Chapter 13
Epistemic Dissonance Encountered: Academic Adaptation Experiences of Chinese Students in a Canadian University

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ABSTRACT

This chapter is based on a qualitative inquiry looking into the epistemic acculturation experiences of the Chinese students in Canadian graduate programs. Guided think-aloud activities were conducted for participants to compare their learning experiences at home and in Canada through an epistemic lens, and to examine whether their preferences have changed after one semester studying in a Canadian University. Results showed that participants aligned their learning experiences in China predominantly with the description of the Realist epistemic views, whereas they associated their learning experiences in Canada with the Contextualist and the Relativist epistemic views. In addition, all the participants reported that they value the learning experiences in Canada more. Altogether 90 per cent of participants claimed that they have experienced some degree of epistemic change. Findings are useful for facilitating international students’ adaptation to new learning environments.

INTRODUCTION

A recent British Council (2013) report has predicted that there will be 3.85 million mobile higher education students globally by 2024; up from 3.04 million in 2011. The United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada are among the top destination countries for international education. For example, in Canada, as reported by the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (AUCC, 2010), international
student enrolment has been steadily on the rise for the past fifteen years. China alone contributed to 30 per cent of the Canadian international student population in 2012, and the number of Chinese students in Canada grew 20 per cent from 2011 to 2012 (CBIE, 2013). To keep pace with the internationalization of higher education, and most importantly to successfully support international students, there is a need for a better understanding of their perceptions of the learning experiences, and the difficulties and concerns during their sociocultural and academic adaptation in the host milieu.

Accordingly, research in this regard has been rapidly expanding, involving efforts at different levels. For example, the Canadian Bureau for International Education (CBIE) has been conducting research on a regular basis to evaluate the experience of international students in Canada by using a benchmarking survey. While the ultimate purpose of these activities is to inform policy and practice at both governmental and institutional level to attract more international students, the resulted reports (e.g., CBIE, 2009) cover a wide range of aspects of international student experiences. Among these are awareness of and attitudes towards Canada, problems experienced, adjustment issues, and overall satisfaction.

Studies on different aspects of adaptation experiences are also prominent in the research literature. For example, some researchers have focused on cross-cultural adaptation in general (Campbell & Li, 2008; Cemalcilar & Falbo, 2008; Jiang, 2010; Ward & Masgoret, 2004), whereas others have focused on more specific topics such as acculturation and psychological adjustment (Dao, Lee, & Chang, 2007; Leung, 2001; Major, 2005; Spencer-Oatey & Zhaoning, 2006; Wang & Mallinckrodt, 2006), stress or anxiety affiliated with the adaptation process (Fritz, Chin, & DeMarinis, 2008; Lee, Koeske, & Sales, 2004; Ying, 2005), or cross-cultural academic adaptation (Durkin, 2008; Liang, 2004; Wan, 2001; Xu, 2002). An important construct that is frequently used among these researchers is known as acculturation, which has been commonly defined as “the change in individuals whose primary learning has been in one culture and who take over traits from another culture” (Marden & Meyer, 1968, p. 36).

International students are very likely to be pressured to acculturate, as they are between cultures. Actually, researchers agree that experiences in the initial phase of international students’ sojourn are especially intense. Students have been described as being “uprooted” (Kim, 2000) or experiencing “education shock” (Mestenhauser, 1988). When individuals are challenged by such drastic experiences of disorientation or shock, they are often thrown in a state of uncertainty wherein the known and the learned is questioned (Zaharna, 1989). As a consequence, their beliefs about the nature of knowledge and the ways of knowing (that is, their epistemic beliefs) may be challenged or threatened. This chapter provides an in-depth understanding of Chinese international graduate students’ epistemic acculturation experiences and their perceptions of their learning experiences at home and in Canada through an epistemic lens.

BACKGROUND

Epistemic beliefs refer to individuals’ beliefs about the nature of knowledge and knowing (Hofer & Pintrich, 1997). Evidence has been accumulating that “epistemological thinking matters” (Kuhn & Weinstock, 2002). For example, it is empirically supported that epistemic beliefs have direct and indirect effects on learning, including the types of learning strategies that students use (e.g., Muis & Franco, 2009; Schommer, Crouse, & Rhodes, 1992), cognitive processing (e.g., Kardas & Howell, 2000), conceptual change (e.g., Qian & Alvermann, 2000), metacognition (Muis & Franco, 2010), and self-regulated learning (Muis, 2008).