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## Cooperative learning vs Confucian heritage culture's collectivism: confrontation to reveal some cultural conflicts and mismatch

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**Abstract** Asian countries with Confucian heritage culture (CHC) such as China, Vietnam, Singapore, Korea and Japan have been proven to share characteristics of a collectivist society. Researchers agree that this collectivist mentality strongly supports cooperation that CHC's learners/workers best perform in groups. However, little is known about the other side of the coin. Whilst applying a method born in one culture to another, cultural differences have been forgotten. The so-called global application has led to a situation in which a Western model is forced to launch in a completely new and different context. This new context and the existing cultural values are not always incorporated into the implementation of a Western concept of cooperative learning. Consequently, it does not necessarily follow that all forms of cooperative learning will surely succeed within a CHC environment. As a result of ignoring, stereotyping and underestimating cultural and educational characteristics, in CHC countries, the implementation of constructivism and one of its applications—cooperative learning—has ended up in failures, suspicion or resistance. The authors would like to question (1) the fixed assumption that “group-work surely works in CHC countries” and (2) the domination of developmentalism in education nowadays and its mismatch with cultural assets. With this paper, the authors contribute to the recent call for culturally appropriate pedagogy.

**Keywords** CHC countries · Confucian · Collectivism · Group learning · Cooperative learning · Culturally appropriate pedagogy

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## 1 Introduction

*An example: the silence of the lambs and the monetary cooperative learning group* Samantha Burk, an American teacher from California, suddenly froze in an oddly quiet classroom. She had done nothing more than to hand some English exercise out to these Vietnamese students and ask them to work in groups. After a lot of encouragement, the students moved reluctantly into groups. A few hissed and growled because some girls did not want to sit together with the boys. Then, within just a few seconds, the whole class was in chaos with 54 students all running and calling for their best friends to make groups. When they had all settled down and the class was once again quiet, Samantha urged: “Come on! Let’s discuss the picnic that your group would like to have.” Only a few students started whispering softly, one eye on their group mates and one eye on Samantha. It was a long time before the first group was ready to reply, but by then, the class had come to an end. Samantha decided to make the discussion a written group assignment. The papers were submitted a week later. Everything was better than expected. However, Samantha later found out that in two groups, the students paid money to one group member and this one did all of the work.

The interpretation of this example is discussed in the following sections of the paper.

## 2 Confucian heritage culture’s<sup>1</sup> collectivism supports cooperative learning<sup>2</sup>

In this section, we look first at how collectivist mentality supports group learning. Around 500 BC in a divided China, Kong Ze (latinized as Confucius) was famous for a non-religious teaching that can be described as a set of practical ethics for daily life. The key principles of Confucian teaching are (Hofstede 2003):

1. The stability of society is based on unequal relationships between people. The *wu lun* (five basic relationships) are: ruler–subjects, father–son, older brother–younger brother, husband–wife and senior friend–junior friend, based on mutual and complementary obligations: junior partners owe seniors respect and obedience. The senior owes the junior partner protection and consideration.
2. The family is the prototype of all social organizations. A person is not primarily an individual but a member of a family. Harmony and consensus are ultimate goals.
3. Virtuous behaviour towards others consists of not treating others as one would not like to be treated. A basic human benevolence towards others.
4. Virtue with regard to one’s tasks in life consists of trying to acquire skills and education, working hard, not spending more than necessary, being patient and

<sup>1</sup>CHC countries: This term is used for countries with CHC background, but to some extent can also be understood as Asian countries in general, i.e. countries more or less do not share CHC background but do have the characteristic of a collective society (see Hofstede 2003 for more details).

<sup>2</sup>The term “group learning” is used to cover both approaches: cooperative learning and collaborative learning. “Cooperative learning” used in the title is merely for better recognition and contrast. For the differences of each approach, see discussion in part [Fourth Dimension: Uncertainty Avoidance](#).

persevering. Conspicuous consumption is taboo, as is losing one's temper. Moderation is enjoyed in all things.

Collectivist Confucian heritage culture's (CHC) family happens to be the first group environment into which each person is born with a specific role to play from his/her first living day. Children grow up and think of themselves as a part of a "we" group, a relationship which is not voluntary but given by nature. Earley (1989, cited in Hofstede 2003, p. 66) showed that Chinese workers performed best anonymously and in groups. They performed worst as individuals and with their names marked on the products. The team feeling is formed among learners of CHC much faster and easier than in other cultures. At the end of a project between Hong Kong students and students from Eindhoven University, The Netherlands, only 27% of the Dutch participants agreed that they had experienced team feeling, whilst 85% of the Hong Kong students indicated that they had experienced a global team spirit, surprisingly not among themselves but with their European counterparts (Vogel et al. 2000).

The CHC's family emphasizes the family's interest and the interest of everyone in the family as a whole. This forms a *collective goal* in the family, a cooperative environment where everyone is obliged to accept a certain set of commitments, under *shared responsibilities*. Here is a fable that all Vietnamese children have to learn when they are just 8 years old: a father once gave his sons a bundle of chopsticks and challenged them to break with a big reward. Every son tried hard but no one succeeded. The father then untied the bundle and broke the chopsticks one by one. "Too easy that way!"—cried the sons. But then their father calmly said: "This is my lesson! If you are separate, you are weak. Stay together, you are invincible!"

The CHC's traditional family, with all of the characteristics mentioned above, mirrors interestingly the modern principles of group building. Economist Astorga (2002) even ironically claimed that "...the West has developed an ingenious way to package and operationalize a concept and practice that obviously has traces of Eastern fingerprints all over it. Long before Kurt Lewin tinkered with group dynamics in the 40's at MIT, Lao Tzu (Confucius) and his assistants over twenty six centuries ago were already extolling the virtues of collaboration and group effort complete with a veneration for life, nature and space. For the most part, credit and accolade are now ascribed to Lewin especially when groups and collective behaviours are talked about."

With this cultural asset, CHC learners not only show a preference for group learning (Chan and Watkins 1994; Sullivan 1996; Tang 1996; Park 2002; Hofstede 2003), but, in some contexts, such as with CHC learners in Western countries, they also proved to do better in groups (Earley 1989, cited in Hofstede 2003). Cooperative learning is strongly suggested for CHC learners (Salili 1996). Cultural perspectives are outrageously used to explain, confirm and reconfirm the latent centuries old credits of collectivism (Chan and Watkins 1994; Curro 2003; Tjosvold and Fang 2004). All in all, it seems that researchers have reached a consensus and settled finally upon the verdict that the collectivist mentality emphasizes group characteristics and, in one way or another, guarantees group success.

### 3 CHC's collectivism vs cooperative learning: applying cooperative learning in CHC countries—cultural conflicts

According to Hofstede (2003), culture differs along five dimensions: power distance, individualism–collectivism, masculinity–femininity, uncertainty avoidance, and short-term orientation–long-term orientation. The continuum “individualism–collectivism” is only one of these dimensions, bearing the characteristics of only one aspect of a culture as a whole. Researchers generally view group learning along the single continuum “individualism–collectivism.” However, cooperative learning, as an educational method, should be objectively and clearly researched in, not one, but a system of five cultural dimensions. Besides, collectivism can only be a source of motivation for group learning. Collectivism clearly does not always *mean* group learning. To begin the debate, the framework of Hofstede (2003) and the statistics of IBM employees in the book *Cultures and organizations—software of the mind* will be used for this analysis.

#### 3.1 The first dimension: power distance

Definition: Power distance is the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions expect and accept that power is distributed unequally (Hofstede 2003, p. 28).

For this dimension, CHC countries score highly on the power distance index (PDI) with Malaysia on top with a score of 104, Singapore with 74, Hong Kong with 68 and Taiwan with 58. Confucius maintained that the stability of society is based on *unequal relationships* between people, in this case, the pair teacher–student. The position of teachers in CHC countries is not only a teacher but a model of correct behaviour. Students stand up when the teacher enters the classroom and are allowed to speak only when invited to do so. Rarely does a student dare to question a teacher and (s)he is treated with deference even when no longer at school. Mostly, this respect remains for life (Scollon and Scollon 1995). There is a saying in Korea: “One does not dare to step on a teacher’s shade.” In Vietnam and China, a teacher is ranked second, after the king and above the father: the king–the teacher–the father.

To return to cooperative learning in the classroom, group work means working within a social constructivist environment in which students, by their collective knowledge, may exceed the knowledge of their teacher and thereby bring the teacher’s knowledge into question. The change of status also means that a quiet, orderly class will no longer exist, and various social complex situations will materialize. This happened in a Vietnamese school. Whilst giving his lesson, a teacher somehow made a mistake and gave the wrong translation of the word “redneck.” A student spotted the mistake. Instead of accepting that this was a mistake, the teacher felt offended and said: “If you think you know more than me, come *up* here and replace me as the teacher!” (personal communication, 2002).

The question here is:

1. Is it possible for a teacher to lower him/herself from a position of sacred and inviolable correctness to someone who dares to accept that (s)he might make mistakes or that (s)he does not know the answer? When encountering such

problems in the teacher–student relationship, is it possible for a teacher to forget that (s)he is always right; to forget that (s)he is a ruler so that problems can be resolved in a spirit of cooperation and social constructivism?

Due to the strong *need* for dependence, Hofstede (2003) argued that teacher is supposed to take teaching in action, not students with gaining knowledge actively in action. The teacher is supposed to actively teach, and the students are supposed to passively learn. When the students are asked to actively participate, it is quite likely that the students would react in the same way as the students reacted in the example of Samantha's class: her students talked with one eye on the group and one eye on the teacher. They are perplexed with the right of self-control. The education process is teacher-centred; the teacher outlines the intellectual paths to be followed and initiates all communication (Hofstede 2003). Besides textbooks, the teacher is the ultimate, the one and the only source of knowledge in the classroom (Maley 1983). The stream of knowledge passes along a one-way street from teacher to students. The reverse occurs in a cooperative learning situation. Knowledge begins with the students themselves, and, within the group, the students maintain an even higher level of knowledge. The teacher, according to Johnson and Johnson (1994), plays the role of a guide, a facilitator who moves from group to group to observe and to motivate learning. Here is the second problem:

2. Is it possible for a teacher to lower him/herself from a position of honour, being the ultimate source of knowledge, to a silent and patient facilitator?

Clearly, in CHC countries, culture has somewhat assigned the classroom to be the teacher's kingdom of sanctity. The third question pops up:

3. If culture has somewhat created the strong need for dependence on the teacher, made the classroom the holy territory of the teacher, how can students become independent and autonomous enough to carry on group learning?

And there is evidence. Research shows that CHC learners are more likely to depend on the teacher (Chan 1999; Samuelowicz 1987) and not on themselves in order to engage in group learning. Kirkbride and Tang (cited in Chan 1999) stated that CHC learners prefer a didactic and teacher-centred style. Fourteen percent of Chinese students prefer to be spoon-fed by the teacher, whilst 21% learn better when most of the information is given by the teacher: they do not learn well when discovering for themselves (Kee and Wong 2004). Similarly, Ballard and Clanchy (cited in Kirby et al. 1996) agreed that the Asian culture and education system stressed the *re*-production of knowledge. Neuman and Bekerman (2000) argued that for a community where students had been as passive recipients of data, it would be difficult to apply a constructivist approach.

There is also a problem with the student–student relationship. Among a learning group, power distance does affect. According to Johnson and Johnson (1994), *shared leadership* means each member has a job to do, and the team has no formal leader. In contrast, Confucius said the society is based on *unequal relationships*. In CHC families, the father is the leader. At schools, the teacher is the leader. In a class, there is a monitor, each unit has a leader, then within each unit, every table (three to five students) has one sub-leader. Strong hierarchy rules

(Hofstede 2003). If there is a group, there is a leader. Without a leader, a group is not stable. In a meeting with a group that consists of three CHC learners and a Dutch student (Motivational Strategy Course, 2002), Dr. Mark Gellevij (Twente University, the Netherlands) asked the reasons for the group process's stagnancy. One Chinese student explained that they needed a leader, and that it should be the role of Dr. Gellevij to assign a leader to their group. In the example at the beginning of this paper, the students in Samantha's class are reluctant to take the initiative partly also because they do not know who should be the first to speak. Normally, this is the leader's role, and the leader is absent in this case.

From this perspective, the next question is as follows:

4. In what way could CHC learners surmount the need of formal leader in group learning and go for an equal shared leadership?

### 3.2 Second dimension: individualism–collectivism

Definition: Individualism pertains to societies in which the ties between individuals are loose—everyone is expected to look after themselves and their immediate family. Collectivism (as its opposite) pertains to societies in which people from birth onwards are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups which continue to protect them throughout their lifetime in exchange for unquestioning loyalty (Hofstede 2003, p. 51).

The individualism index shows CHC countries with a rather low score: Hong Kong with 25, Singapore with 20 and Taiwan with 17. Individualism and collectivism are introduced as polar points of a single continuum. Logically, a low score indicates a high potential in the collectivist domain. This means a strong sense of in-group cohesion and successful cooperative learning. A recent study about work ethics between five groups of managers in North Vietnam, South Vietnam, South China (cosmopolitan), Southwest China and the US showed that North Vietnam is *more individualistic* than South Vietnam and Southeast China, but, contradictorily (at the same time), the *most collectivistic* of all (Ralston et al. 1999): see Table 1. Clearly, collectivism is not simply the mirror opposite of individualism, and they should be considered as two separate continua. This point of view is supported by Triandis (1995).

Additionally, individualism may be a multifaceted dimension consisting of more than one component (Triandis 1995). Some researchers have argued that *self* is actually very important in collectivist society: "... Why much of the discussion on Eastern culture points to collectivism, there is a neglect of individualism in the Eastern tradition. In fact, *self* constitutes a significant reference point in a person's value system. Human relationships actually extend from the self, and are centred around the self" (Lee 1996, p. 33, cited in Chanock 2003). In their study of CHC learners in University of South Australia, Kee and Wong (2004) found that there is a *preference to work individually* among CHC learners so that they can have full control of the final product. This is contradictory strongly with findings of various researches mentioned at the beginning of this paper. Park's (2002) study showed that Korean students have negative preferences for group learning, that this preference reflects their individualism and competitive spirit in Korean classroom. Similarly, Agelasto (1998) argued that in term of pedagogy in China, competition

**Table 1** Duncan multiple comparison results for the individualism and collectivism dimensions,  $p < 0.01$ 

Dimensions	Mean
Individualism	3.30 South Vietnam
	3.43 China
	3.64 North Vietnam
	3.82 China (cosmo.)
	4.04 U.S.
Collectivism	3.39 China (cosmo.)
	3.59 U.S.
	3.86 China
	4.34 South Vietnam
	4.41 North Vietnam

Source: Ralston et al. 1999

is generally more highly valued than cooperation. In her study of secondary schooling during Cultural Revolution, Shrik (1982, cited in Agelasto 1998) stated that "...cooperative learning rarely exists at any level of education in China. Study was organized individually, with no collective goal. Furthermore, the structure of educational selection and job assignment placed classmates in direct, face-to-face competition with each other." Note also that her book was named *Competitive Comrades*.

The next question, although may venture to another level of analysis, is derived from this argument:

5. If collectivism and individualism are not inverse ratio and each of them is such a complex problematic construct, can collectivism actually act as cultural supportive background for group-working success?

And that is not the only question raised in this dimension. We also need to look at the concept of *face* and *harmony*.

Losing *face* is an extremely serious personal damage which one should try to avoid at any price (Hofstede 2003). Being scared of losing face, many CHC learners dare not speak out with personal ideas either for fear of being thought silly or for fear of making others feel humiliated (Cocroft and Ting-Toomey 1994; Ting-Toomey 1988). Allowing a person to save face is more important than telling the truth. In this way, both parties for the sake of "giving face," "saving face" and "asserting face"<sup>3</sup> keep their mouths shut. A study of Volet and Kee (cited in Volet 1999) showed that CHC learners generally have low participation in tutorial discussion. Managing conflict among CHC learners/workers has been a problematic aspect according to researchers. Even in an online environment where face-to-face meetings are absent, they do still show reluctance to contribute to discussion (Pincas 2001, cited in Tjong and Yong 2004). In an attempt to explain this shortcoming of CHC learners, Tjong and Yong proposed several reasons in which *personal barriers* such as shyness, low self-esteem and lack of confidence were mentioned.

<sup>3</sup> Terms borrowed from Ting-Toomey's (1988) facework.

In the collectivist classroom, the virtue of *harmony* reigns supreme. Confrontations and conflicts should be avoided (Leung 1997; Ting-Toomey 1988; Hofstede 2003). Teachers dream of a class with little noise, and students try hard to make this dream come true. In a group setting, Chinese learners suppress their personal desires, avoid conflicts and hence avoid criticizing their peers or claiming any authority (Carson and Nelson 1996, cited in Jones 1999). CHC learners' main goal is to maintain group harmony, and this affects the *nature* of group interaction. To compare, we could compare this with the second premise of Johnson and Johnson's (1994) cooperative learning entitled "Face-to-face Promotive Interaction": *providing* each other with feedback; *challenging* each other's conclusions and reasoning; *advocating* the exertion of effort; *influencing* each other's efforts; *striving* for mutual benefit; and maintaining a moderate level of *arousal*. The question is, with all the restrictions of losing face, of trying to maintain harmony, of avoiding disagreements, of being shy and of having low self-esteem and low self-confidence, how can CHC learners *challenge* each other, *advocate* each other, *influence* each other, *strive* for each other and *arouse* each other. The Western approach of working in groups and dealing with conflict may therefore seem to be culturally inappropriate. Neuman and Bekerman (2000) in their study even advised caution in introducing Asian students to a constructive and cooperative learning approach.

Leading into the next dimension, there is now one more question:

6. How strong an influence does the fear of *losing face* have on the effectiveness of group learning? How strong is the influence of *personal characteristics* as a barrier to the effectiveness of group learning? How strong is the influence of the attempt to maintain *harmony* on the effectiveness of group learning?

### 3.3 Third dimension: masculinity–femininity

Definition: Masculinity stands for a society in which social gender roles are clearly distinct—men are supposed to be assertive, tough and focused on material success; women are supposed to be more modest, tender and concerned with quality of life. Femininity: both men and women are supposed to be modest, tender and concerned with quality of life (Hofstede 2003, p. 82).

CHC countries scored on both sides of this continuum. For the masculinity index, Japan is the champion with a score of 95; Hong Kong had 57 and Malaysia had 50. For the femininity index, Singapore scored 48 and Taiwan scored 45.

Let us read again what Confucius preached. The stability of society is based on five unequal relationships between people, one of which is husband–wife. Wife is subject to husband. A proper woman in CHC countries is someone who could well practice what are called the "three follows" (at home she follows her father; when married, she follows her husband; when widowed, she follows her son) and what are called the "four virtues" (good worker, good demeanour, good speech and good behaviour). Many Asian brides still follow their husbands by living in his family's house and by considering herself to be no longer a part of her own family but to be a part of her husband's family. The "four virtues" are still consistently being used to pass judgement. Traditionally, women have a lower social position than men, suffering from this inequality since a very early stage of life. The old saying



“Having one son means having but having ten girls means having nothing” comes to mind. Of all CHC countries, only in Vietnam do women seem to have some small social standing. This is partly due to a great number of heroines during the long history of wars. This passive role tends to have influences on group learning with mixed genders.

Researchers have not yet reached a consensus about the influence of cross-gender issues in cooperative learning. Many said that a heterogeneous group with both male and female learners would enhance learning and provide valuable opportunities to overcome gender discrimination (Slavin 1995; Kuh et al. 1997; Johnson and Johnson 1994). Sadker et al. (1991) took another direction and showed that group learning may be less equitable for female learners than autonomous learning. Group learning may reinforce stereotypes and biases. Male learners may discredit females. Females talk less in mixed group and are interrupted more often (Belenky et al. 1997). Sadker et al. (1991) stated that the differences and contradictory findings in cross-gender performance during cooperative learning suggest that, by itself, the implementation of group learning does *not* necessarily lead to a more equitable and effective learning environment.

Coming back to the CHC countries and the traditionally passive role of women, if Western female learners are likely unable to achieve an equitable and equal role when participating in a group with mixed genders, how will it be for CHC female learners? Especially for older adult learners, who are more likely to be judged with the “three follows” and the “four virtues” than the younger students? Gajdusek and Gillotte (1995) in their study also raised this question, aimed at female learners from cultures where women's voice or right to a voice is challenged.

Thus, one more question to add to the list:

7. In what way can female learners from CHC countries surmount their passive status (that they have been strongly influenced) in order to actively participate in group learning?

### 3.4 Fourth dimension: uncertainty avoidance

Definition: Uncertainty avoidance is the extent to which the members of a culture feel threatened by uncertainty or unknown situations (Hofstede 2003, p. 113).

In this continuum, CHC countries differ greatly one from the other. Japan and Korea have a very high uncertainty avoidance index (UAI) score of 92 and 85, respectively, whereas Taiwan has a medium 69. Hong Kong has a very low 29, and Singapore has the lowest score of 8. Surprisingly, to the best of the author's knowledge, there is no research that properly explains this divergence.

Some researchers consider that countries with high UAI will have learners who only feel comfortable with structured learning, precise objectives, detailed assignments, strict timetables and who do not like predicting and guessing. In other words, they want to be told what they need to know and precisely how to prove that they have learnt it (Hofstede 2003; Munro-Smith 2003).

According to Strijbos (2000), the learning preferences mentioned above could be found in group work which has a *high amount of structure, a well-structured task and algorithmic skills*. This is the approach of the “cooperative extreme.” The

other approach, the “collaborative learning extreme,” requires a *low amount of structure, an ill-structured task and a synthesis skill* (Fig. 1).

Apparently, group learning cannot always be organized with well-structured tasks, precise objectives and with all the details available. Discussion and open-ended group tasks (collaborative approach) play a very important role in the process of learning and often give credit to learners who are more open with new ideas, free thinking and willing to take risks. Grashna (1972) describes these two learning preferences as *avoidance-participant*, with *avoidant* students try to avoid becoming involved in the class, whilst *participant* students look for opportunities to socialize and interact. Clearly, *participant* learners are more suited to group learning since *avoidant* learners do not want to take risks. It may also mean that they do not like conflict and pursue group harmony. This hypothesis fits perfectly with the virtue of CHC learners. But what could one say about Hong Kong and Singapore with their very low UVI scores? Does that mean that Hong Kong and Singapore learners prefer active, open-ended learning situations? Researches somehow proved the reverse (Chan 1999; Neuman and Bekerman 2000). The next question is therefore stated as follows:

- 8. In what way can CHC learners surmount the avoidance learning style in order to reach the level of collaborative participation in group work?

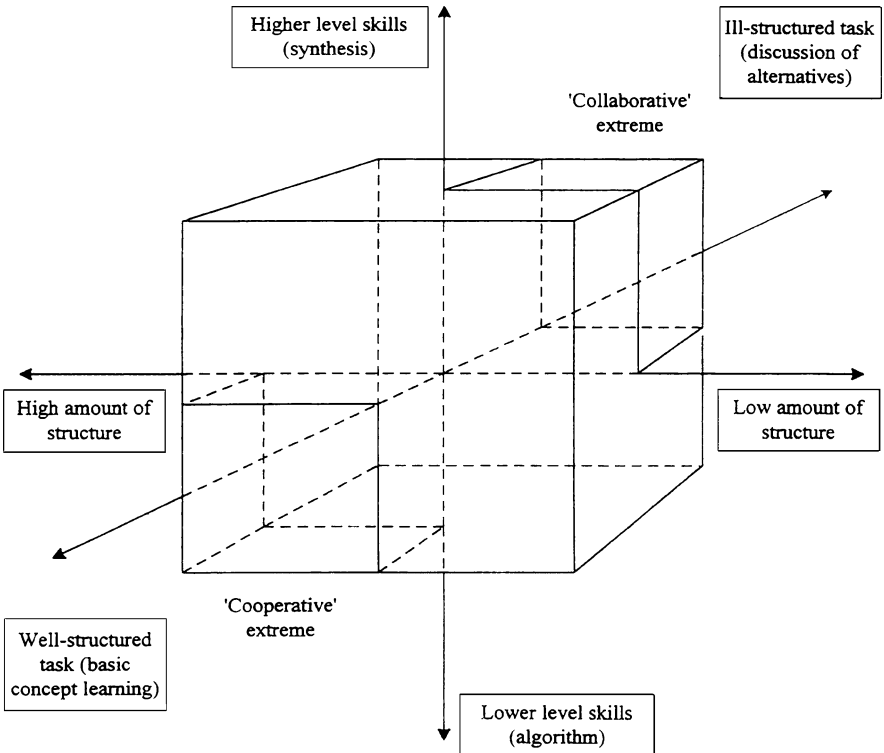


Fig. 1 The dimensions of group-based learning (Strijbos 2000)

### 3.5 The fifth dimension: short-term orientation vs long-term orientation

Definition: Short-term orientation stands for the fostering of virtues related to the past and present, in particular, respect for tradition, preservation of “face” and fulfilling social obligation. Long-term orientation stands for the fostering of virtues oriented towards future rewards, in particular, perseverance and thrift (Hofstede 2003, p. 165).

The top five positions in the long-term orientation index (LTO) are taken by five CHC countries: China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan and Korea.

In terms of learning, this spectrum can be seen as a measure of how patient learners are with the results of their learning (Chang 2003; Munro-Smith 2003). The high LTO in CHC countries suggest that CHC learners may take time (presumably to digest the materials), whereas others want to get the task done as soon as possible. An interesting example could be found again in the cooperative project between Eindhoven University, The Netherlands, with the Hong Kong students mentioned above. The Hong Kong students found it more difficult to cope with the pressure of time constraints that pushed them to work harder.

The Dutch tended to start out enthusiastically by coming up with many suggestions and information about the joint assignment. However, many were disappointed with the initial scarce input from the Hong Kong side. This caused a dip in their commitment to the project. Towards the end of the project, the input rate of the Dutch students rose again because of the pressing deadlines and the growing input rate from the Hong Kong side. The Hong Kong students generally started to work just before the deadlines. Most of the time, the contribution from the Hong Kong students lagged behind the Dutch contribution. However, just before the deadlines for the project activities, the input rate from the Hong Kong participants

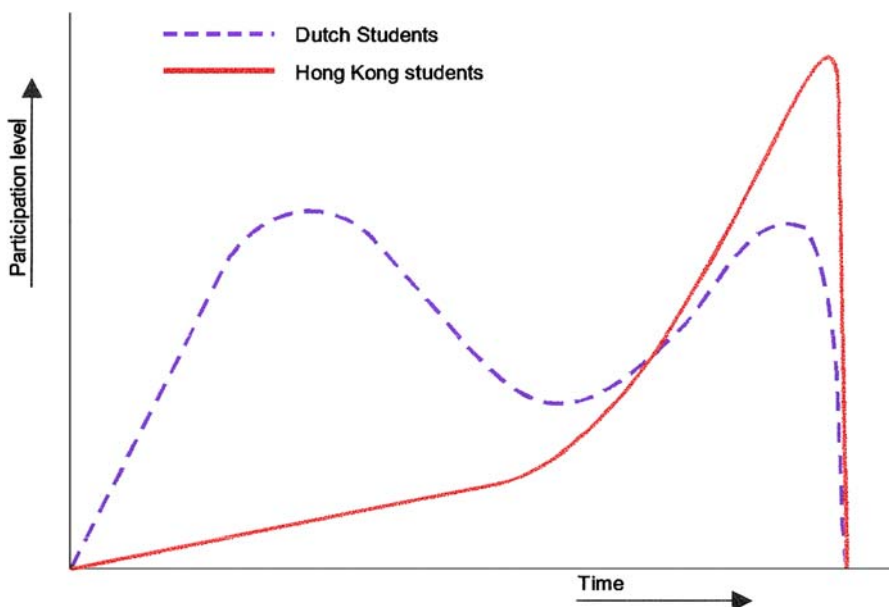


Fig. 2 Participation dynamic (Vogel et al. 2000)

**Table 2** Term orientation style and effected attitudes (Chang 2003)

Short-term time orientation	Long-term time orientation
What are the <i>deadlines</i> for the assignments for all my subjects?	The exam is <i>around</i> November, right? And there will be assignments <i>somewhere</i> during the semester? Ok!
I have to contribute at every possible tutorial.	So, ok, <i>sometimes</i> I contribute more, <i>sometimes</i> less. It evens up <i>eventually</i> anyway. No fuss!
I have to be at tute by 3.15 but I want to be out of there by 3.55 so I can be at the next lecture <i>on time</i> .	It's ok! I'll make it! <i>As long as in the long run</i> , I attend the tutes and lectures, that's fine!

increased considerably. One student described the difference between both cultures as follows: Netherlands—more creative and innovative; and Hong Kong—prudent but effective (Vogel et al. 2000; Fig. 2).

Chang (2003) has illustrated the two types of orientations in Table 2.

Fluid time value has been considered to be one the characteristics of collectivism (Gydykunst and Ting-Toomey 1988). Members of collectivistic cultures, which value polychromic time rhythm (vs monochromic values or linear time value in individualistic cultures), are likely to practice the eventual or long-term reciprocity norm. Time is limitless and not quantifiable. There is always more time. Wessel (2003) states that polychromic time people change plans and deadlines frequently, consider schedules as goals instead of imperatives. And unfortunately, there is another question:

9. In what way can CHC learners surmount the fluid time habit in order to manage and cope with time pressure in group learning according to the Western model?

## 4 Applying cooperative learning in CHC countries: educational system conflicts

### 4.1 Class size

Back in Samantha's class! The total number of students that she had to manage is 54. If an effective learning group should consist of no more than four students (Johnson and Johnson 1994; Kagan 1994), there will be 13–14 groups working simultaneously in a room of 9×9 m.

The teacher–student ratio is very high in CHC countries. Japan has classes with 50 students and a legal maximum for elementary classes of 45. There are 50–60 students per class in China and 43 in Korea (statistic cited in Kirkpatrick 1998).

Researchers have shown the long-term benefit of smaller classes. The optimal class size should be 1:15 according to various analyses on grouping effectiveness and academic achievement (Achilles 1996). During a study tour by a Vietnamese delegation from the Ministry of Education and Training to Utrecht University in the Netherlands (Nov. 2004), a delegate said that many schools in Vietnam are refusing to apply “group-based” learning as a method of teaching because class size, one among many reasons, is mentioned as being too large.

## 4.2 Time and curriculum constrain

Forty-five minutes! Time allocation is strict. Education curriculum is a whole-nation program. At a particular time, the teacher will teach *that* lesson and the students will do *that* exercise and read *that* book. Finding a place within the existing curriculum for a group project is a real problem. The volume of study is also heavier with 6 days per week of schooling for both Vietnamese and many other Asian students.

There are many reasons for this tightly stretched and inflexible program, but one might be the urge to achieve proposed goals. Smith and Ragan (1999), among others, have formulated the principles to determine the optimal degree of instructional support as follows. (1) When time is limited, the instructional strategy should be *supplantive*. (2) When high achievement of domain specific goals is higher priority than “learning to learn” skill, the instructional strategy should be *supplantive*. (3) When achievement of domain specific goals is universal for all learners (all learners are expected to learn at least a minimum level of competence), the instructional strategy should be *supplantive*.

Vietnam and China fit this scenario very well. The governments in these countries have a long list of educational goals to achieve in the process of modernization (Agelasto 1998; Pham Minh Hac 1998; Nguyen Dang Thin 2000<sup>4</sup>). More effort and attention is devoted to the *quantity* rather than the *quality* of education as a whole. Schools are under pressure from severe competition, and they are struggling with national plans and targets such as the number of graduates. A teacher who organized his class along the lines of “group learning” received complaints from neighbouring classes that his students are too noisy. He was also advised by the headmaster that “people look at the number of students that pass the national exam, not at how they learn. Therefore, stop it!” (personal communication, 2004).

## 4.3 Teacher quality

Baker and Giacchino-Baker (2003) stated that “the lack of adequately trained teachers to meet the demand of modern curriculum and deliver teaching effectively is a major cause of internal inefficiency in education.” Many student teachers assume that group-based learning is simply putting learners together with an assigned learning task. If a teacher simply puts this in practice, his/her students are likely to form *pseudo groups* (Johnson and Johnson 1994), which are even less effective than individual effort.

Although all of these problems are not directly related to *culture*, the problems are sufficiently important to ask this last question:

10. In what way can the obstacles of *class size*, *time and curriculum constraint* and *teacher quality* be surmounted in order to achieve effective group-based learning?

<sup>4</sup> The Vietnamese names (Pham Minh Hac, Nguyen Dang Thin, Le Van Giang, etc.) are written in their culturally appropriate order as follows: family name–middle name–first name.

Returning to Samantha's dismay when she discovered that students had cheated, cheating and the like are the result of *school pollution*. In Vietnam, bribery has become a serious problem in schools. It started with the role of diplomas in CHC mentality. Hofstede argued that in collectivist societies, a diploma is an honour not so much associated with the mastering of a subject but more with the gaining of social acceptance. This explains why in CHC countries the temptation is much stronger to obtain diplomas in some irregular way, by bribery or on the black market. Vietnam has acknowledged this as a serious problem (Le Van Giang 2003). In the case of Samantha, her students were influenced by the way corruption is happening in the schools and, in their turn, tried to solve a problem with money. The author is aware of the fact that this might be a case only in Vietnam (even though Chinese students may give similar stories but no official reports could be found), and hence, the problem is not included in the last question.

## **5 Developmentalism and sustainable development towards appropriate pedagogy**

Developmentalism is a form of romantic naturalism that has the premise about goodness of the natural. It assumes that the developmental directions issuing from the child's native tendencies and characteristics are optimal because they are part of "nature." Rousseau (1712–1778) and other European developmentalists active in the early history of developmentalism believed that formal schooling was not only unnecessary (because children already tend naturally to learn), but it also harms students by violating their natural propensities. Stanley Hall said that the school should be fitted to the child rather than the child to the school, and this concept has become a mainstay of educational orthodoxy (McCuller 1969). Classrooms should therefore be organized in a way that mirrors and supports the natural development of children, giving them the choice to learn and to make effort only if they feel interested and enthused. Study is expected to be more like fun than work (Stone 1996). The term developmentalism nowadays is broadly connected with its most recent methodologies: child-centred, student-centred or constructivism.

With the powerful wave of globalization, many educational theories and practices from Western countries have been transferred to and applied to Asia. Education leaders in Asia, concerned with reforming their education systems to meet the requirements of the new era of modernization and competition, have adopted numerous policies and practices from the other side of the world and expect to see the positive effects. However, *The Economist* (Roll over Confucius, 25-1-2003) has recently reported a very strange situation in China. Innovative schools with modern Western-based teaching and learning methodologies are being shunned by parents in favour of schools retaining the traditional educational methods (cited in Munro-Smith 2003). Agelasto (1998) stated that, in China, there was too much resistance from students to group learning and the instructors hesitate to apply this in their classes. A similar case is observed in Hong Kong where the effort of moving away from traditional teaching and learning has met with resistance and suspicion. A Western approach using constructivism does not seem to find a home in the main stream schools of Hong Kong (Edmond Law 2003). The resistance to and struggle against the application of developmentalism in Asian schools (in an attempt to employ ideas of developmentalism) can be seen in

research by Young-Ihm Kwon (2002). This researcher has discovered that all Korean kindergarten teachers in their study advocated the *child-centred* approach as the main aim of preschools, but 49% supported extrinsic motivation and all of them separated play time from work time which goes against the premise of developmentalism. There is a large gap between “belief” and “practice,” and the study suggested that any educational system is inseparable from a specific cultural context.

Going in a very different way is Pennycook (1999). He claimed that the history of teaching methods has been dominated by a Eurocentric version, and it *is* a history of ethnocentric and developmentalism. Developmentalism too often implies an upward, linear path of progress whereby whatever is happening *now* is presumed to be superior to what happened before. With this notion, it is easily conflated with notions of modernization and westernization, and then continues to construct the recipients of development aid as backward, underdeveloped, static and traditional, make this as *before* and hence is worse than what is *now* being applied in the West. As a result, developmentalism divides the world in detrimental ways in which the concept “self and other” (Pennycook 1999) is created with parts of the world being given the labels and there comes the categories of Othering (dichotomous productions of Self and Other; East and West; Confucian and Christian), stereotyping (fixed assumptions: collectivist people means group work, etc.). Stereotypes have somewhat guided the practice (Chanock 2003). A method born of one culture may be adapted to another *only* when relevant cultural differences are rigorously considered. Hofstede, though with all his works of trying to identify and to label different cultures, also warns of behavioural variability within cultural groups and how variability differs between groups. However, it is *not* enough. What is being discussed is not only the variability, but also the “tendency to operate with static models of cultural differences, static definitions of culture that dichotomise polarity of differences” (Pennycook 1999); again, it is also the way of self-assuming as being superior and even trying to assimilate the Othering (conscious or not) with ethnocentrism. There is no “one size fits all” when it comes to this level of practice.

*Sustainable development* should be the new criteria. We can envisage the potential of a sustainable pedagogy which is based upon the unique privileges of the learners and their unique context: a pedagogy that is *culturally appropriate* and which, at the same time, takes into account the *constraints of the educational system*. The notion of *culturally appropriate pedagogy* is with full respect for culture as differences: heterogeneous, diverse and dynamic. As Pennycook stated, “Product of such appropriation may be a hybrid form, different from and greater than sum of its original parts (heterosis).” The dilemma in countries and cultures of applications should not be a choice of “accept” or “reject” an educational practice but a compromise and a positive combination which is not only culturally appropriate but also superior to either of its initial forms. And with this belief, new research questions concerning a new sustainable model of instructional design in cooperative learning in CHC countries should be raised to answer this need in applied education.

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