

How relevant is Cultural Dimensions Theory? An empirical study of Sri Lankan undergraduate Business and Management students.

Abstract:

Research undertaken has reported profound differences in the studying practices of students across the globe. This research has ascribed difference to cultural dimension theory and the idea that there are clear differences in the way that certain societies approach teaching and learning. Cultural Dimension Theory has contributed to the bifurcation of learning into convenient classifications. “Asian” practices have been described as excessively teacher-centred and preoccupied with knowledge transmission. Whereas teaching and learning in western societies is portrayed as being more student-centred and knowledge creation. The purpose of this paper is to test these generalisations through empirical research with reference to Sri Lankan students enrolled onto a blended degree in Business and Management. The principal research question for this research is: In what ways do national culture influence study behaviours of Sri Lankan management students? The findings suggest that instead of accepting stereotypes of students, we should search for a deeper understanding of how, as individuals, contemporary students learn.

Key words:

Cultural Dimensions Theory; National culture; Sri Lanka; Strategic, surface and deep learning

Introduction

In his discussion of the changing nature of international business education, Drew (2014, 185) raises a fundamental concern for those who teach business across the globe:

The increasing variety of modes of delivery raises an important question, however-how to deliver the same material in different contexts and achieve the same learning outcomes.

Although this question focusses primarily on the ways in which we deliver the business curriculum, it searches for a better understanding of the impact of national culture on an international business study programme. It also infers that we should critically evaluate how students respond to it, as the two are inseparable from a pedagogical perspective. For an English university that delivers Business and Management undergraduate degrees to students in Sri Lanka through a blended provision of periodic visits and online learning, the issue of how students engage with their tutors and learning materials is of utmost importance. However, Marambe, Vermunt and Boshuizen (102, 301) suggest that:

Studies on differences between Western and Asian cultures suggest that student learning patterns may be connected to the power distance, uncertainty avoidance, collectivism and masculinity of local cultures.

As such, how can business educators mediate between the way they have designed their programme of study and the way in which students from a different culture approach learning?

This paper aims to address a key research question relating to how students from Sri Lanka approach learning at undergraduate level: In what ways do national culture influence study behaviours of Sri Lankan management students? As Aggarwala and Wu (2019, 2) acknowledge, ‘the international or cross-cultural setting can bring unique challenges to student learning...and misunderstandings due to language and culture differences’. For those who teach business in different cultural contexts, professional reflexivity and cultural intelligence are pre-requisites not only for professional development but also for the successful delivery of study programmes (Earley and Ang, 2003; Dibble, Henderson and Burns, 2019). Although Aggarwala and Goodell (2016, 1) draw attention to the need for ‘adaptation to cultural differences [as] an important component of global mind-sets needed by students and executives in international business’, it is also important that teachers are aware of the cultural contexts that may affect students’ learning. This paper offers a discussion of Cultural Dimensions Theory (CDT) and its application to education, with particular emphasis on how it has led to the over-generalisation and subsequent stereotyping of Asian students. The empirical research for this paper involved the distribution of a structured questionnaire to students based in Sri Lanka that elicited their views on their approach to study. The findings suggest that Cultural Dimensions Theory can only ever be a partial explanation for the variety in students’ approaches to study.

Literature review

Cultural Dimensions Theory and its impact on the interpretation of students as learners.

In his study of management practices across the globe, Hofstede (1980; 1991) claimed that it was possible to identify where ‘collective programming of the mind that distinguishes members of one group of people from others’ (1991, 5). In 1991, Hofstede added a fifth dimension- that of long versus short term orientation- to the four originally specified in 1980 and presented as a continuum of behaviour, which are: power-distance; individuality-collectivism; masculinity-femininity; and uncertainty avoidance. More recently, Hofstede has added a sixth dimension- indulgence- but as there is no score for this at present for Sri Lanka, it is not integrated into this research. In his analysis of cultural dimensions across a range of countries, Hofstede (1980) generated a series of scores to represent a distinct set of behaviours that were to be associated with that society. Table 1 shows Hofstede’s scores for a range of countries.

TABLE 1 INSERT HERE

Table 1: A summary of Hofstede categorisation of national cultures.

Source: Country comparison- <https://www.hofstede-insights.com/country-comparison/sri-lanka/>, and Raymond and Choon, 2017, 195.

The result of Hofstede's work (1980; 1991), is that much of the subsequent literature has accepted this underlying premise that 'national groups as having the same patterns of thought, action, and values' (Uzuner, 2009, 2). For example, Uzuner (2009, 1) claims that 'learning is not only dependent on optimal uses of available technologies, teachers' pedagogical knowledge, and students' motivation level, it is also dependent on the cultural (mental) representations learners and teachers bring to the learning situation'. A number of researchers have reported on the how national cultural may determine students' approaches to learning. Loh and Teo (2017, 194) contend that 'the importance of cultural influences on students' learning styles cannot be underestimated. Ardichivil, Li, Wentling and Stuedemann (2006, 94-95) claim that 'studies of cognitive strategies and methods of learning and knowledge generation suggest that cognitive styles differ by national and ethnic cultures'. Kim and Bonk (2002) reported on the task-focussed behaviours adopted by Finnish and American students, whereas Korean students tended to concentrate on the development of relationships as a way of tackling problems. The underlying premise of this 'culture-based learning styles approach' (Wong, 2004, 154) is that the way students approach learning is predetermined by a range of cultural factors that are indigenous to their country of origin. Uzuner (2009) explains why this could be so in terms of cultural hegemony (Gramsci, 1971), wherein common understandings and interests pervade societal values. For example, Wursten and Jacobs (2013) applied the Hofstede (1980) model to education and divided a range of countries into three categories: China, Malaysia, Indonesia and Vietnam; Thailand and the Philippines and Australia; and finally, the United Kingdom and the United States.

This categorisation of cultures into particular types has, however, been challenged since Hofstede published his research. For example, on an individual level, Bauman and Winzar (2017) refer to the importance of personal circumstances as well as values in driving behaviour. However, much of the criticism levied against Hofstede is concerned with his methodological approach and the validity of his findings. Beugelsdijk, Kostova and Roth (2017) argue that aligning culture to any given nationality is too simplistic and that researchers should aim to explore a fuller range of societal values that extend beyond Hofstede's relatively narrow scope. In particular, Tung and Stahl (2018) argue that there are still a number of unresolved methodological issues that have yet to be addressed, such as whether it is possible to identify groups in any given society who could be said to be truly representative of national culture. Those who do subscribe to the basic premise of Hofstede's approach have suggested some revision of CDT that focusses on the nature of data sampling. In a study of 53 countries, Minkov (2018, 253) argued that Hofstede's data samples 'were not good representations of the cultures from which they were drawn, whereas samples available today are far more representative'. This 'revisionist' position builds on the work of Beugelsdijk, Maseland and van Hoorn (2015, 223-224) who contend that 'cultural differences between country pairs are generally stable', and that 'Hofstede's dimensions of national culture can be replicated for difference cohorts using contemporary values data'. In their research, both Minkov (2018) and Beugelsdijk, Maseland and van Hoorn (2015) highlight Hofstede's individualism-collectivism pairing as being an important and defining characteristic of national culture.

A second critical perspective of CDT focusses on the stereotyping of the approaches to study adopted by Asian students. Rear (2017, 18) explains culture-based approaches are influenced by misperceptions of how Asian students learn. Much research, particularly in the United States, has focussed on the underperformance of Asian students studying in western universities. Zhao and McDougall (2008) reported on the apparent reticence on behalf of

Asian students to express their views in a classroom environment and Liang and McQueen (2000) indicated that Asian students were reluctant to ask questions and withdrew from discussions. All too often, however, references to Asian students either are over-generalised or relate largely to research that reports on Chinese students. As a result, “Asian” students in particular have been presented as preoccupied with surface learning and memorisation, in what Marambe, Vermunt and Boshuizen (2012, 301) describe as a narrow approach, which is characterised both by the intention to understand as well as memorise. For some researchers, this focus on memorisation also correlates to a lack of critical thinking and reflection by Asian students (Davies, 2013; Shaheen, 2016). For Rear (2017, 23), ‘the discourse of Asian learners as uncritical and passive has become widespread in Western universities, passing almost unchallenged as an educational orthodoxy’. It is important, however, to challenge this orthodoxy as Sri Lanka possesses a rich cultural heritage that draws from India and European traditions, and the idea of a uniform approach to learning across Asia is unsustainable.

In addition to ideas relating to cultural hegemony, a number of scholars have highlighted the importance of philosophy, and the role of the teacher. A number of studies have discussed how epistemological beliefs may influence how teachers conceive their role, and how students should approach study in a range of contexts (Bodycott and Walker, 2000; Dileki and Tezci, 2016; Paeuler-Kuppinger and Jucks, 2017; Yuan, 2017). Loh and Teo (2017, 194) report that much of the work in CDT (Murphy, 1987; Chan, 1999) portrays Asian students as passive recipients of knowledge, with the teacher directing learning. Indeed, Alvi, Iqbal, Massod and Batool (2016, 54) report on their study of Pakistani students that ‘an over reliance on help has often been related to low levels of self-regulation’ of learning. However, an increasing body of research challenges the characterisation of teaching and learning in Asia as universally authoritarian, teacher-centred and predicated solely on Confucian ideas.. One of the failings within Cultural Dimension Theory (CDT) is that of over-generalisation and a lack of historicity in failing to recognise how societies change and adapt to the influences of external influences. Kuo, Walker, Schroder, and Belland (2014) report that although the intensity and frequency of learner-instructor interaction is an important factor in a learner’s progress and level of satisfaction, it is the level of interaction with the learning material itself which is most significant.

Jayatileke and Gunawardena (2016) refer to the typology provided by Hall (1976) that describes ‘low-context’ Occidental societies, and ‘high-context’ Oriental societies such as Sri Lanka. In their research, Jayatileke and Gunawardena (2016, 53) describe that ‘high context cultures depend upon the contextual clues delivered through indirect verbal messages in order to extrapolate meaning.... High context societies like Sri Lanka will need the context to understand the message’. The role of the teacher as ‘Guruvaraya’, a provider of context to students is accentuated in Sri Lankan society, where the school system ‘is still teacher-centred and authoritarian... where the student is not supposed to argue or challenge the thinking process of the teacher’ (Marambe, Vermunt, and Boshuizen, 2012, 303). In addition to social deference, which is identified in Hofstede’s power-distance score of 80, the Sri Lankan education system is supposedly characterised by surface learning and a focus on success in examinations, rather than deep learning (Marambe, Vermunt, and Boshuizen, 2012).

The idea that Sri Lankans are culturally inextricably aligned to superficial forms of learning has been challenged recently in the research literature. In their research into the learning approaches of medical students across south east Asia, Chonkar, Ha, Chu, Ng, Lim, Ee, Ng and Tan (2018) report that only 9% adopted a surface approach to learning, whilst

40% and 51% pursued a deep and strategic strategies. Indeed, in this cross-country study, they suggest that students were driven to adopt deep and strategic approaches in their learning because of the demands of their profession and not their national culture. This research is replicated by Samarasooriya, Park Yoon, Oh and Baek (2019) who also report on the importance of professional drivers in the development of self-directed learning by trainee nurses. In addition, Sivalogathan and Abeysekara (2015) report on how management education in Sri Lanka is being remodelled in order to promote analytical skills and the capacity for innovative thinking. Recent research therefore challenges the stereotype view of Sri Lankan education and in particular highlights the role played by professional education in transforming education in Sri Lanka.

Considering the limitations of CDT

A number of scholars have identified limitations within CDT, which would infer that we should look for a more sophisticated understanding of how students engage with learning. Rear (2017, 18) suggests that the underlying failing within CDT is that it presents 'Asia as a monolithic entity, arguing that the stereotyping of Asian students as uncritical is an act of othering that fails to recognise the cultural and social diversity of such a large group of people'. Furthermore, much of the research (Wong, 2004; Young, 2017; Yuan, 2017) relates to studies of Chinese students and a focus on a Confucian approach to teaching, which may not apply to the Indian sub-continent. Amongst others, Gieve and Clark (2005) and Hurd and Xiao (2006) question the presumption of societal uniformity that exists within CDT. Goodfellow and Hewking (2005) challenge the 'essentialist' nature of CDT. Not only are most societies more complex than Hofstede's model could accommodate, we live in an increasingly globalised world that has changed remarkably since 1980. Moreover, many countries are now more multi-cultural and contain a range of sub-cultures, some of which are based on differences in ethnicity, religion or language. In an age where social media has transformed our understanding of the world around us and that of others, we must also recognise the relevance of social agency and the potential of individuals to step outside their culture and redefine their understanding of the world.

There is an increasing body of research looks beyond the confines of CDT for a fuller explanation of how students approach study. Lee, Lee, Makara, Fishman and Teasley (2017) point to a combination of individual, social and institutional factors that coalesce to influence learning. In particular, Young (2017) has highlighted the benefits of institutional change in order to re-evaluate how western universities respond to the social and learning needs of Asian students, and the need for academics to reflect on their professional practice. Lee et al. (2017) report that the most important determinant of student achievement is not national culture, nor gender, but the effectiveness of instructional methods and assessment regimes within institutions. This finding mirrors the research by Hong and Suh (1995) that reported that institutional practice is more important than cultural context in conditioning students' success.

In a study of learning practices in Sri Lankan higher education, Andersson (2008) explored the combination of enabling and disabling factors that impact on the success of undergraduate programmes in Sri Lanka. For Andersson (2008) although cultural issues do impinge on perceptions of learning, these are secondary to wider socio-economic and resource issues. Andersson (2008) offers conceptual framework consisting of eight categories (student, teacher, course, technology, support, institution, costs and society) that headline 37 key

determinants such as the expertise of staff, student motivation and institutional resources. The value in such an approach is that it enables a more holistic understanding of the learning environment in which students engage in study. In identifying a diverse range of factors beyond the confines of CDT, points to the complex interactions of factors in conditioning learning.

Research methodology

Using questionnaires to elicit students' views

Research data was obtained through the use of a two part questionnaire that was distributed through a virtual learning environment together with supporting forms related research ethics and informed consent. The first part involved students responding to a five item Likert-scale. The use of structured Likert-scale self-report questionnaires is established in learning strategies research (Chen and Rosi, 2013). A five-point Likert-scale questionnaire, distributed towards the end of the course, sought to explore the validity of Hofstede's model to their experience of learning. This questionnaire was composed of 13 statements, each of which was associated with one of the cultural dimensions identified by Hofstede (1980). For example, statement 11, 'learning is fundamentally related to achieving a qualification'; statement 12, 'learning is fundamentally about becoming a critical thinker'; and statement 13 'learning is fundamentally about doing enough to pass' were concerned with eliciting students' views on learning. Other aspects of CDT were touched on through statements that related to power-distance relationships (statements 9 and 10); individuality-collectivism (statements 3, 4, 5 and 8); masculinity-feminity (statements 6 and 7); uncertainty avoidance (statements 1 and 2).

Part two of the research questionnaire sought to elicit comments through the provision of 'open space' boxes that enabled respondents to develop their response in depth or to raise new themes that were not addressed in part one. In adopting a mixed methods approach, the research adopted what Tashakkori and Teddlie (2003, 45) describe as 'methodological bilingualism'. In mixed method research, the choice of research instrument is conditioned by the focus of the research, its context and the nature of the research population. Given that the research population were on the other side of the globe, there were certain constraints on the options available. Consequently, the approach taken was essentially pragmatic in nature and adhered to the advice from Punch (1998, 21) that suggested that researchers prioritise a focus on the research questions rather than adherence to 'methodolatry'.

There were limitations, however, associated with the research. Although the potential sample size was 180, the questionnaire generated feedback from 96 students, a response rate of 53%. The balance between male and female genders enrolled onto the programme has remained relatively even over a number of years. However, the level of response to the questionnaire from male students in Sri Lanka was significantly below that for female students. This may reflect particular cultural values and social deference within Sri Lankan society. A second limitation related to the choice of only one module- that of leadership- as the basis for comparison. As other modules cover different subject areas, and at different times during the year, it is possible that other comments could be made at different periods during the academic year.

Results:

The data generated by the questionnaire is presented below.

FIGURE 1 INSERT HERE

Figure 1. Data generated by male respondents.

FIGURE 2 INSERT HERE

Figure 2. Data generated by female respondents.

This set of data is indicative in two respects. Firstly, the raw data described in tables 1 and 2 provide an overview of how students responded in terms of the Likert response scale. Secondly, the *t*-test provides a way of interpreting any statistical difference between male and female students, with the highest-ranking statement inferred the most marked difference between the genders. The data derived from the questionnaire is presented below, was analysed in two categories: Sri Lankan male, and Sri Lankan female. It was decided to scrutinise these findings using a *t*-test, where the medians of each category are compared and ranked in terms of agreement with the statement, using the formula below, and applying a 0.5 level of significance. Importantly, the data is ranked in order to show the difference in responses from both genders. The intention was to test for any statistical significance in the median of each category in order to confirm H_0 or H_a . The data is presented in Table 2.

The *t*-test assumed two hypotheses, the null and alternative hypotheses were:

H_0 : The samples come from populations have equal means

H_a : The samples come from populations have means that are not all equal.

TABLE 2 INSERT HERE

Table 2. A summary of the analysis of the data generated by the questionnaire.

Analysis of statistical data

The statistical data infers some differences between the views of male and female students:

- Male students are more likely to challenge a teacher than female students
- Male students are more likely to prefer a highly structured teaching environment
- Male students are more likely to focus on viewing study instrumentally in terms of passing and obtaining a qualification
- Male students are less likely to ask for help from a teacher than female students

However, there are also some important areas of significant commonality between genders:

- Becoming a critical thinker is identified as very important.
- Group work is highly valued by both genders.

Analysis of emergent themes from the qualitative data

INSERT TABLE 3 HERE

Table 3. A representative sample of respondents' comments and thematic development.

The qualitative data was analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Nowell, Norris, White, and Moules (2017, 2) highlight the benefits of using thematic analysis in mixed methods research in that it ‘provides a highly flexible approach that can be modified for the needs of many studies, providing a rich and detailed, yet complex account of data’. These qualitative comments added to the bald quantitative data and enriched the insight of the learning experiences of the students. In particular, two dominant themes emerged. The first related to the use of social media, which had not been addressed as part of the questionnaire but was mentioned by a significant number of respondents. This finding highlights how technology is making student interaction more complex both in a temporal and spatial context, as well as influencing cultural norms of behaviour. These comments also serve to triangulate the quantitative data. Although it is clear that students valued learning in a structured format, this finding could be replicated in many societies, including the Occident as well as the Orient. The preference for collaborative forms of learning that is identified in the quantitative data is also highlighted through the use of social media as a way of communication. Perhaps the most striking finding is how the comments validate the finding from the statistical data that indicated students viewed learning as being more than simply aiming to pass in order to gain a qualification and that they did not view learning as solely concerned with attaining a qualification.

Discussion:

Addressing the research question: How do cultural factors influence learning

Sulkowski and Deakin (2009) reported how much of the literature on international study programmes was concerned with the dissonance between the way in which learning was designed and delivered, and the way that students preferred to study. The idea of authoritarian teaching regimes and social deference in Asian educational settings resonates with the power-distance pairing enunciated by Hofstede (1980) and when placed together with Hall’s (1976) cultural context framework, would infer that there is an indisputable causal association between culture and student behaviors (Uzuner, 2009; Bista, 2015). However, CDT is not without conceptual and methodological faults that lead us to question its validity.

In a critical appraisal of CDT, Rear (2017, 28) argues that ‘the evidence overwhelmingly suggests that Asian students do know how to think, and they are willing to engage critically and creatively with academic content.... It is unhelpful and potentially misleading to focus on cultural factors’. This critique infers that there is a need to revisit CDT and develop further conceptual approaches. This paper advocates a critical perspective of CDT as being too generalised and ahistoric, and raises further questions relating to the gender and cultural context that are identified by Kim and Bonk (2002), and Schunk and Usher (2013). A critical perspective of CDT aims to draw attention to other possible factors that influence learning, including institutional practices in relation to teaching and assessment. Importantly, an institutional perspective offers researchers a more nuanced and accurate insight into the way students of whatever background approach study.

The findings from this empirical study also question the ‘revisionist’ perspective of Minkov (2018) and Beugelsdijk, Maseland and van Hoorn (2015) that the ‘individual-collectivism’ pairing is a defining feature of learning cultures. Although there is an inference of instrumentalism, particularly amongst male students, the findings point to a wish to engage in critical thinking which counters much in the conventional CDT literature. (Marton, and Säljö, 1976; Biggs and Tang, 2011; Entwistle and Ramsden, 2015). These findings do infer that Sri Lankan students do value the opportunity to undertake research-rich learning and see learning more than simply obtaining a qualification. Indeed, the data would infer that these Business and Management students see the development of those skills associated with research-rich learning as an essential part of their professional growth. This finding mirrors recent research in professional education in Sri Lanka and would suggest that work-oriented learning is a powerful driver of learning. Useful research could explore how educational programmes are being transformed in order to meet the challenges posed by globalisation.

The findings from this research infer that we need to renew our conceptual understanding of the influence of national culture on learning. In simple terms, we could consider the learner with their personal and professional concerns at the centre of the discourse, rather than national culture.

INSERT HERE

Figure 3. A learner-centred re-conceptualisation of CDT.

Conclusions

The principal research goal for this paper was to gain some insight into the influence of cultural factors in the learning approaches adopted by students in Sri Lanka. The literature on international business education is replete with references to implied cultural biases that are linked to idealized conceptions of learning how we believe students should study. All too often this takes the form of investigations of the ‘problems’ Asian students experience in American or Australian universities. This paper asks that we reflect and consider how Higher Education in the Anglophone world can respond to the increasing diversity within the international student body. In this sense, the issue of meeting the needs of international students is part of a much wider concern that relates to changing practices within universities.

The view that particular societies are inherently and immutably ‘teacher-centered’ is ahistoric and indeed misleading. If we consider the history of educational practice in England, for example, during the nineteenth century, we can see how the regimental ‘monitorial system’ was dominant in schools but now is discarded. Teacher-dominated approaches to learning are practiced across the globe in various measures by those who claim a particular insight into how students learn best, irrespective of cultural background. Indeed, many students respond well to, and value, teacher-led learning, especially during the lead-up to examinations. This lapse into instrumentalism is a consequence of many factors such as

assessment regimes and institutional practice. Although much research highlights a history of didacticism within Oriental cultures, it is a history that the Occident shares. It is all too easy to make simplistic generalisations about teaching from afar. If we are to change the way students learn, then we should reappraise how we also will change and how we design the learning experience for students.

CDT offers a partial explanation of the way students from different cultures approach study. More recent revisions of CDT have accentuated the 'individual-collective' pairing as key in understanding students' approaches to study- although this paper suggests further research should be undertaken in order to validate this position. Although cultural factors may condition learning, these do not determine learning. In reality, students adopt a pragmatic approach that corresponds to their individual professional context and that aligns with those institutional practices such as teaching and assessment that create the learning environment within which students study. This paper contributes to the refinement of our understanding of the complexities of teaching Business and Management across cultures and calls for further development of how we conceptualise learning. It is clear that we must move beyond CDT for more informed and learner-centred interpretation of learning if we are to respond successfully to the challenge presented by Drew (2014).

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