Hong Kong and is taught in English. Since 1991 SCOPE has offered degree, diploma, certificate and professional programs in collaboration with local and overseas partners in discipline areas that include: accounting; architecture, building and construction; banking and finance; business administration and management; computing and the Internet; counselling, education and psychology; engineering; floral design, calligraphy and music; hospitality management and food hygiene; language and communication; and law (SCOPE 2005). Members of our School (English, Communication and Theatre) as well as other sections of UNE have been working in collaboration with SCOPE since 1999, at which time we partnered with this organisation in providing a Bachelor of Arts (Honours) in Professional Communication to students in Hong Kong.

The focus of *Writing for Work: Styles and Contexts* is both scholarly and vocational. It seeks to provide a detailed theoretical underpinning about, and a series of practical opportunities to gain skills in, forms of writing that students are likely to use (and need) in both the workplace and their lives outside work. These forms can be broadly classified as organisational writing (in this case, writing reports, discussion papers and book proposals) and arts-based media writing (using the example of review writing), with a feature of the unit its exploration of the commonalities shared by these seemingly disparate forms. The unit asks students to consider how, and why, writers choose various styles, registers and modes of address to suit each new task of writing. This combination of analytical and practical approaches aims to give students the knowledge and confidence to branch out into various forms of writing practice (including those not included in the unit) with a broad understanding of how form, content and context are related. Versions of this unit are offered to internal students who work on campus in Armidale (Australia) and external students, as well as in Hong Kong.

This unit is taught in Hong Kong, as are the other UNE units in this degree, by Armidale-based UNE staff who travel to Hong Kong to deliver an intensive lecture block, and then by local tutors who meet with students weekly throughout the semester. The lecture content is delivered over a three-day session: in this case, a Friday afternoon and evening, and then all day on the following Saturday and Sunday. After this, students work through a series of UNE-designed tutorials with their tutors. All discussions, teaching and writing

are in English. Most of the students are in full-time employment, and this timetable attempts to dovetail with their other commitments. Although counted as internal students for UNE auditing purposes, this type of delivery is becoming increasingly common within our School and our university, which has similar arrangements with other educational providers in Australia and internationally.

Readying the unit for Hong Kong

In preparation for delivery of the unit in Hong Kong, I was asked to assist in redeveloping the unit (which had, at that time, only been offered to internal and external students from Armidale) for off-shore delivery. This redevelopment was three-fold. The first obvious task was to remove or rewrite content that required a familiarity with material that these students would be unlikely to possess (such as current popular Australian books, television programs or films), or that was too Australian-specific to be useful for Hong Kong students in their future careers (such as Australian policy or legislation, or the workings of particular sectors of Australian cultural and other industries). The second task was to locate and substitute local and relevant Hong Kong examples for Australian-specific ones whenever possible, and the third to check that the framing aims, objectives and claims of the unit worked the local Hong Kong context as far as we could determine it. Toohey has written that the important factors of 'conceptual change', 'development of intellectual abilities', 'skilled performance' and 'development of dispositions' (Toohey 1999: 118) must be taken into account when developing such units. By liaising with other staff who had taught into this program, we attempted to build a consideration of these academically and vocationally relevant factors into both the lecture program we were planning and the tutorial guide we were preparing for the tutors to utilise with the students.

As this was my first experience of teaching outside Australia, I was stimulated by the challenge of teaching unfamiliar students in an unfamiliar environment and, during this development period, attempted to learn as much as I could about the special issues involved in teaching in Hong Kong. I added to my own general reading about Hong Kong history, and my pre-existing knowledge from a brief visit some six years before, by meeting with a number of academics then teaching (or who had taught) into this off-shore program. I also attended our Teaching and Learning Centre's regular seminar on teaching internationally, and located peer-reviewed and other publications about Chinese language and Hong Kong students studying in English. This research had the final aim of attempting to identify the needs and expectations of these students, and their probable learning styles and preferences.

The importance of enhancing creativity

While the aim was, of course, for these students to engage with and learn from the unit as an integral part of their course of study, as a teacher of writing one of my main motivations was to develop and foster these students' creativity. Many writers on creativity, including Dacey and Lennon (1998), argue that as the world changes from being based on knowledge to information processing, creativity is crucial to our survival as a species (Root-Bernstein and Root-Bernstein 1999: 29). In terms of potential applications after graduation, creativity is a valuable asset as, world-wide, employers are increasingly listing creativity among the most important attributes they seek in potential employees. Moreover, since the late 1990s, the creative industries sector (the knowledge-intensive 'arts' industries that rely on creativity and talent as core

attributes) has been recognised as sustaining the growth momentum of advanced economies (Bott 2004, Caves 2002, Florida 2002 and 2005, Landry 2000).

In a 2003 Policy Address, Chief Executive Mr Tung Chee Hwa stated that Hong Kong's SAR government would engage in 'actively promoting creative industries' (HKGCC 2003), with these creative industries, as defined by the government, including such major sectors of the economy as advertising, writing and publishing, architecture, the performing arts, film and television, art and antique markets, music, digital entertainment, computer software development, animation production, and fashion and product design (CEPA 2005). A Hong Kong Trade Development Council (HKTDC) report of September 2002 estimated that at that time the creative industries accounted for some 3.7% of Hong Kong's total employment (90,000 jobs), 3.1% of services exports and 2% of GDP (some HK$25 billion). Although Hong Kong's creative industries are smaller in relation to the overall economy than in Australia, New Zealand and the UK, Hong Kong is widely regarded as an Asian creative centre with worldwide recognition of the Hong Kong film industry and Hong Kong's architecture, design and advertising businesses (HKTDC 2002). In terms of employment in Hong Kong for students from writing and/or communication courses, publishing (alongside IT and advertising) are the most obvious and closely related creative industries, with Hong Kong an established regional centre for publishing supported by a highly developed and internationally-recognised printing industry.

Content redevelopment

In terms of content redevelopment, I concentrated on the 'arts and media reviewing' section. In this, my framing motivation was - as Kelen has identified is especially essential when teaching writing to non-native speakers, but which is important for all writing students (Kelen 2003) - to make the work students were being asked to produce commensurate with what they were being asked to consume and critique. I believe an ability to write reviews is of significant future practical use for writing students, even if they are not going to pursue careers as literary or cultural critics, as this skill has many applications in a broad range of professional careers. The mass of textual and other documentation generated in this information age requires those in a variety of workplaces to process and review this material regularly, and craft written responses to report on the findings of these examinations. The overarching rationale of this section of the unit was, therefore, to ask students to take both a scholarly and a practical/professional approach to reviewing, not only in order to ensure that what they were learning was a viable part of a university degree, but to give this learning a real place in their developing portfolio of useful English writing skills.

I also wanted students to complete the unit with a thorough understanding of reviewing in an international and a Hong Kong context, as writing, publishing and reading increasingly happen in a global marketplace. An ability to articulate what reviews are, comprehend the important work reviews and reviewers do, identify where (and how) reviews are published and the factors affecting their reception by various audiences would, I hoped, not only feed into students' abilities to write their own reviews (of both work-related and cultural materials) but also assist them in exploring the potential venues available to them to publish these reviews. In this, I understood students' review writing to be a creative task, in preparation for which they would use a mixture of formal, analytical and critical study of reviews and the contexts in which they are produced, as well as practice in drafting, writing and editing.

In terms of planning the intensive teaching weekend, I knew it was essential to include a series of creative thinking and other activities that the students would complete during the 'lecture' sessions. These decisions were motivated by a recognition that no one, no matter how willing, could sit through - and more importantly, actively learn anything significant or meaningful from - three long days of passively listening to material delivered in the conventional lecture format. Few contemporary students, after all, sit completely enthralled throughout the entirety of a single hour-long lecture. Apart from the tendency of such conventional lecture formats to promote surface learning (Marton, Hounsell and Entwistle 1984), Ramsden details how such lectures are framed by a teacher-centric view of the learning experience, whereby the transmission of information by the teacher supposedly (and erroneously) equals knowledge learned by the students (Ramsden 2003: 147). With these criticisms of the conventional lecture in mind, one of the main tasks of content reconfiguration was to work out how to deliver the necessary content over the three-day period in a way that also involved the students in a series of student-centred active learning activities. It was the same problem as how to make a one- or two-hour lecture period come to life, but intensified.

The solution seemed to be to outline, illustrate and reiterate key content concepts, as in the conventional lecture, but to situate this lecturing as just one activity within an active learning environment that would involve students in coming to understand this material by working through a range of activities during this time. These student activities were diverse, but could be grouped as following: working on oral, written and other problem solving exercises alone, in pairs or in small groups, and presenting the results to the whole group; compiling and completing quizzes and tests; participating in role playing exercises, guided writing exercises and mini writing workshops; designing and completing research tasks and interviews and reporting the findings to the class; and similar activities. Together with these student-centred activities, the lectures would utilise powerpoint presentations and discrete slides, an overhead projector, live internet connection and print handouts to outline, illustrate and reiterate the key content concepts. This mixture, it was hoped, would keep everyone awake, stimulated, thinking, interacting and - most importantly - learning.

Within this frame, the lecture timetable was recast into a series of brief content 'outlining' sessions that would be supported by the range of student activities outlined above. A series of break-out rooms adjacent to the stepped lecture theatre was also booked to provide quieter spaces for activities such as role play, as well as stimulating students physically by requiring them to move from one location to another. The varied spatial arrangements, lighting, furnishings, acoustics and décor of these flat tutorial rooms could also provide further stimulation for students expected to spend eight-hour days in a single lecture theatre. While I am aware of research about the contribution learning spaces and their design and decoration can make to learning (see for example, Jamieson et al 2000), there was only a limited choice of rooms available and these were booked sight unseen. That said, these rooms were quiet, comfortable, clean and relatively attractive and (apart from the tiered lecture theatre) each afforded some flexibility in how the furniture could be arranged and rearranged.

As indicated above, during this planning and redevelopment stage a significant amount of time was spent thinking through how what we wanted students to learn could be addressed and/or reinforced by a series of student-centred activities. This involved not only envisaging how these activities would work (as well as how they might not), but also in planning how these activities would fit into both the three-day timetable with its set meal and other comfort breaks

and the tutorial program which would follow this weekend. By the time this preparation was completed, it was obvious that more activities had been designed than were necessary for the students to learn or practice what was required. There were also more activities than the students would realistically have time to complete. This planned redundancy was, however, important in order to have a degree of flexibility in both the choice of activities and the time spent on each one. Such flexibility could take into account which activities engaged the students' imagination most productively, and which did not. As all this thinking was, moreover, before-the-fact of the actual teaching and learning experience, much of it was also completed along strategic lines of contingency. If there was time, for instance, this line of thinking suggested, exercise 'A' could be attempted before the dinner break, or otherwise that task could be set as a small group discussion to be completed during that break. Exercise 'B' would definitely be completed and probably take a set amount of time, but if it fell flat or was completed more quickly than planned, students could also move on to complete the extending exercise 'C'. If both 'B' and 'C' were successful (with the outcome that certain content and skills were definitely being understood and explored), then this learning could be extended to include the material from activity 'X' and/or 'Y' from the next day's program, and so on. The three days were broken into eight sessions, with a strategy in mind that a running assessment would be made in terms of unit content between each session, and ongoing adjustments made to activity scheduling and timing as the weekend progressed.

The problem

Only a delivery strategy with this degree of flexibility satisfied my conviction that a high level of student participation was completely integral to quality learning during this three-day intensive program. At the same time, however, more and more advice was being given to me that the students would not welcome this approach. My research reading also supported this pessimistic view. A number of UNE colleagues, for instance, described our Hong Kong students to me as very 'formal'. The general consensus was that these students came to these classes direct from fairly high-powered professional positions and wanted the material delivered in an efficient and 'no-nonsense' manner. 'These are, remember, *Chinese* students', a colleague told me. This remark inferred many of the stereotypes about learning in the literature on Chinese language students - that these students would prefer a conventional hierarchical teacher-oriented approach, and would defer to perceived leaders during group work. Chan outlines how rote memorisation in Chinese classrooms is, and has been, not only common but has been 'at the expense of creativity' (1999: 298) and also notes that students' 'passive and compliant' (1999: 302) behaviours and a preference 'not to express their opinions in public' (1999: 301) means that 'participative approaches … may cause a problem for Chinese learners' (1999: 298). While there are also studies that contradict this view (including Kember and Gow 1991; Biggs 1994 and 1996) the overwhelming impression gained from this research was that Chinese language speaking students not only expected, but preferred, to learn by rote memorising of materials which would then be tested in fact-based examinations. I also read that the Chinese government was not only conducting research into levels of creativity among its students (Li et al 1997), but actively creating education policy to legislate for the teaching of creativity, as this was so sorely lacking in Chinese curriculum and students (Pierik 2003). In a survey of 11,800 students, the China University of Politics and Law's China Youth Creativity Research Centre found that while students had more knowledge about creativity, they still stuck to rigorous thinking methods for problem solving - what Zeng calls the 'old mentality in thinking' (Zeng 2001: 2).

As this dual process of reconfiguring unit materials and teaching plan and background reading progressed, I became extremely concerned about how the students in Hong Kong would react to these activities, many of which were versions of creativity exercises or, at very least, required imagination and creativity and a certain level of personal involvement, reflection and/or revelation to complete. Everyone I spoke to about this had an opinion that largely seemed to reflect the research cited above. I was reminded that it was costing these full-fee paying students a significant amount of money to complete these degrees (with an inference not to waste their time) and that there were a great many family and self-expectations of their performance. I was also advised to remember that these students were working in a second language, that they would be shy and would not speak up in class and, most importantly, that they would probably not participate in the types of activities planned. The most forthright said that the students would be embarrassed. I could imagine the evaluations: why had UNE not sent a *real* lecturer to Hong Kong to teach this class?

This trepidation was reinforced when, only hours before the first session in Kowloon, I met the locally-based tutors. A tutors' guide had, as requested, been prepared. This contained the readings for each week, key focus questions for discussion and a series of activities that the class could select from to complete each week in class and for homework. These activities followed from, and extended those, in the intensive sessions, and involved students in such activities as outlined above. 'Oh,' said one of the tutors, 'these [activities] won't work. Hong Kong students are just not creative, you see.' Warming to the subject, this tutor continued to reinforce the opinions voiced by my Australian colleagues above: that the students just wanted to be given the necessary information to complete their assignments successfully, and nothing but that content. Moreover, they wanted it delivered to them as quickly and efficiently as possible, and would not attempt anything in or out of class that was not assessed.

This was so perturbing that I planned to run the first session as proposed and then, if the approach failed, completely reconsider the remaining sessions. There was another level of anxiety operational in this concern. As outlined above, this unit conceptualises various forms of writing in terms of the key variables of communication. But the overarching rationale of the unit is based on the premise that students are interested in harnessing their own creativity and a universe of interests and knowledge to a range of writing contexts that they could, and would, make work for them professionally and personally. As I walked into the room for the first class, the students smiled. I smiled back, but the tutor's words rang in my ears: 'They just won't do it - any of it.' As I began to introduce myself a number of thoughts ran through my mind: how much was this course costing the students? Could I be sued for inadequate performance? Would I be held personally responsible for the collapse of this prestigious international collaboration?

The outcome

Contrary to these concerns, the three days were stimulating, exhilarating and, in terms of student learning (and in retrospect, in terms of feedback and student progress), a success. The students were not only relatively relaxed and informal from the very beginning, but they were also willing to participate in a wide range of creative thinking and practice activities in and out of class. The students embraced the great majority of the activities (both those required and the suggested) with gusto, intelligence and high levels of creativity. They, indeed, largely performed these tasks more assiduously than some of my

internal, domestic students, of whom there is always a small proportion who will resist whatever is proposed and take the opportunity to chat to their work partner, SMS a friend or visit the nearest vending machines rather than engage with the activity in question.

SCOPE staff advised the class attendance over the weekend was significantly higher than usual. Attendance is monitored and compulsory, but not one student signed on and then left, as we had been advised would sometimes occur. While five students did not turn up for any of the sessions, of the other 65 more than two-thirds attended the entire time of all the sessions, and an overwhelming majority of the other 20 students only missed a single session, with most of these absences due to unavoidable work or family commitments. The informal feedback received during and immediately after the weekend suggested that these students had enjoyed the three days. Formal evaluations and surveys echoed this anecdotally collected information. Moreover, student work submitted for assessment was of a generally high standard and showed a high level of engagement with the unit content, proving that significant learning had occurred during the course of the unit.

Sixty students replied to a survey I circulated following the unit's completion. [note 4] Fifty-six students (93%) reported that they enjoyed this unit, while four (7%) did not. Reasons for enjoying the unit included: fourteen (23%) help with assignments, with four (7%) specifically mentioning the opportunity to participate in guided writing exercises in class, seven (12%) practicing speaking English in class, and one student noting that the assignments were 'easy' because of the work completed in class. Twelve (20%) mentioned class work (rather than assignments or work for assessment) and nine (15%) working in pairs and groups in and out of class. Sixteen (27%) of students cited the intensive block as a reason for enjoying the unit, adding specific detail that they liked such as the varied class activities (three students), the 'slow' pace of the weekend - 'I could always follow what was being taught' (two), the 'friendly', 'helpful' and 'kind' lecturers (five), that questions were not asked directly of individuals (two), and the 'clear English speaking and explanation of lecturers' (one). One student specifically mentioned 'the variety of readings, some were really fun to read'. The four students who reported they did not enjoy the unit cited the following reasons - which also regularly occur on internal and external student surveys: 'too much work' (two), 'too much reading' (two), 'too much writing' (two), 'assignments too difficult' (one), and 'the timing of classes did not fit in with my work schedule' (one).

In terms of the enhanced creativity that was one of my overarching aims, the survey asked students, 'Do you think it is important to become more creative?' Fifty-one (85%) of the students agreed with this proposition, citing the following reasons: thirty-eight (63%) to help me get a 'better', 'more rewarding', 'interesting' and/or 'enjoyable' job; twenty (33%) to enhance performance in their current job; eleven (18%) to enhance their achievement in educational terms; twenty-three (38%) to make their lives 'better', 'more interesting', 'more enjoyable' and 'not boring'; five (8%) to improve society in some way; and five (8%) to assist or help others. I also asked if, in his or her opinion, the student considered him- or herself 'a creative person'. Less than half of the respondents (twenty-seven, or 45%) answered 'yes' to this question. The responses to this question were particularly interesting in that although there was no 'Why or why not?' query after this question, a number of students did, nevertheless, supply this information. These extra responses included: 'I was not born creative', 'I have never been creative', 'My family is not creative - all accountants' and 'I am too logical and analytical to be really creative'. There were six responses on the theme of being too busy to be creative such as 'I do not have the time to develop my creativity'. On this theme of developing

inherent or existing levels of creativity, one student wrote: 'I would like to be more creative, but do not know where to start'. Three students added the information that developing or otherwise enhancing their creativity was one of the reasons they had enrolled in this course or unit.

Conclusion

Given the teaching and learning environment with which many of these Hong Kong students were familiar - highly structured, formalised, didactic and teacher-centred - it was likely that they may have felt uncomfortable with the high level of student centred and creative activity, including group work, that this unit demanded. On the contrary, these students not only embraced these activities, but also clearly articulated that they wanted to enhance what they understood as their creative abilities. Moreover, these students understood this enhancement as being useful for them in vocational, academic, community and personal contexts - appreciating also that, while the creative industries provide a range of future opportunities for graduates both in and outside Hong Kong, the increasingly global nature of the creative industries also offers many opportunities for bilingual graduates. In-class discussions, indeed, revealed that some 10% of these students were already working (paid or unpaid) in the creative industries sector, with a far greater number expressing interest in working in the creative industries, including in arts administration and education in this area. Yet even in courses and units designed by Western universities, widely-held beliefs about Chinese language students' lack of creativity and preferred learning styles, together with the way many teachers have been advised to structure their classes and delivery strategies for these students, would seem to be actively working against optimising such future opportunities for these students.

These students' willing embrace of what I knew, despite all the seeming 'evidence' of what was a valid approach to teaching, also taught me a valuable lesson. While reinforcing that detailed and considered preparation for teaching overseas (as for all teaching) is, of course, a completely necessary part of being a responsible educator, I also learnt that teachers need to trust both their instincts and experience. As was said to me when presenting some of material outlined above in a forum for teachers readying themselves for international teaching: 'Good teaching is, just that, good teaching'. And, I would add, if it is good teaching, it may just work in a myriad of varied contexts.

Notes

[1] Parts of this article were presented as papers in the University of New England's Teaching and Learning Centre's Internationalising the Curriculum seminars: 'Teaching international students in Hong Kong', May 2005 and 'International Students and the Issue of Creativity: Unexpected Findings', October 2005. An earlier version of this article appeared in *Writing Macao*, 4. Thanks to Christopher Kelen and that publication's referees (as, always, those of *TEXT*) for editorial input and support. return to text

[2] Sharpling warns that the common way of referring to groups of such learners as 'Chinese students' undermines self-esteem and discourages initiative in these learners (Sharpling 2004: 78). This is ironic as often those speaking in this way are the very staff actively involved in trying to encourage these students' self-esteem and initiative. In this article, I could not find another more suitable term than 'Hong Kong students' to refer to the cohort I was teaching. I do, however, recognise that these terms, 'Chinese students' and 'Hong Kong students', do need nuancing. Students from the People's Republic of China (PRC), Taiwan and Hong Kong can all fall under these rubrics, and although I have no data on the exact composition of the classes I have taught, anecdotal evidence and personal experience suggests there is currently an

increasing number of students from the PRC and Taiwan enrolling in classes in Hong Kong. While my background research focussed on whatever I could find about all these groups, this paper concentrates on students studying in Hong Kong. I would like to acknowledge here the assistance of both *TEXT* referees for this article (who remain, necessarily, anonymous) for their useful comments on this complex matter. return to text

[3] The unit, *Writing for Work: Styles and Contexts*, was initially developed at UNE by Associate Professors Dugald Williamson and Russell McDougall as a key component of a professionally focused suite of writing units. I have also, since the experience recounted in this paper, retaught this unit in Hong Kong in 2006. return to text

[4] As students could tick more than one reason, the results from this survey often add up to more than 100%. return to text

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