

**CULTURE OF ACTIVE VERSUS PASSIVE LEARNING:
TRANSFORMATIVE EXPERIENCE IN LEARNING QUALITATIVE
INQUIRY COURSE**

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ABSTRACT: *This paper provides an important personal reflective journal emerging from the existing experience of qualitative inquiry course and analysis of international students' experiences on the culture of active versus passive learning and how we can archive transformative learning. Based on the finding emerging from focus group interviews with international students, three general themes emerged, including teacher-students' interaction, communication skills and International-Chinese students' relationship as aspects promoting transformative learning. The author concludes that the active learning method was the best way to promote transformative learning among students. The study has implications for future research on the culture of active versus passive learning and on how transformative learning can be promoted in the university milieu.*

KEYWORDS: active learning, passive learning, transformative learning, qualitative inquiry

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study is to investigate international students' experiences on the culture of active versus passive learning in the university as a way to promote and foster changes in students' learning (transformative learning). Based on the existing experience in qualitative inquiry courses offered at the school of education in a top-tier comprehensive research university in southeast China, this study presents the author's reflective journal and international students' experiences in the culture of active versus passive learning and how we can archive transformative learning through this culture.

A Brief Overview of Active versus Passive Learning

Education has always been packed with new ideas about learning and teaching. Teachers are regularly bombarded with suggestions for reforms on whether to prepare students for examination grades or to drill them on the understanding of facts, ideas, and skills (Wilson & Peterson, 2006). With the increase in competitive demand in the world, educators strive to provide the most productive learning experience to their students in order to prepare them for better careers in the global job market (Cui, 2013). The teaching and learning methods might be an important factor in creating significant learning environments and equipping students with important experiences which could enable them compete in the global job market and which could also help stimulate changes in educational thinking and practice. The assessment of two-learning styles (active and passive/traditional) and their impact in promoting transformative learning, came into my mind after being exposed to both learning methods which led into

different learning experiences, particularly in my five years as international student in China.

The culture of active versus passive learning as a method of learning within the university has been under debate for some time. According to Hill (2013) and James Cook University-Australia: guide for stuff (2014), active learning students can develop 5Es models where they learn and retain knowledge from their encounter and diversity of experiences with the persons in charge of learning facilitation. The 5Es model includes five phases as follows: Engage: this help students to make a connection between prior knowledge and new ideas, Explore: this facilitates activities that give students the opportunity to explore concepts or skills and allow them to engage with problems and describe them in their own words, Explain: here the focus is for facilitators to employ the concepts and terms already used by the students to develop explanation for the phenomenon they have already experienced, Elaborate: this focuses on students to apply knowledge or skills to develop a deeper understanding or better demonstration of skills, and lastly, Evaluate: this emphasizes on review and reflects learning new understanding or skills. James Cook University-Australia: a guide for stuff (2014) define active learning as a process wherein students are actively engaged in building an understanding of facts, ideas and skills through the completion of instructor directed tasks and activities. It is any type of activity that gets students involved in the learning process.

Cui (2013) from Hanoi University, Nanjing-China conducted an empirical study to compare the impact of an active learning approach on student cognitive outcomes, in two sections of an introductory management course, one part was taught in an active manner with varieties of active activities, the other was taught in a passive way emphasizing daily lectures. Based on empirical study Cui (2013) came up with a definition of passive learning as an approach prevalent in the traditional teaching approach adopted by many professors in the business school at Hanoi University. These professors delivered lectures for the majority of time and there was little opportunity for student input through discussion on experiential exercise. One of the results in Cue (2013) was the positive student cognitive outcomes on specific material covered in a class taught through active teaching approach as opposed to one taught with the passive teaching approach.

Transformative Learning Experience in Qualitative Inquiry Course

Transformative learning is “an approach to teaching based on promoting change, where educators challenge learners to critically question and assess the integrity of their deeply held assumptions about how they relate to the world around them.” Mezirow & Taylor (as cited in Alhadeff-Jones, 2012, p. 178). Transformative learning experience involves learning how students know, rather than what they know, it helps students to adopt new paradigms of understanding and apply them; it assists students with opportunities to explore new answers and perspectives, it also captures what the learner does, feels and experiences in the classroom and beyond (Alhadeff-Jones, 2012; Crenson, 2006; Nohl, 2014; Taylor, 2008; Troop & O’Riordan, 2017).

As a learner and practitioner in higher education, I believe learners can develop transformative learning after being exposed to several experiences in the classroom and beyond. This paper empirically applies the concept of transformative learning (Mezirow, 1978) on the basis of a comparative analysis of two learning approaches (active and passive approaches). Numerous studies have shown that Chinese classroom activities are typically seen as dominated by teachers with limited questioning or discussion taking place. The feature of silent learning can be traced back to the Confucian tradition which encourages Chinese people to respect hierarchical relationships in the society. The knowledgeable people like scholars and teachers are greatly respected as role models who keep order and harmony. Students are usually not permitted to speak up until being called upon (Chan, 1999; Sit, 2013).

Other bodies of literature argue that, keeping passive in class doesn't mean that students are not intelligent or are not thinking critically but rather, it is a dominant culture which teachers and students have gotten used to. Although teaching and learning passively has a great chance of cultivating a dormant mind in students, a dominant culture in any institution, which seems to bring negative impact, can be contested and challenged with success (Phan, Tran and Blackmore, 2018).

In promoting transformative learning, the events of teaching and learning must focus on cognitive tasks and building empathic connections between instructor and learner (Taylor, 2008; Troop & O'Riordan, 2017) such as: to allow the learner's voice and strengthen affective ties with the teacher (Ellsworth, 2006), to create a dynamic classroom that provides a safe, inclusive, and open learning environment (Cranton, 2006), to have a shared classroom practice with the opportunity to engage diverse perspectives (Troop & O'Riordan, 2017) etc. Moreover, Taylor (2008) added the three teaching methods essential to fostering transformative learning. First is the centrality of critical reflection, with the purpose of helping learners develop an awareness of different phenomenon and promote critical thinking. Second is a liberating approach to teaching in acts of cognition not in the transfer of information (focus on problem-posing and dialogical methodology). Third is a horizontal student-teacher relationship where the teacher works as a political agent and on an equal footing with students.

METHODS

A qualitative approach was employed in this study given that it was an empirical study designed to reveal author's reflective journal and international students' learning experience. Case study design was an effective approach in identifying and explaining various layers of settings (Yin, 2018), thus revealing a complex picture into the culture of active versus passive learning and how we can contribute to meaningful transformative learning experiences. The institutional site was the school of education in a top-tier comprehensive research university in southeast China, where I pursued my PhD studies in higher education.

Data Collection

The data collection took place over 16 weeks of autumn semester in 2019. Data were collected using two methods:

First: observations of classroom learning activities; at this stage I acted as participant-observer and made a thorough observation of all class lectures offered in qualitative inquiry courses. During this stage, I prepared a list of things to observe, which included elements such as: teacher-student's interactions (e.g. How did teachers interact with students?), classroom activities (e.g. How students and activities connected? When did the activities begin? How long did they last?), conversation (e.g. who spoke more? Who listened more?), etc. I organized the full notes in a written narrative format soon after the observation.

Second: focus group interviews; after 9 weeks of observation in qualitative inquiry courses, I managed to reveal several personal and professional insights. Besides, after my observation, I wanted to find out whether other international students had similar experiences as concerns the culture of active versus passive learning and how each of these styles could promote transformative learning. As Adams and Bochner (2011) suggested, "Researchers must not only use their methodological tools and research literature to analyze experience, but also must consider ways others may experience similar epiphanies; in so doing, make characteristics of a culture familiar for insiders and outsiders". Owing to Adams and Bochner's (2011) ideas, the focus-group interviews were prepared with international students from different schools within the university. 15 graduate students were recruited for three focus groups to provide anonymous responses and each group contained no more than five participants. During the period of data collection, ethical considerations were significant for carrying out this study; the informed consent letter for participation was provided at the beginning of each focus-group interview and all students were given enough time to read and understand before focus-group discussion.

The participants were recruited using convenience sampling and snowball (Patton, 2002). During focus group interviews, students were asked open-ended questions, which prompted them to answer by providing a deeper insight on the culture of active versus passive learning and how transformative learning can be promoted. Sample open-ended questions included: "Describe your experience of the current teaching and learning style at the university", "What is/was the biggest challenge you face/faced in relation to the teaching and learning style?", "Describe your experience of the culture of active versus passive learning method", "In what way do you feel the two types of teaching and learning methods enhance transformative learning"? etc. At this stage I did not allow feelings and emotions to influence the collection of findings, since I was matching my observation experience with other international students' experiences, it helped me to gain a profound understanding and familiarity with other international student's experience, values and the perspective of academic challenges from the level of everyday lives.

Data Analysis and Trustworthiness

Once the data collected was thematically analyzed, the constant comparative approach (Charmaz, 2005) was used to compare the field observation notes, focus group interview transcripts and existing literature. This approach helped to categorize and condense wide and varied raw data into a brief format to constitute a single theme in order to identify major concepts. To ensure the trustworthiness of our data from focus

group interviews, I confirmed the transcriptions by listening and reading concurrently. I also involved the respondents in member checking to verify, in the transcripts, if the respondents' thoughts were represented as intended. Stake (2010) specified that by qualitative approach we mean that it relies primarily on human perception and understanding.

RESULTS

Author's reflective journals

The following reflective journals are grounded on the lived experience of qualitative inquiry courses. According to the course instructor: The primary course outcome is the facilitation of students' understanding of in-depth research using a range of techniques to explore why people think, feel, react and behave in the way that they do. Stake (2010) specified that by qualitative inquiry we mean that it relies primarily on human perception and understanding. For a long time, I had a sense of enthusiasm to understand a diverse culture, people's experiences, to understand what people have in common and what differentiates them. A qualitative inquiry course was offered to graduate students for 21 weeks of autumn semester in 2019, at the school of education in a top-tier comprehensive research university in southeast China.

A course instructor graduated from university of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in the US and she always devoted her time and experience to make the course productive for the students. The instructions of this course were inspired by Paulo Freire's, (1996) ideas, emphasizing on the cooperative learning process in the interaction between teachers and students. The teacher was not merely the one who taught the students but was one who was taught in turn in a dialogue with students. The class was also supported by the philosophies of John Dewey, (1938) in the significance that he gave to the experiential in education, which experiential bridges the existing gap between theory and practice and intentionally invites students to make connections between the learning that occurs in classroom contexts and that which occurs in the wider community. Despite the prior experience of qualitative inquiry classes, I valued the active teaching style used by the instructor, which promoted active learning in the classroom, wherein students were engaged in building an understanding of facts, ideas, and skills through the completion of instructor directed tasks and activities.

The instructor was engaging students with the course projects in every stage of learning so as to enable them practice what they had already learned, for instance, in learning how to collect qualitative data, students had a hands-on activity in every stage of the process, such as how to do interview, how to conduct observation and gather field notes. We created several scenarios in order to practice every method of data collection, some students practiced how to conduct the interview and others observed if the interview followed all necessary procedures such as asking good questions, considering interview ethics, and collecting important information from people. The aim of classroom activities was to for students to put into practice what they had already learned theoretically, so as to enable them grow mature and be successful in collecting and understanding people's experiences, opinions, feelings, knowledge as well as to lead arguments and develop their critical thinking.

Based on my practical experience and observation as international student in China, I have also experienced passive learning in some of classes. The teaching style is mostly teacher-centered and students are not well engaged in the classroom which makes students to experience passive learning. For instance, teachers only used power point presentations (PPT) to lecture, with little chance to engage the students into different class activities and limited opportunity for the students to ask questions. Nevertheless, most of the classes using an active method of instruction were taught by teachers who had international experience (those who were working or studying abroad e.g. US or Europe); they were very flexible in interacting with international students coming from different backgrounds and this made the whole learning and teaching process to be more interactive, thereby promoting transformative learning among the students.

Moreover, the qualitative inquiry course created the foundation of this study. On the sixth week of a course, an instructor introduced a collaborative writing method by using the research method called community auto-ethnography (Toyosaki, Pensoneau-Conway, Wendt, & Leathers, 2009). The primary objectives of collaborative writing were to explore the students' experience about teaching and learning qualitative inquiry as resistance to the challenging issues existing in higher education institutions. Teacher-students dialogically collaborated through writing, critique, arguments and resistance to challenging issues existing in higher education institutions. Under teacher-students dialogue, several themes emerged such as: publish or perish as academic culture in higher education institutions, active versus passive learning methods, academic pressure among teachers and students in universities etc. Every student was required to select one theme to argue on how it could be challenged in order to promote transformative learning within the university. After obtaining a collective experience, I deliberately selected the theme on how active versus passive learning can contribute to transformative learning experiences which, I believed, was a critical issue which could be subject for much discussion in many Chinese universities.

International Students' Experiences

To attain the research aim, International students from different schools within the university were recruited to share their experiences through the focus group interviews. The ensuing responses from participants helped to compare my reflective journals with the participant's answers relating to the culture of active versus passive learning and the contribution of transformative learning. Participants' responses centered around three general themes: teacher-students' interaction, communication skills and International-Chinese students' relationship

Teacher-students' interaction

Commenting on their experiences in the culture of active versus passive learning, similar results as was shown in the existing literature, confirmed the domination of passive learning in many classes. One participant shared his experience on how he stopped engaging in class discussions because interaction and questioning were not the norm in class.

I still remember some classes with little interactions...I was expecting to have more discussion in the class, teachers to engage students in critical discussions, but to a larger

extend it was not the case... You only listened to the instructor then you went home....at the beginning I found myself talking too much in the class, and all the Chinese students always remained quiet; at a certain time, I also stopped talking again.

Another participant shared how the emphasis of active teacher-students' interaction in class enabled them to express their experiences, opinions, feelings, knowledge, critique, and even to stand against certain issues with success, all of which promoted meaningful transformative learning and critical thinking

I remember in one class, a teacher was very friendly and interactive...Several times the teacher came to class and addressed students individually: "hey how are you, how is your program going? What challenges are you facing in this course? Etc. At this moment you get to talk to a teacher directly. I really liked this kind of interaction.

Communication Skills

Another key theme that emerged was communication skills. Some instructors were described as lacking English oral presentation skills. They were said to make interactive classroom teaching difficult and to encourage passive teaching style. This situation led to frustration and boredom among the students in class. The following comment illustrates how lectures were delivered by reading slides one after the other due to lack of communication skills to present and clarify the information.

One instructor only uses PPT; the PPT is about what the instructor has about that particular course, but they just present PPT, they don't give us the chance to discuss or ask questions. We just sit and listen... I know they are not lying, but I don't know, because I cannot ask questions. I am not very cool with this style of teaching.

Though this theme is confirmed through one quote, the majority of respondents commented about the lack of English oral presentation skills by some of the instructors. This finding has a negative impact on transformative learning because it is difficult to develop transformative learning and critical thinking under this dominant approach of passive learning.

International-Chinese students' relationship

Echoing the findings of Ellsworth (2006) and Troop & O'Riordan (2017) which asserted that relationality is part of a connected approach to transformative learning, these researchers added that, "In a shared classroom practice, the opportunity to engage diverse perspectives in a democratic style holistically honours the learner's voice and strengthens the relationships that enable us to create in mutually transforming ways."

Participant's responses revealed the difficulty in creating an interactive atmosphere in class thereby causing them to feel very isolated from the Chinese students. Lack of effective programs to bridge international and Chinese students was mentioned as one of the reasons. This trend was reflected by participants who had similar experience. As one of them stated:

I remember one class in which we were only two foreign students; the rest were Chinese students. Most of them were afraid to talk and interact with us ...Unfortunately a

teacher didn't prepare any kind of activity to facilitate interaction with the Chinese students. So, it was very hard to establish a relationship and to learn from each other. Moreover, the collaborative inquiry with international students through the focus group interviews also helped me to discover that international students made little efforts to advocate for transformative learning. Most of the students criticized the dominating passive learning methods, but did not take any initiative to have this concern addressed, which makes the authority not to take proactive measures to promote transformative learning. One participant argued that:

I think the position of international students is to keep quiet, get our degree and leave, even if some learning methods do not cultivate us the way we want...If we really need changes, we students in the various universities need to claim for it.

DISCUSSION

This study revealed the author's reflective journal and international students' experiences with the culture of active versus passive learning and how we can document transformative learning. Based on the revealed experiences as elaborated in my reflective journals and participant's responses, there is no doubt that the active learning method is the best way to promote transformative learning among students. This resonates with the ideas proposed by Mezirow (1978), who define transformative learning as an approach to teaching based on promoting change. The transformative pedagogy is a significant potential in shaping and transforming the minds of our meaningful future teaching and learning. The culture of active against passive learning is a critical agenda in contemporary world. Such communicative praxis is significant potential for course instructors and students in sharing their experience of teaching and learning.

CONCLUSION

Higher education institutions are places where antagonistic teaching methods and sets of constructs are experienced daily. This study presented an empirical evidence of the active learning method and its role in stimulating transformative learning in university. In providing author's reflective journals and an analysis of international students' experiences, this study has significant implications for the field of higher education as it considers transformative pedagogy as a crucial component in the improvement of meaningful teaching and learning and the promotion of changes in students' thinking and practice.

Limitations and Future Research

Within the constraints of research, we could practically recruit only international students in a single university. It is therefore suggested that future research could further investigate the experiences of international students on the culture of active versus passive learning across various higher education institutions. The perceptions of international students in a given institution might differ from those of students in other well-developed institutions which are considered as world-class universities. Moreover,

the participants volunteering in the study were those who were confident enough to share their thoughts and perceptions in focus groups interviews; it is possible that they may have different experiences from those who did not choose to participate in the study. I encourage future research to be carried out on these various methods. For instance, quantitative or mixed-methods research could provide a better understanding and richer data on the culture of active versus passive learning and how transformative learning could be promoted in universities.

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