TITLE OF PROJECT:

Examining cultures of learning and their perceived impact on the learning of culturally diverse students in a graduate course in Education

PROJECT PARTICIPANTS

Principal applicant
  Name: Roumi Ilieva
  Position at SFU: associate professor
  Faculty: Education
  Department/School: 
  Phone: 778-782-4570
  Email: rilieva@sfu.ca

Collaborator(s)
  Name: Neha Arora
  Position at SFU: graduate student
  Department & faculty: Faculty of Education
  Role in project: research assistant
PART I – PROJECT FINDINGS

Introduction

In today’s world of transnational mobility within educational settings there have been recent calls to take into account “cultures of learning” when addressing the internationalization of higher education (Jin & Cortazzi, 2017). It has been suggested that gaining awareness of how cultural frameworks guide expectations and interpretations of teaching and learning environments, as well as classroom communication practices, reflects the need “to learn about, from, and with each other’s cultures of learning” (ibid., p. 241) in order to enhance learning opportunities in today’s globalized university settings.

I regularly teach a seminar course in a graduate program designed primarily for international students who plan to teach English as an additional language in their home environments. While the majority of students typically come from China, sometimes students in the program arrive from quite diverse locations and, in my experiences and observations as an instructor, there have been situations when diverse students’ expectations about university classrooms and students’ and teachers’ responsibilities have led to misunderstandings among students about the collaborative activities and tasks that they commonly engage in in a Canadian graduate seminar and their roles in them. On such occasions I have wondered about the impact of differences in expectations around teaching and learning on students’ engagement with the course content. The project described here attempted to address this question.

Research context, focus, data collection and analysis

This study inquires into how cultural assumptions about classroom activities, teaching, and learning impact the expectations and participation of one cohort of TEAL-F graduate international students from a range of cultural backgrounds in their first academic course in the program. Prior to starting this course, students in the program are involved in a 5-week intensive orientation to the North American academic environment. The class consisted of 18 students, of whom 13 were from China, 2 from Iran, 1 from Bangladesh, 1 from Russia, and 1 from Taiwan.

With this study I have been particularly interested in how the cross-cultural interactions the students engage in as part of collaborative activities common in the seminar course I teach (also typical in Canadian classrooms) may be supporting or constraining their perceived learning of the course content. I am also interested in finding out to what students might attribute any potential changes in their classroom participation during the course, their expectations about optimal classroom environments, and their understandings of the concept of “cultures of learning” defined as “cultural beliefs and values about teaching and learning, expectations about classroom behavior and what constitutes ‘good’ work” (Cortazzi and Jin, 1997, p. 76).

To this end I embarked on a study, aided by a former student in this program, Neha Arora who acted as a research assistant, to address the following research questions:

What are students’ expectations of optimal classroom environments and are perceived “cultures of learning” impacting those?

How do classroom activities align with students’ expectations and what is their impact on class participation?
Are there changes in students’ assumptions about optimal classroom environments at the end of the course?

Have there been (positive or negative) changes in students’ participation in classroom activities and engagement with their classmates?

To what do students attribute any potential changes in their class participation, their expectations about optimal classroom environment, and their understandings of “cultures of learning”?

Data collection involved:
- an anonymous initial (pre-) survey (consisting of 20 Likert-scale questions, 1 “yes/no” question that asked students about their familiarity with the term “cultures of learning”, and 6 open-ended questions)
- audiotaped class discussion of anonymized pre-survey results
- classroom observations at the beginning, middle and end of the term
- final (post-) survey consisting of the same questions posed in the pre-survey
- focus group interviews at the end of the term with interested students

The survey questions and the focus group interview protocol are attached to this report.

The initial survey was sent to the participants in the form of an online questionnaire at the beginning of the term and its purpose was to examine students’ assumptions about classroom teaching and learning and their own participation in the course, and their understanding of the concept “cultures of learning”. The survey was followed by an open classroom discussion, with the aim to bring more clarity on the perceptions behind the survey responses. During the course of the term four classroom observations were conducted, two of which were for half a session. The observation data was meant to help us understand how students’ initial responses tie in with their actual practices as they engage in the classroom through whole class, small group, and pair work. The post survey was sent to the students towards the end of the term and was followed by focus group interviews after the term was completed. In all, 7 out of the 18 students participated in 2 focus group interviews and these interviews aimed to gain an understanding of changes the students perceived in their expectations and participation in the classroom and how or if “cultures of learning” were implicated in these changes.

The study reflects working within a qualitative interpretive paradigm and data was analyzed through descriptive analysis of the Likert-scale survey questions and the classroom observation fieldnotes, thematic coding of the responses to the open-ended questions in the pre/post surveys, as well as thematic coding of the transcribed classroom discussion and the transcribed focus group interviews.

Findings

The findings of the study will be reported in the order of the research questions posed in the previous section with questions 3 and 4 combined in the analysis, given that their focus is on changes that can be observed at the end of the term.

1. What are students’ expectations of optimal classroom environments and are perceived “cultures of learning” impacting those?

To respond to these questions this report will draw on the data collected in the pre-survey and the transcribed class discussion of selected anonymized survey results. Because of time constraints and for reasons of efficiency, not every single question that students responded to in the survey was
addressed in the classroom discussion. Rather, the topics in the discussion revolved around questions which presented somewhat contradictory answers (e.g. Q5 “I feel exhausted after doing peer or small group work” where 38.89% agreed with the statement, and Q7 “I learn better when I work with others” where 44% agreed with the statement) or questions to which a large number of students chose “neither agree or disagree” as their preferred answer (e.g. Q8 “It is easy to communicate with peers from the same cultural background as mine” where 33.33% chose this answer, and Q12 “It's easy to talk about course content with my peers from different cultural backgrounds than me” where 44.44% chose it). Additionally, somewhat contrasting answers to each of the open-ended questions in the survey were selected for the class discussion (e.g. Q22 “Learning in a graduate class involves…”: a) “students’ critical thinking” and b) “self-learning and absorbing from my professors and peers”. References to the data from the class discussion will be made further in this section.

All 18 students responded anonymously to the online survey in the last 20 minutes of the class in the 4th week of the term with the RA present to answer clarification questions on the survey if needed. The Likert-scale questions in the survey addressed topics on preferences about classroom activities (e.g. Q1 “I prefer to learn by listening to a lecture rather than participating in group activities”), beliefs about learning (e.g. Q3 “I remember things better if I discuss them with someone in class”), participation preferences (e.g. Q9 “I want to understand something well before I talk about it in class”) or perceptions about one’s class participation (e.g. Q16 “I add many original ideas during class discussions”). Given that 13 of the students in the cohort were from China, one could perhaps assume that there could be a lot of similarities in the survey responses of more than half of the respondents to a specific question. Yet, no particular trend was evident that would allow delineating responses on the basis of students’ cultural background or the presumed “culture of learning” that these students have been socialized in in their home country. Rather there were variations with some themes dominating across all students’ responses. For example, no student disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement in Q2 as seen in Figure 1 below, indicating that all students were somewhat reluctant to fully embrace the dynamic nature of a seminar classroom.

Figure 1

I prefer things presented in a step-by-step way in a classroom setting.

Answered: 18  Skipped: 0  First: 9/26/2018  Zoom: 1 pm 9/25/2018 to 12 pm 9/26/2018

![Graph showing survey responses](image-url)
At the same time, some statements that could be considered describing Canadian culturally expected behaviours in educational settings, seemed to reflect most students’ initial perceptions of their own classroom behaviour. For example, no one disagreed or strongly disagreed (and only 16.67% neither agreed or disagreed) with the statement in Q13, “I participate actively in a small group or peer interactions”. Such survey findings will be addressed more fully later in this report.

To understand students’ expectations around an optimal classroom environment more fully, the survey had six open ended questions that revolved around their perceptions about a good student, a good teacher, and a graduate class. With regards to who is “a good student” and “a good teacher”, as seen in Table 1, most students believed that good students are autonomous, and independent, and yet their responses about “a good teacher” show a strong dependence on instructors for guidance and right answers.

Table 1. Perspectives on a ‘good student’ and a ‘good teacher’ (pre-survey)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Good student</th>
<th>Good teacher</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>an active learner both in and after class.</td>
<td>give more guidance to help students find resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>be responsible for her/his studies - actively participate in classroom</td>
<td>to be patient, nice, knowledgeable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>discussions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>be autonomous, self-regulated, take the autonomy of learning, have the</td>
<td>explain unclear points of the readings - gives clear guidelines for the</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ability of self-learning, be independent in own learning</td>
<td>projects/assignments - clearly articulating her expectations for the students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pay attention on the class</td>
<td>engage students in content</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>understand the course and material deeply</td>
<td>be expert in the academic field and willing to share with students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>listen attentively and think independently</td>
<td>explain the new terminology, consider differences of their students.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

At the same time, a number of students also perceived a “good student” as someone who has a responsibility towards their peers:
Table 2. Good student and collaboration (pre-survey)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Good student</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Be helpful to others, can respect different opinions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involve in the class discussion, respect to other peers and have critical thinking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Share his/her ideas and help peers to understand the topic</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Thus, while participants seemed to value students’ individual efforts, a tendency assumingly reflective of a Confucian approach where one’s own persistence and putting in the best effort are considered essential for student success (Gorry, 2011), the focus on connecting with one’s peers could reflect aspects of what Cortazzi and Jin (1997) term “reciprocal learning”. According to these authors, Chinese and other non-western learning cultures believe in a give and take relationship, where students depend on not just the teacher but also their peers for their learning in a larger social context. “The social context includes peers, who have a strong role in supporting learning in a collective, as much out of class as within it” (ibid., p. 85). It should be kept in mind here that collective learning is not translated as group work or discussion but “group harmony in common effort” (p. 85).

The participants’ views of a “good teacher” as part of an optimal classroom, and as reflected in Table 1 above, suggest high expectations for instructors. Most participants saw the teacher as a mentor who is not just a repertoire of deep knowledge but is also patient, fair and understanding. Only 1 participant described a good teacher as a facilitator. The classroom discussion revealed a similar attitude towards teachers as seen in Excerpt 1.

Excerpt 1 (classroom discussion)

S1: So this is one aspect of being a teacher. Give us more resources to think about and give specific feedback. …
S2: I think the teacher should be sensitive to the difficulties the students encounter and give some useful assistance for their students to overcome these difficulties.
S3: I’m coming from the banking education system, we think instructor as authority. We expect to get the correct answer from the class, from the instructor. And maybe from another kind of educational system, they expect answer from peers.

Such dependence on the teacher can perhaps be explained through some cultural assumptions. Cortazzi and Jin (1997) believe that “the academic culture of the Chinese (and many other non-western groups) emphasizes relationships” (p. 78). According to these authors, in many non-western academic cultures there is a hierarchical relationship between students and teachers where the learners’ role is to comprehend and absorb and the instructors are the authorities that impart knowledge. Students assumingly consider that teachers have “deep knowledge, as an authority and
an expert” (p. 85). We interpret this to mean that cultural assumptions have led many participants to rely a lot on the teacher and believe that she/he only can and should provide the right answers.

With regards to learning in a graduate classroom, there was a general recognition of critical thinking skills as expected in such a setting. Many participants acknowledged the element of critical thinking in graduate learning as exemplified in the words of one participant, “Learning in a graduate class involves lots of reading and reflection and critical thinking”. Participants’ emphasis on ‘critical thinking’ reveals that they are aware of the Canadian academic culture. This is particularly clear in the words of one student during the classroom discussion of the survey when she stated “[critical thinking] is a requirement of the Canadian education [while the view to absorb information from professors] is how it could be maybe in my country”. Furthermore, the questionnaire responses on what students expect in a classroom revealed a considerable reliance on the surrounding system, including the instructor, and peers. Many of the participants expected guidance and support (see Table 3).

**Table 3. Classroom expectations (pre-survey)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>In a classroom I expect …</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To discuss content with peers and the teacher, to understand the vague parts of the readings</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To have an opportunity to ask questions and clarify unclear points about the readings; to discuss readings with all peers; to hear the feedback from the teacher</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction, engaging activities and step by step explanation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There is clear instruction from instructors, and some activities with peers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional instruction and explanation of professors</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Thus, the above table exemplifies what was evident in the responses of 2/3 of all participants – the importance of guidance and help in working with the course content. The students’ views on a positive classroom environment below suggest the atmosphere they imagine as allowing for such support to unfold.

**Table 4. Descriptions of a positive classroom (pre-survey)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positive classroom</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teacher creating a friendly environment between the students and the teacher</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relaxed – reasonably humorous – friendly – supportive - respectful</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Everyone is encouraged and feel comfortable to speak in front of the</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
whole class. And every opinion is respected

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Friendly, inclusive of diversity, supportive, helpful, and having positive energy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Respectful, diverse, cooperative, supportive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open to different perspectives and questions</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As can be seen from Table 4, many of the participants expected respect, encouragement and support. We are wondering if such views can speak to apprehension in operating within a new culture of learning that is often associated with active oral participation in a seminar class.

Prior to administering the survey, I was curious whether students had heard the term “cultures of learning” and what it meant to them. Half of the students had heard the term and half hadn’t, but it was not clear to me if any of those who had heard it were referring to hearing it during the first session of the class when I informed them about the nature of this research project. Most students’ responses to the open-ended question about the meaning of “cultures of learning” reflected primarily an understanding of the term along the lines of, in the words of one participant, “the techniques, methods, teaching/learning styles used in a certain country”, but there were also a few responses that would reflect a broader understanding of the term as “learning from the diversity of cultures”. The discussion of some of the focus group interview data further in the report speaks to the nuanced understandings of the term that some students seemed to develop by the end of the course.

The classroom discussion of the survey results confirmed some of the students’ expectations around learning and teaching and offered insights in the reasons behind some of the views they had expressed in the questionnaire. The ones I found particularly useful to refer to follow below.

Students’ apparent contradictory views about working and learning with their peers where almost 45% share feeling exhausted in working in a small group with peers, and over 55% state that they learn better when working with others are explained in the class discussion as depending on the type of work students do with peers, and the group members they work with where “if their thoughts and my thoughts are in alignment” without “having to agree all the time,” group work is beneficial. One student articulated clearly the usefulness of working with peers when she stated: “working with peers helps me to see, to analyze [a reading] through different lens, to see maybe I just understand something totally different when I just do it on my own, I never get that point. So working with peers help me to understand more, to see deeper.”

I had found quite puzzling the number of noncommittal responses in the survey to questions around communicating with peers where 1/3 of the students neither agreed nor disagreed that it’s easy to communicate with peers of the same cultural background and almost 45% neither agreed nor disagreed that it’s easy to talk with peers from different cultural backgrounds about course content. The class discussion clarified for me such views. A student explained that “it’s not so much about the culture, in some ways it’s about this person. This person is complex…She or he has his own culture, but also she or he has his or her own personality. It’s complex” Another observed that one’s background knowledge of the discussion topic and whether the discussants have similar experiences could be factors impacting successful cross-cultural communication. One made the important point that “I like to communicate with other people, like other cultures, but it might be a little bit hard at first
because I still don't know anything about their culture … it takes time to get to know the people, know their culture, their background and their experiences…. I think it's about everything from their background like how did they study, how did they work, where did they work, everything is connected”. A student also pointed out that for students to be successful in cross-cultural communications they need to value intercultural competencies.

In sum, participants’ initial questionnaire responses and classroom discussion showed both cultural beliefs about learning, teaching and optimal classrooms that they may have carried to this program from their educational experiences in other cultural contexts and, at the same time, their initial perceptions around a new culture of learning that they are becoming part of within the Canadian context. Reliance on teachers, hard work, respect and encouragement, and partial awareness around critical thinking and the importance of peers in one’s learning were some of the themes prominent in both the pre-survey and the classroom discussion of its results.

2. How do classroom activities align with students’ expectations and what is their impact on class participation?

While the initial plan was to address this question through data collected in the classroom observations, some of the students’ pre-survey responses and the subsequent classroom discussion of these also seemed relevant in responding to it.

As stated in the previous section, students had high expectations for guidance to come from their instructor in a class. As the instructor of a graduate seminar course, my focus has been on raising important questions around major trends and issues in English as an additional language education theory and practice that often have no easy or right answers. That such an approach was challenging for some students was evident during the class discussion on the pre-survey as per Except 2 below:

Excerpt 2
S1: I would prefer maybe to be given more information by the teacher and telling that this is correct, than like trying to figure it out after all whether it is correct or is not correct because at the end of the day that question is not answered. … and people [are] wondering.  
S2: Because ever since we are learning from primary school, we always had that one correct answer. That’s why we think that way. If we didn’t have it from then it wouldn’t be such a huge change in the graduate.

Given the seminar nature of the course, classroom activities rely heavily on small group and peer work. Yet, students were ambivalent and many chose “neither agree nor disagree” responses to questions around how their learning was impacted by working with others as seen in Figures 2 and 3 below.
Figure 2
I learn better when I work alone or study by myself.

Figure 3
I learn better when I work with others.

Such noncommittal views could perhaps be clarified with the words of one student during the class discussion:

Excerpt 3 (classroom discussion)

S: *Maybe it’s not about the cultures, maybe it’s about interpersonal communication. It’s about whether you like the person or not, … it’s like we are unsure because some of us will, may be more comfortable with some representative of this culture and less comfortable with other representative of the same culture. And that’s the reason why it is. Okay. That’s hard to say.*
Another question that showed a very mixed response was related to students’ preferences to learn by listening to a lecture or by participating in group activities with 1/3 responding they prefer to listen to lectures, 1/3 disagreeing with this statement, and 1/3 neither agreeing nor disagreeing with such a view. In sum, although the participants seemed receptive to ideas of sharing and interacting in class, overall, they seemed to choose neither agree or disagree for most of the questions related to learning and class participation preferences. This could reflect ambivalence with regards to different cultures of learning or their apprehension towards a new academic culture that they are being socialized into in the course. In either of these cases, cultural assumptions seemed to impact their initial expectations and some of the actual practices for these participants in the seminar class given that my instructor’s experience, as well as the classroom observations, suggest that only about 1/3 of the students are regularly active in participating orally in whole class discussions.

Classroom observations were revealing in a number of related ways. During the classroom observations the RA was taking notes of activities and interactions. I was more attuned to wearing also a researcher hat in the classroom and jotted down some personal reflections on how the class went immediately after the observation sessions. While not many students took part in the whole class discussions, most students participated actively in small group and peer work. Small group work and peer work were overall successful with some activities generating less enthusiasm (e.g. a small group discussion related to a reading about teaching grammar during the 1st observation) and others seeing a surge in oral participation (e.g. a debate on the topic of assessment during the 3rd observation). Understandably, it could be deduced that clarity of task design, students’ interest in and personal experiences around the topic, as well as time constraints impacted the nature and quality of students’ oral participation in small group and peer work during the term. Other observations worth pointing to, however, refer specifically to students’ interactions. In walking around the class during small class and peer discussions, I noticed students’ efforts to do well and be polite with their interlocutors. I also observed them being non-competitive in completing tasks in relation to the readings on grammar during the 1st observation, but much more competitive in participating in the debate on readings related to assessment practices during the 3rd observation. Where a group of students of Chinese background worked together, they also made use of their 1st language as a resource affording them group membership and an additional opportunity to make sense of class readings. The RA’s observations with regards to students’ interactions were quite revealing. Here is an excerpt from her 2nd observation where the students’ task is set by a group of their classmates facilitating an article focusing on “reading” as a skill associated with language acquisition. These notes reflect patterns Neha observed during all her observation sessions:

The groups were divided randomly, with group 1 and group 2 comprising of learners from diverse backgrounds (culturally), and the rest of the groups from the same nationality.

Group 1

Student 1: They want us to draw a T-chart?
Student 2: I think they want us to discuss first and then present it in the form of a T-chart.
Student 3: Yeah, I am not saying that we have to draw like literally. I meant the same.
Student 2: No, we have to draw it as well but first discuss. Do you understand?
Student 1: So, if we can just write it will be fine?

Group 2

Student 1: Alright, how about we draw first and then put our thoughts in it?
Student 2: I don’t understand. What do we need to do?  
Student 3: I think what they have said is to discuss the ideas first. Like, let’s say…  
Student 4: Yeah, I think this can make sense.  
Student 2: Ok, but it’s still not clear.

Group 3

Student 1: We can discuss it first and then write.  
Student 2: Reading can be a part of …. [offers her view]  
Student 3: It does not say so. [referring to the article]  
Student 4: We can understand more [refers to the article] ….

Reflection

It was observed that students from diverse cultural backgrounds (groups 1 and 2) used more sentence starters like, ‘yeah, I agree’, ‘no, but I think”, ‘alright, so you mean’. They discussed with a clear starting and initiating the talk. However, the groups with [the same] cultural backgrounds had a comparatively softer approach and preferred to initiate discussion without any announcement of their opinion.

In none of the groups the learners forced their opinion on each other, however, with group 1 and 2 the learners made persistent effort to explain the confusion.

Also, it was observed that agreeing more (group 3) could also be a sign of speaking less. As they were a little hesitant to discuss, it might be that agreeing with each other means the group members don’t have to say a lot. On the other hand, this can be a sign of gaining acceptance in the group.

The data shared in this subsection suggests that students showed ambivalence in the pre-survey about aspects of the class involving participation and learning preferences, as well as their own participation, often choosing to respond to such questions with the statement “neither agree nor disagree”. This could perhaps be interpreted as reflecting these international students’ awareness of straddling various cultures of learning as they start their graduate degree in a Canadian setting. The class discussion alluded to the complexity in unpacking such matters given a host of factors that could impact cross-cultural interactions. Observations suggested that students were overall active in small group and peer activities and not very active in whole class activities.

3. Are there changes in students’ assumptions about optimal classroom environments, and in their participation in classroom activities, as well as engagement with their classmates?

Findings discussed in this section are based on data from the post-survey, the focus group interviews at the end of the term as well as some of Neha’s observational notes. While there are few pronounced changes in students’ responses to the Likert-scale questions in the post-survey compared to the pre-survey, there are some tendencies that reflect them becoming more comfortable with more active participation or cross-cultural interactions in classroom activities. Below follow a few examples to substantiate this claim.

While only 3 students disagreed with the statement that they prefer learning by listening to a lecture (Q1) in the pre-survey, 6 students disagree with this claim in the post-survey; while 3 students
disagreed (1 of whom strongly) with the statement that they feel comfortable interacting with peers from different cultural background (Q4) in the pre-survey, only 1 student disagreed with this statement in the post-survey; the number of people feeling exhausted after doing peer or small group work dropped slightly from 8 to 6; while only 2 students disagreed with the statement that they learn better when working alone or studying by themselves (Q6) in the pre-survey, this number has jumped to 7 in the post-survey; while 8 people neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement that they add original ideas during class discussions (Q16) in the pre-survey, only 3 students support this statement in the post-survey.

Overall, the post-survey, classroom observations and focus group interviews, all pointed towards a process of acculturation into a more participatory culture of learning that the participants went through during the course of the term. In relation to perceptions about “a good student”, the participants were more vocal about good students as involved in discussing and participating. With regards to “a good teacher”, the expectation was centered more around teachers as facilitators as is visible in Table 5.

Table 5 Perspectives on a good student and a good teacher (post-survey)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Good student</th>
<th>Good teacher</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Be an active learner both in and after class;</td>
<td>Be facilitator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>be responsive to teacher’s questions; be reflective to self and peers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be open to all kinds of new and critical thoughts</td>
<td>Facilitate students rather than depositing knowledge to students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help each other during class activities</td>
<td>Respect everyone’s opinion and way of learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be engaged with the learning, diligent, actively involving with the class</td>
<td>Be a facilitator and guide me to expand my ideas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actively engage in class, be more critical</td>
<td>Be professional, patient, and willing to help</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respect other thoughts and people</td>
<td>Be expert in the academic field and willing to share with students</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Together with these views that reflect an appreciation of participation and facilitation as important aspects of an optimal classroom environment, the specific ideas in response to the open-ended questions about a positive classroom environment and expectations about a graduate classroom, also express the importance of sharing and discussing ideas rather than just expecting support from the teacher and peers. Critical thinking was also prominent in students’ responses in the post-survey and there was more elaboration on what it involved.
Table 6. Expectations around a graduate classroom and a positive classroom (post-survey)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Graduate classroom involves</th>
<th>Positive classroom</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Critical thinking, deep analysis of the readings</td>
<td>Where everyone participates and teacher welcomes questions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deep and critical understanding and more participation</td>
<td>Non-judgmental – conversational – friendly – one where there is place for laughter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supporting criticism using articles we have gone through</td>
<td>Learner-centered one where students are more autonomous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teamwork and critical thinking</td>
<td>Responsive and respectful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open to cultural diversity</td>
<td>Listen to more voices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cooperation, critical literacy and autonomy</td>
<td>Friendly teacher-student relationship, supportive classroom</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

On the other hand, the focus group interviews offered further understanding of students’ socialization in the culture of learning of this particular classroom. Their initial assumptions had led them to accept and embrace oral participation, discussion and group work vigorously, as they deemed it to be an important aspect of western academic culture. As seen in Excerpt 4, the culture of this particular classroom allowed for a shift:

Excerpt 4 (focus group interview)

S1: I used to participate [in a whole class discussion] as much as I could but then little by little, I feel like I saw that the instructor was going from one person to another, giving a chance to talk to everyone. So I decided to just only give my opinion on the matter that I really believe it so that everyone has a chance

....

S2: first I thought that a good student need, you need to talk more in the classroom just like [student name] says, so at first we pushed ourselves to participate more in the classroom, but later I realized that the participation in the classroom is just a part of your learning, just a part of how you, how you gain knowledge … actually like we have different assignments. You need to write, and reading responses and do team work together. So it’s not all about like [oral] participation in the classroom to learn to be a good student. There are more aspects.

It was evident in the end of the term that some students could express in an elaborate manner the benefits of class discussions in a graduate class thus showing appreciation of the cultures of learning associated with the course:

Excerpt 5 (focus group interview)
S: I feel okay expressing my ideas, even if they are erroneous, even if they're not in compliance with the teacher’s and I think that while we are discussing like in small groups or like trying to express the ideas somehow we are moving towards the right answer even if it’s, it was initially wrong, but then we are developing, we are co-constructing, we are negotiating, meaning making. Yeah, during like we’re listening to each other and thinking.

An interesting aspect of students’ participation was highlighted in Neha’s observational fieldnotes. In the post-survey, 13 out of 18 participants agreed that they brought forth many original ideas to class discussions. However, these responses were not necessarily confirmed during the classroom observations. It was observed that the majority of the participants from China, when in a small group activity with their compatriots, were generally more concerned about the content of the reading and agreeing with most of the ideas which was not as typical in groups where students of diverse cultural background (including students from China) worked together. The excerpt below from the final classroom observation during an activity when students are tasked to define the term “translanguaging” in their own words in a peer activity, represents two very different interactional exchanges:

**Pair 1 (different cultural background)**
S1: For me it [translanguaging] was more of ....
S2: When I did this activity in my classroom, I could see that the students were uncomfortable.
S1: I remember that it happened the same with me. When we were introduced with...

**Pair 2 (same cultural background)**
S1: The article talks about translanguaging...where can we find the main idea?
S2: I think it is on page number * and especially this sentence.
S1: Yes, but I have highlighted something on the first page. I think this talks more clearly about translanguaging.

Neha felt that in a way there was more limited circulation of new ideas in the discussion of Pair 2 that would add to the content of the reading as they were observed to primarily attempt to construct meaning from the article. Perhaps it could be assumed that they have a somewhat similar and collective experience (educational and professional) around translanguaging and thus sharing common knowledge might not be very interesting. On the other hand, pairs and groups with students from different cultures of learning were observed sharing more about their varied personal experiences (both as a student and as an instructor) with regards to translanguaging, as almost all of them had different opinions and experiences related to it thus allowing for a more relatable engagement with the course content.

As already mentioned, the post-survey indicated some changes in participants’ perceptions about their classroom participation. Several interesting changes could be observed. As can be seen in Figure 4 below, the participants were more in favour of participating in small groups and discussions in the pre-survey. However, there was a considerable shift by the time of the post-survey with 7 participants not viewing themselves as active participants, compared with only 3 in the first survey.
Some interview responses could perhaps explain this shift. Initially, the participants believed it to be a requirement of western academic culture. However, with the passage of time they started accepting their own academic cultures and adjusted to the specific environment of the course, too. As can be seen in Extract 9 below, the participants believed that their perceptions were colored due to initial cultural assumptions.

Excerpt 6 (focus group interview)

S2: Before the class started I assume [the importance of participation]; that gave me like a lot of stress. Like I need to like 100% focus on the class participation thing. I need to answer like every question a teacher tossed, but actually the reality is different because sometimes I have difficulty in figuring out what the teacher was saying, because after like I understand what the teacher is saying the time is over. Yeah, so it's one of the troubles. Um, so, after like a few weeks later, I didn't give me like so much pressure because I think I just act like naturally

S3: Yeah, it's because I was from a different educational system. So I think because I already make the decision, I need to study abroad, so I need to change my personality because I'm actually not like… I'm actually a shy person before I came to here. So I needed to make a change. … but the reality is different. So I think oh maybe I should just, I'm thinking another way, not to have that much stress and enjoying this so not to put a lot of pressure.

S4: Yeah, … just like accept my own culture, like some Chinese students might want to be more active in classes to break the stereotypes of the Asian students though, but it's not something like wrong. So it doesn't need to change. Mmm. It's just our way of learning stuff.

The post-survey responses gave further insights into the changing perceptions around interacting and communicating with peers from different cultural backgrounds. Figure 5 clearly shows the difference, as 13 students agreed it is easy to do that compared to 8 participants in the pre-survey. This could be attributed to becoming familiar with each other during the course of the term. However,
the role of group and pair work, which helped participants from different academic cultures in getting to know each other better, cannot be ignored.

Figure 5:
It is easy to talk about things other than course content with my peers from different cultural backgrounds than me.

Overall, the participants’ anxiety around a new culture of learning was eased out due to regular classroom discussions and interactions. In conclusion, the expectations and assumptions around an optimal classroom and participation changed visibly during the course of the term. However, as the discussion in the next section will show, the initial assumptions not just impacted the classroom expectations and participation, but were also impacted by these participatory activities, leading to greater and smoother interactions and familiarity: a process of acculturation.

4. To what do students attribute any potential changes in their class participation, their expectations about an optimal classroom environment and their understandings of cultures of learning?

Most of the discussion in this section is based on students’ views as expressed in 2 focus group interviews in which a total of 7 out of 18 students participated at the end of the term.

Overall, there were some changes in students’ perceptions with regards to cultures of learning, and optimal classroom environments through the course of the term. In general, participants’ attitude changed towards classroom participation, affecting not just the present classroom dynamics but also altering their prior perceptions and assumptions.

For some students, becoming aware of the notion of “cultures of learning” was perceived as helpful in advancing participation in the classroom. Here is what some students shared:
Excerpt 7 (focus group interview):

S1: I think culture of learning actually did help people to participate in class, for example, once we met … the peers from the same cultures, while we have some problems like doing the readings or doing assignments, we can ask the people from your cultures to help you improve … Yeah, because maybe we have the same thoughts, because we are based in the same culture. So that maybe we have the same questions and we could try to stitch the answers together for those same questions.

S2: it helps you to have a better way, like how to make [someone] more comfortable to participate in the activities. Like some people from some certain countries, they are shy and you know how to encourage them. … So if you know that the other person is from different culture, you are aware of it. So you can help that person to participate more in the class.

Another interview participant, however, was not as convinced of the relevance of this notion because “the realization that we are different. It doesn’t help because we still have different styles of learning, still have different cultures”, but as it was observed by another student, this awareness could assist with being respectful of different cultures of learning. The idea of “cultures of learning” in these views seems to reflect an appreciation of learning “with” each other’s varied cultures (cf. Jin & Cortazzi, 2017).

An obvious reason for positive changes in students’ engagement with each other was related to getting to know one another better throughout the term as one participant explained:

S: I’ve noticed changes, like at the beginning of semester, … we didn’t talk so much, because we didn’t know each other. But now that we know each other we were less shy with each other like yeah, we like go out, talk, have lunch together. … So it makes easier for group like, participation like, we are … not that shy and I’m more comfortable.

With regards to whether participating in the study potentially impacted students’ perspectives on an optimal classroom environment (including notions of a good student and a good teacher), students’ responses were mixed. Some of the focus interview participants felt it didn’t impact them, others were not sure, while a few felt they had been influenced by participating in the study. One student stated that “some questions made us more aware of like what’s going on, what we are doing”. Another appreciated the classroom discussion of the pre-survey responses which made her aware of how differently people chose to respond to any given question: “I was like wow, there are so many … differences from what I thought and what I’m seeing like on a big scale so it just made us I think made me a little bit aware”.

Several students observed that experiences within the classroom led them to feel safe in sharing their views and have impacted their expectations of a good teacher: “for the good teacher so firstly I think … [the instructor] to share about her experience like when we learn something, …And so after she talking about her experience, we’re not afraid to share our own experience.” To which another student added: ‘And also shaped, built a safe environment for us to share our opinion … because there is, she always, ‘Okay, there’s no right or wrong answer’. So at least you see something or you share. It’s all about your own real experience.’

One particular change that most students noted referred to their understanding of the notion “cultures of learning” where while most students thought initially that it referred to national cultures, through participation in the study and the classroom discussion they developed a broadened understanding:
“Before this course, I think like culture, we always say like Western culture … so after I learned [about this notion] I know like we can say that each individual they represented their culture. So everyone has their own like own identity, own learning style. So I think this will help me to understand that. Each individual does have their own learning style. They have their own culture so we cannot say that one represents that whole [national] culture.”

We have found useful to refer to Bakhtin’s notion of chronotopes to explain some of the changes the students experienced through their participation in this class. According to Bakhtin chronotopes define “the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature” (Bakhtin and Holquist, 1981, p. 84). Renshaw (2007) has made use of this concept in discussing “cultures of learning” as it highlights the obvious time/space frames which directly impact classroom learning and teaching. We will be referring to two trajectories of chronotopes: chronotope grounding (Renshaw, 2007; Brown & Renshaw, 2006) and chronotope moves (Lee, 2013) in our discussion below. Where chronotope moves are the flashbacks that some participants mention during the focus interviews, referring to a certain and somewhat critical turning point of time in his/her life, chronotope grounding refers to relational learning journeys where the participants developed new identities through interaction and discussion with their peers and teachers. According to Brown and Renshaw (2006),

The chronotope provides a way of viewing a student’s participation in the classroom as being a situated, dynamic process constituted through the interaction of past experience, ongoing involvement, and yet-to-be-accomplished goals. Neither the product of learning, as coming to know, nor the process of learning, as ways of coming to know, is viewed as fixed or stable. (p. 249)

Bakhtin’s notion of chronotope becomes helpful in analysing changes in participants’ perceptions and expectations as the past experiences of the participants, the time and space where they come from, and their present interactions with new time/space help in understanding the process of adaption and acculturation. The chronotope moves or the crucial turning points highlight the changes in the participant’s lives or, as Lee (2013) puts it, foreground the transnational experiences that influence the change in participants’ understanding of different academic cultures. Thus, Bakhtin’s chronotopes could be a useful tool in analyzing different cultures of learning, as these time/space experiences of present, past and possibly future impact each other, becoming relative journeys. An excerpt from a focus interview below represents how one student connected experiences she has had in her life to how she dealt with potential disagreements within a class activity:

Excerpt 8: On working together and agreeing/disagreeing during group work (focus group interview)

S1: I always had people disagreeing with me my whole life [because of the way I dress and my hairstyle]. So anything I do I know that this [activity] is not fixed, like we have different points of view to it and like I always had this point of view different from others and other way of seeing. We’re seeing things differently from another’s perspective…. My hair or makeup, everyone always disagreed with me. I know kind of like I say like, this is what I think and that is what you think. So I try to solve [disagreements] that way but when it comes to discussions like inside [a classroom], when planning, I see I try to see like their point of view like I put myself in their shoes and see like why do they choose this and like, why did I choose this and I go like, put them on … like a balance

Instructors are aware that different understandings of an activity are often an essential component that impacts group/pair work in the classroom. With regards to this student, people’s disagreements
with some of her appearance choices in life outside the classroom for a long time enabled her to accept that it is O.K for people to disagree. Thus, in her learning journey she understood that we need to accept others’ points of view in a classroom situation with students from diverse cultural backgrounds. As explained by Brown and Renshaw (2006), “We … consider how particular groundings for interaction are created by students as they draw on past, present, and future temporal relations in explaining and justifying their ideas to one another” (p. 249).

In another case, the participant’s journey from one culture of learning to another helped him to establish connections and bonds with peers and teachers in Canada. According to him, these experiences from the past, as a student in Ireland and as a teacher in China, gave him clarity with regards to differences in different cultures. Such chronotope groundings supported him not just in making sense but also in adapting and adjusting to different cultures of learning (as seen in Excerpt 9 below).

Excerpt 9: Comparison within and with other academic cultures (focus group interview)

S: I study in Ireland before so when I studied in Ireland most of the questions [were] answered by those European counterparts and I just sit back and I sometimes [was] regard[ed] as inactive student, not participating in classroom discussions, and I just neglect or ignore, but in Canadian classrooms, I think every learning style is welcome, so some students they may be quite reserved and so they didn't answer too much questions. But [the instructor] did not criticize them or we do not have too much pressure on us, we don't feel guilty.

…

Before I pick this course, I always okay even though I don't agree with my classmate, I won't say [it] in the classroom because … I always think, ‘okay, I don't agree with you, but that's fine. That's your opinion. It doesn't matter with me.’ But here I noticed in the classroom, welcome to different voice and the teacher is waiting to hear from you. At least you have a reason why you think that way and you can disagree with your classmate and you can have agreement with them. All is welcome in a Canadian classroom.

…

I was a teacher when I was in China and I think at the time I should be like I say just be an authority, they say just tell this, just transfer this knowledge to students. But after that I change my mind, maybe a good teacher they just should be a facilitator to help students how to learn, give them the way and all.

This excerpt suggests that this participant’s experiences of studying and teaching in different academic cultures appear to have affected not just his prior assumptions but also impacted his present understandings of a new academic culture. During the course of the term he experienced a process of cultural transformation, where the practices and norms of both the new culture and prior cultures are affected (Kamputlainen and Renshaw, 2007) thus creating a “cultural synergy” (Yuan and Xie, 2013).

Concluding thoughts

The data shared in this report offer a complex, rich (as well as quite messy) snapshot of a classroom in which international graduate students of diverse cultural backgrounds are negotiating different expectations about optimal classroom environments as related to cultures of learning they have experienced prior to and in the context of the first academic course they are taking in the new for them Canadian environment. It seems that the changes they experience in their perceptions about their own class participation and learning as well as “good” teachers and students are the result of a
variety of multilayered factors – the experiences that a seminar class relying heavily on small group and peer work afforded them, the relations they built with their classmates, and the educational experiences they brought with them to this setting as well as their participation in this project. As their instructor I recognized the value of offering space for them to reflect on these matters through this project and I intend to create opportunities for such reflections to become a regular part of my classroom. The project allowed all of us, students, RA, and instructor “to learn about, from, and with each other’s cultures of learning” (Jin & Cortazzi, 2017, p. 241).

PART II – CHANGES AND IMPLICATIONS

1. Changes to the project plan.

The only minor change in the project was that there were 4 observations (2 of which for half a session) rather than 3 observations. This was due to RA’s availability issues and did not impact the research process.

2. Additional funding.

No

3. Changes in my/our teaching.

There are no significant changes in the ways I intend to structure the courses I teach or my teaching philosophy. However, some suggestions that participants in the focus group interviews made on ways to invite silent students to participate in class discussions by expanding the scaffolding opportunities I provide (e.g. allow for time to write in class their ideas on a specific point or start with a peer discussion before moving on to a small group discussion), will be incorporated more often in my seminar classes. As the project afforded the students opportunities to reflect on their own cultures of learning, which seemed to be beneficial in allowing them to feel more confident about their learning, I plan to consciously make use of classroom situations that may arise that would invite such reflections. I am thinking of incorporating in my criteria for evaluating the students’ small group presentation/facilitation assignment(s) the need to reflect on their experiences in interacting with their partners in preparing for the assignment(s). This would be another opportunity for students to become more aware of cross-cultural exchanges and how or if they impact their learning.

4. Learning from the unexpected.

I was quite struck by the data in the observation fieldnotes that speaks to the variations in the interactions between study participants who share a cultural background and those that come from different cultural backgrounds. The observations that interactional turns differed in these two groups, and that cross-cultural grouping allowed for more varied engagement with a particular reading in incorporating to a larger extent students’ personal experiences, confirm my belief in the added value of cross-cultural grouping to enhance students’ learning.

While I wouldn’t necessarily call it “unexpected learning”, my appreciation of the presence of an RA in my class to make me realize the difficulty of engaging in an action research project in one’s classroom by juggling the roles of instructor and researcher is very real.
5. **Influence of the project on the teaching of others.**

No, but as I plan to discuss the study with colleagues working in the TEAL-F program, there could be some ideas that colleagues find relevant to delve into within their teaching activities.

6. **Other influences, links, outcomes or “spin-offs”.**

Not yet; I will keep you informed if there are related outcomes in the future. I would like to point out, however, that my RA found working on this project very exciting and, especially engaging with academic literature to draw upon to make sense of some of the data. In searching for theoretical constructs that could be relevant to the data analysis Neha found Bakhtin’s notion of a “chronotope” very useful in making sense of how participants' earlier educational experiences in various contexts have been impacting their perceptions of what they saw as positive characteristics of the Canadian classroom (especially attending to diversity and acknowledging the value of different perspectives).

**PART III – SHARING AND DISSEMINATION**

1. **Sharing findings with my/our colleagues.**

With the completion of this report, I plan to share my findings and related understandings with other instructors in the TEAL-F program at our semesterly meeting.

2. **Publications and conference presentations already done.**

I have not yet done presentations on the project, but that is my intention.

3. **Future dissemination plans.**

I intend to present on my project in at least two venues, one would be the SFU Teaching and Learning Symposium and the other would be at a conference with a focus on the internationalization of higher education. I intend to collaborate with my RA Neha for the conference presentation as well as in preparing an academic publication based on this research.

**PART IV – KEYWORDS FOR PROJECT AND STUDENTS INVOLVED**

1. **Keyword description of project.**

cultures of learning, cross-cultural interactions, international students, classroom participation

2. **Students involved.**

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