

## Neocolonialism in education: Cooperative Learning in an Asian context

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This article is concerned with the influence of western educational approaches in non-western countries and societies. This influence is frequently referred to as educational neocolonialism in the sense that western paradigms tend to shape and influence educational systems and thinking elsewhere through the process of globalisation. Given the perceived pressure to modernise and reform in order to attain high international standards, educational policy makers in non-western countries tend to look to the west. Thus they may ‘borrow’ policies and practices that were originally developed and operated, and which appeared to be effective, in a very different cultural context to that of their own societies. In effecting such transfer, detailed consideration of particular aspects of the culture and heritage of the originating country is often neglected. To illustrate some of the problems that result from this, the article presents a case study of the application of Cooperative Learning, an educational method developed in the west, within an Asian context. Drawing upon Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner’s typology of seven cultural dimensions, our examination of western method and eastern context reveals a complex web of cultural conflicts and mismatches. The paper concludes by suggesting that non-western cultures should seek to reconstruct imported pedagogic practices in accordance with their own world views and in line with their own norms and values.

### Introduction

This article is written in response to a recent volume of *Comparative Education* (2007) that considered aspects of western psychological and educational theory and practice in diverse contexts. The main question addressed throughout was: ‘Are western educational theories and practices truly universal?’ A recurring theme was that simplistic forms of ‘transfer’ of western approaches to other contexts may often be inappropriate, and can potentially undermine existing practice. However, as noted in the editorial (Elliott and Grigorenko 2007), sensitivity to the dangers of inappropriate ‘transfer’ may be less evident in those contexts where policy-makers feel strong pressure to introduce educational reforms. This can be exacerbated by powerful international agencies whose raft of financial incentives and inducements often exerts a significant influence on practice. In sympathy with these observations, the present authors draw attention to Asian contexts where rapid reforms in education may run the risk of ‘false universalism’ involving the relatively uncritical adoption of various western approaches. Rather than examining this issue at the macro level, the paper

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focuses upon a particular educational method whose western origins appear not to play out unproblematically in Asian contexts.

The paper examines how globalising forces, in part promulgated by multilateral aid agencies (Tabulawa 2003), help to shape and influence the host educational system in ways aligned to western orthodoxies. In this context, the priority of policy-makers is not to have cognisance of cultural differences and national idiosyncrasies in driving reform, but rather to take a universalist perspective in relation to international standards, competitive league tables and comparative performance indicators. To highlight the need for a more contextualised approach, and to illustrate how inappropriate ‘cross-cultural cloning’ can be, we shall highlight the difficulties of incorporating Cooperative Learning – seemingly, a specific western approach – within a specific Asian context. The comparison will be undertaken using the seven-dimensional cultural framework of Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1997). Aspects of this form of pedagogic transfer are examined from psychological and educational, as well as contextual perspectives and a number of difficulties are highlighted and discussed. The article concludes, however, by briefly pointing out that Cooperative Learning is, in actuality, not a uniquely western practice but, rather, also has foundations within longstanding Asian educational traditions. Unfortunately, this cultural asset is overlooked in the rapid process of reform and modernisation. By adopting western theories and practices wholesale, and applying these in the classroom without rigorous research and consideration, the potential contribution of Asian education researchers has been largely bypassed or discounted. The field is dominated by policy-makers who lionise western practices, who want quick results and who feel unable to await the outcome of systematic and lengthy research studies. As a result, there is an absence of the healthy scepticism and problematising necessary when introducing any pedagogic initiative.

### Neocolonialism

While, as we note below, western societies have shown some interest in learning from the educational practices of non-western nations, the historical legacy of colonialism is such that the direction of cultural flow is largely uni-directional – ‘from “the West” to “the Rest”’ (Rizvi, 2004). As Crossley and Tikly (2004) observe, the vast majority of education systems that are examined by scholars have their origins in the colonial era. Within the field of comparative education there has been a resurgence of interest in postcolonialism (see, for example, *Comparative Education* 2004) not only because of the theoretical and intellectual insights that this can provide but also because, for some societies, the postcolonial legacy has resulted in educational systems that, ‘remain elitist, lack relevance to local realities and are often at variance with indigeneous knowledge systems, values and beliefs’ (Crossley and Tikly 2004, 149).

In a general sense, ‘neocolonialism’ is one element of the ‘new imperialism’ that reflects the interests of western nations and, more broadly, global capitalism (Tikly 2004). Neocolonialism involves a more subtle form of dominance than colonialism in that in the former the sovereignty of former colonised nations is recognised (Nkrumah 1965; Tikly 2004). The term refers not only to the continuation of past colonial practices but also explicit attempts by the colonising nations to maintain their influence in their former territories (Altbach 1982). The means by which this is achieved is often economic. Thus, control is exercised by decisions to grant or to refuse loans (particularly those financing otherwise unpayable third world debt). Often decisions

are taken by bilateral or multilateral institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the World Bank. By tying funding to explicit conditions, these cartels of states can impose a particular (western) view of education and development on debt-receiving countries and reinforce neocolonialism by further limiting the capacity of these countries to determine their own educational agendas (Resnik 2006). In order to qualify for loans, and other forms of economic aid, less developed countries (LDCs) are required to make concessions and take certain steps favourable to the interests of those aid agencies but which may be potentially detrimental to their own educational development. For example, as both Crossley (2001) and Tikly (2003) point out, the heavy emphasis placed by the World Bank and UNESCO upon primary education, at the expense of other levels of education, removes the indigenous capacity for research and innovation which is centrally important if countries are to link education to sustainable development and the conservation of cultural and educational heritage. In this context, the development of a pedagogy which aims to meet global (i.e. western) requirements and international (i.e. western) standards tends to militate against a pedagogy that aims to meld the prerequisites for effective learning within relevant parameters that typify a particular cultural niche.

In many other parts of Asia, the legacy of colonial power can still unwittingly undermine or negate indigenous educational patterns, many of which are closely linked to cultural norms and values. In one study, Walker and Dimmock (2000) showed how the teacher appraisal model currently being implemented in Hong Kong, drew heavily on philosophies, procedures and innovations dominant in western countries. In particular, UK researchers were widely cited and the models presented in the handbook appeared to clone approaches then in vogue in the UK. However, Hong Kong culture emphasises harmonious relations and the concept of face saving. This can discourage open communication, self-criticism, and the use of direct feedback during the appraisal process. For such reasons, Walker and Dimmock argue that the necessity for openness and confidentiality, features central to western appraisal models, may not fit neatly within the Hong Kong Chinese culture. In another study, Kwek (2003) criticised the desire of Singapore's national political and university leaders to refashion their two main universities as the future 'Harvard and MIT of the East' by means of both rhetoric and the allocation of copious resources. Kwek claims that the attempt of university leaders and intellectuals in post-colonial Singapore to locate themselves from the periphery to the centre of research excellence fails to recognise that their colonised mindsets will always situate them in the shadow of the west. Consequently, their vision of educational development and standards of knowledge production are based on western epistemological schema and theories that are deeply rooted in, and informed by, colonial thought (Wallerstein 1996). Often, Asian scholars seek to emulate the west in a mimetic and uncritical way. They look to their western former colonisers for concepts and theories, technologies of teaching and learning, and innovative methodologies for educational reform (Alatas 2000) and seek publication of their research in western academic journals. Many Asians look westwards for intellectual sustenance and inspiration, for sabbaticals and exchange programmes, and Asian governments appear to take pride in sending future educational leaders to study in overseas universities (Singh 2004). Given the continued hegemony of western educational practices and theories, taught by western experts, it is unsurprising that international students return home with understandings and orientations that are likely to support the maintenance and promulgation of a particularly Eurocentric mode of education.

Adopting the western education–economic growth discourse, educational reforms in a number of Asian countries have been conducted which, with economic development uppermost, perceives education as largely fundamental to the socio-economic infrastructure. Thus, in many ways, education is viewed not so much as a right, a joy, a tool for liberation and empowerment, but rather as an investment (Brock-Utne 2000:12). Official literature in Viet Nam, for example, states:

The basic task of renovation in education is to shift from meeting the needs of a subsidized, centrally planned economy to meeting the needs of a multi-sector, state-managed, socialist oriented market economy ... Investment in education and training must be regarded as one of the main targets for development investment. Conditions must be created to allow education to serve socio-economic development even more actively. (Ministry of Education and Training 1995, 14)

Accepting the education–economic growth discourse, in exchange for financial aid, many Asian countries have struggled to fulfil the concessions they made in order to receive the loans. Reform and innovation are important at all levels of education, and radical changes are being called for in respect of aims, methodologies, pedagogies, programmes and curricula (Pham Lan Huong and Fry 2005). In this process of reform, the combination of both external drivers such as the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank who shape and influence educational agendas by means of their funding, and internal pressures to modernise the educational system, steer educational leaders in developing Asia once again to look westwards for models and examples. There appears to be a naïve belief among many policy-makers and practitioners that theories and practices that are perceived to be successful in the west will prove equally effective in the context of Asia. Non-traditional methods of teaching and learning that are believed to operate widely in western countries (although, in actuality, these are less prevalent than is often realised), such as student-centred learning or group learning, are thought to give a competitive edge and are considered to be fashionable and modern. Unfortunately, in the rush to adopt and import educational theories and practices based on western thinking, cultural aspects of the pedagogy have often suffered serious neglect. Adopting policies across cultures without recognising their distinctive social and cultural dimensions runs the risk of ‘false universalism’ (Rose and Mackenzie 1991). Not only does this ultimately impact upon the quality of student learning, it also provides the opportunity for mental colonialism to continue and neocolonialism to triumph.

Such cherry-picking practices can, of course, also involve importation by western countries. The early 1990s saw the rise of the ‘policy mechanics’, those who believed that it was possible to identify discrete teaching, and wider school practices, that were universally associated with student achievement (Fuller and Clarke 1994). Such individuals obtained a high profile within western policy-making circles and were ironically described as: ‘the academic community’s jet-setting, high-tech, intellectual sharp-dressers’ (Alexander 1996, 6).

The gaze of the policy mechanics at this time was largely to the east. Following a series of international comparative studies, most influentially the Third International Mathematics and Science Study (Beaton, Martin et al. 1996; Beaton, Mullis et al., 1996), policy-makers in many western countries sought to discover the reasons behind the impressive performance of countries in the Pacific Rim and some Eastern European countries (cf. Reynolds and Farrell 1996). For a significant proportion of commentators and scholars, a key factor centred upon the operation of the classroom

dynamic. Thus, for the UK, Burghes (1999) advocated the importation of mathematics teaching methods from Hungary and Alexander (2000) has highlighted the potential of dialogic teaching that he observed in Russia. Similarly, Stevenson and Stigler (1992) and Stigler and Hiebert (1999) lauded whole-class teaching in Japanese and Chinese classrooms as a highly active process that contrasted with the passivity of many traditional US classrooms. However, the importation of 'interactive whole-class teaching' into UK and US contexts has proven more complex than many of its advocates had initially anticipated. Given that pedagogy is culturally embedded within broader socialisation practices (Miller and Goodnow 1995) and student behaviour is conditioned by influences outside the classroom (Hopmann 2000) it is hardly surprising that highly interactive whole-class approaches that require significant levels of discipline, and a willingness to subordinate each student's needs to those of the larger class group, have tended to prove problematic in the UK and US. Thus, direct importation of pedagogic practices are likely to be problematic whether east to west or west to east.

It is interesting to note that recognition of the dangers of cherry-picking is not a recent phenomenon (Sadler 1900; Crossley 1984). Indeed, Crossley (2006) observes that while scholars in comparative and international education have perhaps yielded the greatest insights into educational differences across cultures, they have also been most critical of attempts to provide simplistic implications for practice. Comparativists have long emphasised the need for policy-makers and researchers working across the social sciences to be cognisant of culture and context in understanding educational developments (Broadfoot 1993; Crossley 1999; Crossley with Jarvis 2001) and to recognise the folly of assuming that educational policy and practice can easily be transferred across cultures (Phillips and Ochs 2003). However, such messages are now increasingly important given the ubiquity of international testing programmes, the pressures upon national governments to appear to be successful educationally, and the ease by which information about educational policy and practices around the globe can be accessed (Crossley and Watson 2003).

While the authors of this paper are not claiming that the direction of pedagogic transfer is always from west to east, we do contend that the importation of 'new' pedagogies has tended to flow in this direction largely because of historical and contemporary power differentials. The rationale behind many current initiatives is that western approaches are considered to be more likely to result in greater creativity, an enhanced capacity for problem-solving and the inculcation of a more entrepreneurial predisposition than traditional eastern approaches which, it is often argued, focus more upon inert knowledge acquisition by means of rote memorisation.

### ***The mismatch of western knowledge in an eastern context – the case of Cooperative Learning in Asia***

In the rest of the paper, we present a case study which seeks to illustrate the difficulties that can result when a western pedagogical method (in this case, Cooperative Learning) is applied without sensitive cultural modification to an Asian context. Particular reference is made to Confucian Heritage Cultures (CHC), which include China, Japan, Korea, Viet Nam, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore. Of course, it is important that the very real differences between these countries are not overlooked, and that even experiences of colonisation have often been very different (Bray and Koo 2004).

Cooperative Learning (CL) has its roots in western social interdependence theory (Deutsch 1949) cognitive-developmental theory (Piaget 1950; Vygotsky 1978) and behavioural learning theories (Bandura 1977). The approach has proven to be highly successful with over 900 research studies pointing to the effectiveness of cooperative over competitive and individualistic efforts (Johnson et al. 2000). However, of the numerous studies that have attested to the benefits of CL, almost all have taken place in the west. In Asia, with exception of Japan, admiration for this technique is a relatively recent phenomenon, with the seminal work of Johnson and Johnson frequently cited. Despite the dearth of systematic research in the Asian context, CL is a key pedagogic component of many education reform strategies.

Our case study reveals a series of cultural conflicts and mismatches with respect to the general characteristics/consequences of western models of CL and the norms, values and practices associated with Asian culture. In order to frame our analysis we employ the cultural typology of Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1997) as a valuable parameter. According to these authors, culture differs along seven dimensions: universalism–particularism, individualism–collectivism, neutral–emotional, specific–diffuse, achievement–ascription, attitude to times, and attitude to environment. The first six of these dimensions are utilised in this paper to examine some of the cultural problematics associated with the importation of CL into Asia.

### ***The first dimension: universalism–particularism (rules–relationship)***

This dimension is concerned with how we judge other people's behaviour towards each other. At one extreme, we encounter an obligation to adhere to standards which are universally agreed by the culture in which we live. Cultures at the universalism end of the dimension typically place a high emphasis upon rules, laws, equity and contracts that should be applied in all situations irrespective of personal relationships. At the other extreme, particularism, an emphasis is placed upon the importance of relationships, to the particular obligations we may have to those we know personally, and there is recognition that each situation should be treated differently. Western cultures tend to score high on universalism whilst Asian cultures are often more associated with particularism. In a comparative study by Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1997), respondents from South Korea, Nepal and China were among the five cultures scoring most highly on particularism.

With regard to this dimension, one relevant issue for discussion is that of reward allocation. Here, the primary question concerns how rewards should be allocated. Thus, should a universal rule apply whereby everyone is treated equally and rewards are based on the individual's contribution, or, according to an emphasis upon particularism, should other factors also be involved? Clearly, such a dilemma is of particular concern to those advocating collaborative activities.

The two basic forms of reward allocation are those of equity (Adams 1965) and of equality (Deutsch 1975). The *equity* principle suggests that reward should be given proportionally as a function of each group member's contribution. The *equality* principle, which is underpinned by notions of uniformity and fairness, holds that rewards should be provided equally to group members irrespective of their relative merits.

In universalistic cultures, the emphasis on rules, regulations and guidelines tends to result in an evaluation system that specifies concrete achievement criteria upon which judgements are based and rewards allocated (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner 1997). The equity principle is typically applied so that rewards are allocated

according to the performance of each individual in comparison with their peers. However, in western educational contexts, CL is a case apart. Here, teachers seem to prefer the equality principle when grading group-related assignments; that is, all students in the group receive the same grade irrespective of their individual contributions (Garfield 1993; Kagan 1992). The problem with this approach is that one or two members may carry out most of the work and permit the others to progress with minimal contribution. In order to prevent this problem and to ensure a greater degree of fairness, transparent intra-group evaluation of CL has become popular in western contexts (Hanrahan and Isaacs 2001; Lejk and Wyvil 2001; Ballantyne et al 2002; Sluijsmans and Prins 2006). After each collaborative task or project, group members are involved in a process of peer assessment whereby each member is judged purely on the basis of his/her individual contribution. A typical procedure involves students providing confidential ratings that reflect how well they and each of their group mates have fulfilled their team responsibilities. Such ratings are typically taken from a prescribed list ranging from 'excellent' to 'no show'. In accordance with the operation of the equality principle, this rating does not form part of the final group mark or grade; rather its purpose is to raise responsibility and heighten the participants' awareness of individual accountability. In this way, peer assessment is seen as a mechanism operating from a universalistic perspective of equity yet is one where reward is distributed according to an equality principle. Yet in a universalistic culture, this may still give rise to concerns that such grading is unfair. For this reason, peer assessment frequently operates on the basis of equity. Here, the teacher assigns numerical values to each rating and computes a weighting factor for each member of the group by which each student's individual average rating is divided by the team average. The student's final homework grade is the product of the weighting factor and the overall team project grade. However, this equity-based grading system runs counter to that suggested by CL researchers. In short, a shared-group grade (equality) and an individual grade (equity) can be presented as two horns of a dilemma in a vicious circle as shown in Figure 1.

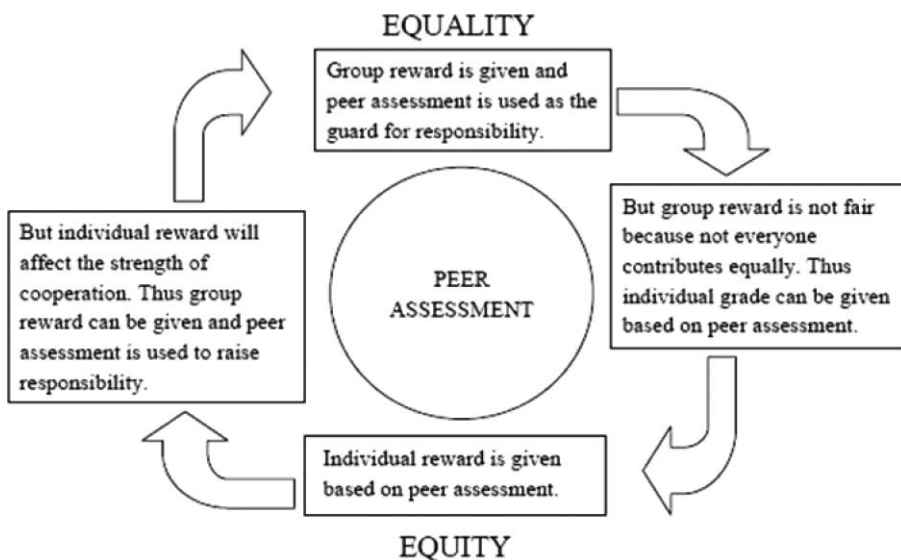


Figure 1. Peer assessment in universalistic cultures: tensions of equality and equity.

We would conclude that the equality norm advocated by western CL researchers is likely to sit uneasily with the equity norm that prevails in universalistic cultures and this tension is best resolved by means of transparent intra-group peer assessment.

In contrast, in societies marked by particularism, the operation of the equity or equality principle is based on particular situations in which in-group/out-group membership is an important factor (see further meta-analysis of Sama and Papamarcos 2000). Bond et al. (1982) and Leung and Bond (1984) found that Hong Kong students tend to use the equality principle in close in-groups, such as among friends and relatives, but the equity principle when dealing with out-groups, such as strangers. Such fluctuation suggests that the reward allocation preference of Asian students may depend on the particular nature of various cooperative relationships. We can predict different perceptions of grade-related fairness on the basis of a student's partners in a CL context: with strangers, with students from other schools, with fellow students from the same school or the same class, with acquaintances, or with friends of differing levels of intimacy. The second factor that influences grade allocation is personality. An Asian allocator may elect not to penalise a poor contributor should that person be seen as possessing some personal asset that is valued. Previous research (Chi Yue Chiu 1989) on Hong Kong students found that when recipients' performance was poor and their personality was perceived as desirable, the allocator tended to give them the same amount of reward as a person who had a high performance and a less attractive personality. A third factor of relevance here is past and future interaction. Zang (2001) argues that for Chinese students, past relationships, and expectations about future relationships in the long/short-term, will exert an influence on students' decisions concerning grade allocation. The third factor that influences reward allocation is seniority. Exall (1985), Bowman (1986) and Lincoln (1989) report that seniority is a relatively pervasive determinant of allocation behaviour among the Japanese. Other factors that are likely to impact here are traditional values as shown among Hong Kong students in the study of Lin et al. (2007) or special needs, as well as particular circumstances that one cannot easily predict. The use of a shared group grade suggested by western CL researchers is, therefore, likely to prove problematic in particularistic cultures.

When the allocation of grades cannot simply be based on a universal rule of equality, the use of peer assessment becomes controversial. In universalistic cultures, all students can be evaluated, indeed, should be evaluated, according to clear guidelines with minimal use of exceptions. In particularistic cultures, judgements are often based upon the specific nature of present circumstances (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner 1997). A particular student, subject to peer assessment, may be considered not just as a group member but as 'my class mate' or 'my close friend'. Furthermore, the student's evaluation may be influenced on the grounds that he or she is 'my neighbour', or because 'my father knows his/her father', or even because, 'our family has a history of disagreements with his/her family'. In each situation, members of the group will be of unique importance to the individual, with a special history of positive and negative relationships. In such circumstances, a guiding principle is that one must therefore sustain, protect or discount this person no matter what the assessment rules say.

In short, when CL is applied to an Asian cultural context, there is a potential mismatch between the operation of an assessment method underpinned by a universalistic principle of equality-based grade allocation in a context in which intra-group relationships have significant influence.



### ***The second dimension: individualism – collectivism***

The second dimension in the Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner typology concerns a well-established cross-cultural tension (Triandis 1993; Hofstede 2003) between what one desires as an individual and one sense of obligation to see the interests of the group that one belongs to. While it is an error to be too sweeping in offering cultural generalisations (Elliott and Tudge 2007) it is fair to state that most western cultures are associated with individualism whereas most Asian cultures are identified with collectivism. Here, important issues for establishing cooperation in learning centre upon trust and identity. Key questions are: ‘Should our trust be based on the professional competence of our partner or, alternatively, on the emotional bond between us?’ and ‘How far should group identity be related to individual identity?’.

Both trust and identity are recognised as important antecedents to cooperation. Trust concerns an individual’s confidence in the goodwill of others in a relationship and the expectation that others will reciprocate if one cooperates (Smith et al. 1995; Kramer and Tyler 1996). McAllister (1995) differentiates between two types of trust: cognition-based and affect-based. The former is linked to the individual’s knowledge and role performance while the latter is derived from the emotional bonds that exist between group members. Trust is culturally determined (Strong and Weber 1998). Chen et al. (1998) suggest that cognition-based trust will be more closely linked to cooperation in an individualistic culture while affect-based trust will be more important in collectivist contexts. In individualistic societies, the development of trust results from experiences where people faithfully adhere to their respective roles, responsibilities and share outcomes equitably. In contrast, those in collectivistic societies may be more influenced by their personal loyalty and attachment to significant others. For example, Sullivan and Peterson (1982, cited in Huff and Kelly 2005) speak of the Japanese concept *wa*, a quality of a relationship involving cooperation, sharing, warmth, and fellowship leading to trust. Similarly, Farh et al. (1997) suggest that in China and Viet Nam, relationships and ties in a company’s culture are more important than the enactment of specific organisational practices.

Group identity is a factor that can radically affect cooperation (Dawes et al. 1990; Aram 1993). However, because prior studies have largely taken place in predominantly individualistic cultures, studies on group identity have yielded inconsistent findings (Chen and Triandis 1996). Chen et al. (1998) argue that group membership on the basis of one’s school, geographical origin, or family name, carries stronger psychological attachment for collectivists than for individualists. Hence, these authors suggest that membership of certain in-groups is more likely to trigger a sense of mutual identification that will help to foster emerging cooperation. Note that for collectivists, social identities are more salient than personal identities, whereas for individualists the reverse is true. Thus, it is likely that for individualists, a new group identity will offer a means to enhance personal identities, but for collectivists, it is likely to enhance pre-existing group identities, such as those built upon friendship, kinship, or geographic origin (Chen et al. 1998).

The two concepts *trust* and *group identity* have a close relationship since a critical condition for trust is identification with the group (Brodt and Korsgaard 2003). In other words, trust is largely determined by the extent to which individuals define themselves in terms of particular group membership. To have a positive effect on cooperation, trust and identity should be synergised in whatever way is optimal. Thus, for collectivists the new group should provide sufficient affect-based trust and at

the same time support an identity which complements other social identities and collective interests. In contrast, for individualists, the new group should guarantee cognition-based trust, while, at the same time enhance personal identity and instrumental and rational self-interest.

In an educational context, group structure will often be an important factor in developing trust and identity. Research has strongly suggested that a heterogeneous group in respect of learning ability is optimal for CL (Lew et al. 1986; Hooper and Hannafin 1991; Kagan 1992, 6:4; Dillenbourg and Schneider 1995; Veldhuis-Diermanse 1999). In relation to cognitive ability, the preferred grouping normally consists of one high achiever, one low achiever and two average achievers. This reflects a position that each group will have equal opportunities to learn as long as each group member acts in accordance with their assigned responsibilities. Although there is research suggesting that heterogeneous groups may also discourage interaction due to the absence of ties between group members (Heilesen et al. 2002), and that group should be composed by individuals who know each other well in order to stimulate the cooperative process (Lockhorst 2004), this line of research on the role of intimacy and social closeness in CL group composition is poorly touched upon. In general, it is suggested that students should not be allowed to form groups based on existing friendships or cliques (i.e. an affinity grouping).

However, the form of grouping recommended by CL theorists and practitioners, emphasising cognitive rather than affective factors, is indicative of a neglect of a cultural perspective with a seeming mismatch between evidence from intercultural/organisational studies and CL's application in educational contexts. If personal relationships play a more powerful role in determining the nature of group collaboration, personal affinity, rather than ability, may be a more significant factor to consider when establishing optimal grouping in collectivist societies. Such a position similarly applies if members in these societies are highly motivated to achieve a given task because of their sense of personal loyalty and attachment to significant others in the group (affect-based trust). This suggestion is supported by the work of Fauzan (2002, 108) who applied a method called Realistic Mathematics Education in Indonesia – a collective culture with a strong emphasis on in-group cohesion. In Fauzan's experiment, students initially formed groups on the basis of cognitive ability. This led to some problems since boys and girls do not normally work or play together. Fauzan subsequently permitted them to form their own groups. Student work-rate increased, largely it was assumed, because they felt more secure in a friendship-based environment. In similar vein, Phuong-Mai et al. (2007) report that Vietnamese students expressed a strong preference for working in friendship groups, believing that this allowed them to benefit from the closeness that already exists among group members. This preference typically remains even when all members of the group are low achievers, as students believe that an able learner does not necessarily guarantee group success and what is more important is the more powerful sense of intellectual confidence and satisfaction that results from working with close associates with whom one shares a sense of group loyalty.

***The third dimension: affective – neutral and the fourth dimension: specific – diffuse***

The third dimension concerns the ways in which the nature of our interactions is expressed, whether we are demonstrative of our feelings (affective) or are more

emotionally controlled and detached (neutral). The fourth dimension also deals with communication and is concerned with communicative style, whether one tends to go 'straight to the point' (specific) or is expected firstly to 'beat about the bush' (diffuse). The former style of communication (affective/specific) is commonly found in many western cultures where people attempt to find immediate outlets for their feelings, the mass of information is expressed very explicitly and problems are expected to be directly and openly dealt with in an objective fashion. The latter modes of communication (neutral/diffuse) are more common in Asian cultures where people tend not to telegraph their feelings but keep them carefully controlled and subdued, and very little information is explicitly communicated. In these cultures, the problem is approached in a diffuse manner and group harmony may often be prioritised at the expense of reaching a final agreement (Hall 1976; Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner 1997; Hofstede 2003).

The communicative features of western cultures provide a basis for western-based researchers to construct CL methods that emphasise 'face-to-face promotive interaction' (Johnson and Johnson 1994, 58). Here, group members are motivated to challenge each other's conclusions and reasoning, influence each other's efforts, strive for mutual benefit, and maintain a moderate level of emotional arousal. Differences of opinion are seen as providing valuable opportunities for productive discussion. Since emotion can be openly exhibited yet can be detached from 'objective' and 'rational' decision-making, disagreement and conflict can be made explicit without giving offence or hurting personal feelings.

In contrast, the strong emphasis in Asian culture upon ensuring 'harmony' and 'face' suggests the need for a very different group dynamic and forms of communication in, for example, Chinese (Liu 2002; Wen and Clément 2003) and Japanese contexts (Yashima 2002). Being seen as modest and self-effacing, rather than 'blowing your own trumpet' is perceived as praiseworthy, while wasting other students' time by expressing independent judgements is often perceived as bragging and reflective of an egotistical and selfish personality. In Chinese classrooms, the forthright expression of one's views in a challenging fashion may lead others to lose face (Kennedy 2002). Students in many '...traditional CHC cultures are not encouraged to speak out, to question or to criticize, to reflect or act independently, nor to organize their ideas in a logical and linear manner' (Jones 1999). Thus, Chinese learners have an approach to learning which avoids them directly expressing a point of view (Connor 1996). In class, Chinese learners are often unwilling to commit themselves publicly for fear of losing face, or leading others to lose face (Tsui 1996; Jackson 2002). In one study (Woodrow 2006), those from Japanese, Korean and Chinese backgrounds tended to be anxious in speaking out although this proved to be less of an issue for Vietnamese students.

Researchers have found that while conflict management has been shown in the west to contribute to team effectiveness (Jehn and Mannix 2001; Lovelace et al. 2001), its value does not extend equally to Asia (Leung 1997). Differences of ideas and opinions may not be seen as a springboard for vigorous debate but rather as a threat to group harmony. Consequently, in order to maintain a harmonious group relationship and avoid the loss of face, when conflicts ensue, Asian students are likely to opt for more indirect responses. These may involve 'avoidance', bypassing the topic of conflict or being 'obliging', reflecting greater concern for the other's interest than one's own (Kirkbride et al. 1991; Jehn and Weldon 1992; Tse et al. 1994). Another form of conflict resolution widely used in Asia is mediation (Ting-Toomey et al. 2000). In order to 'give face to' the mediator (e.g. the group leader or teacher), both

parties in a dispute may be willing to make a concession, as a form of honouring this high-status individual (Wall and Blum 1991).

Once again, we are confronted by important cultural considerations. Those seeking to apply western-based forms of CL in Asian contexts need to consider how to reconcile the interpersonal assumptions of western group methods with the social mores of other contexts where 'harmony' is supreme, expression is subdued and explicit differences of opinion are to be avoided. We would argue that unless adaptation or an appropriate form of reconciliation is made, one cannot expect debate among Asian students to result in productivity, fruitfulness, or the strengthening of interpersonal relationships.

### ***The fifth dimension: achievement – ascription***

This dimension refers to how one's status is judged, on the basis of what one has done (achievement) or on who one is (ascription). In the context of CL, one key issue related to status, our particular focus of comparison here, is 'leadership'.

Research has shown that effective leadership processes tend to reflect the culture in which they are located (Ronen and Shenkar 1985; Jackofsky et al. 1988; Smith and Peterson 1988; Triandis 1993). In many western cultures, the best leader is often considered to be the 'one-minute leader' who communicates clear goals and delegates decisions and tasks in ways that will ensure that the job gets done (Maccoby 1994). Consequently, in CL, teachers typically describe the main task of a leader as being responsible for keeping the team on the assigned task at hand, encouraging all members to participate, and ensuring that everyone has mastered the learning points of a group exercise (Millis 1996). Team members' respect for their leaders tends to ebb and flow according to what he or she has done to achieve the team's goal. A leader is expected to separate work and personal issues, and it is usually considered that the team should be managed according to agreed rules and regulations with little or no personal exceptions.

In many Asian cultures, however, leadership emphasises management of people rather more than management of work, a phenomenon exemplified by the expression 'reciprocally humanitarian leadership' with 'relationship' being particularly emphasised (Chang 1976; Hui and Lin 1996; Lee 2001). A good leader mirrors a good father/older brother who performs by moral example and expresses responsibility and care for subordinates. Consequently, the requirements for good leadership are seen to be more related to one's personality. Ideal qualities include demonstration of virtue and morality, a capacity for maintaining good relationships, and an ability to ensure that group members behave in ways accepted as moral and decent (Gunning 1997). These qualities must be demonstrated in order to win the confidence of team members. In turn, the leader will usually receive a high degree of loyalty and devotion from them. In this way, dignity, kindness and devotion, rather than work-related competence, are likely to be the key criteria for leadership. Thus, Phuong-Mai et al. (2007) report that high school students in Viet Nam largely chose their group leader on the basis of personality (who s/he is) rather than on that of academic achievement (what s/he has done). The students showed strong preference for a leader who was capable of bringing comfort to team members and maintaining group harmony. At the same time students confirmed that an excellent study record was not a sufficient qualification for selection as group leader.

The above discussion demonstrates that students may perceive the role and requirement of leadership very differently across cultures. By adopting notions of leadership

as described by western-based educationalists, the operation of an effective group dynamic may be hindered and group learning and productivity subsequently reduced.

### *The sixth dimension: attitude towards time*

According to Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1997), how people think of time relates closely to how they plan, strategise and coordinate activities with others. In some cultures, sequential time, (i.e. where it is divided in linear segments) is dominant. In others, synchronic time is more prevalent. Here, one's sense of time is informed by communal bonding activities. This definition resonates with what Hall (1983) distinguishes as monochromic-time (M-time) and polychromic-time (P-time). M-time cultures tend to emphasise clock time, schedules, appointments and promptness. Time is tangible and can be 'saved, spent, wasted, lost, made up and run out' (Hall 1983, 43). Individuals in M-time tend to focus on doing one thing at a time, separate instrumental activities from socio-emotional activities, and sacrifice personal interaction to the perceived imperatives of scheduling and efficiency.

In comparison, P-time cultures tend to emphasise the experiential rhythms of time with priority given to relationships rather than 'artificial' clock time. They are more likely to intertwine socio-emotional activities with instrumental, task-based activities, and seek to undertake a number of activities in parallel (Hall 1983). Time is a concept governed by the smooth implicit rhythms that result from interactions between people. It is our servant and tool and is adjusted to suit our needs. The arbitrary division of clock time or calendar time holds little meaning if the rhythms of personal relationships go 'out of sync'. Time is limitless and unquantifiable; there is always more time. Wessel (2003) states that P-time people change plans and deadlines frequently and consider schedules as goals rather than as imperatives. However, problems can result – for example, when having to cope with inflexible deadlines, P-time mentality can jeopardise cooperation.

This spectrum also relates to differences in the approach to, and timing of, learning tasks. In Asian cultures where P-time is more prevalent, a study schedule may not be followed as planned. It is not that the passage of time is unimportant or that one's learning capacity is impaired, but rather that several other factors intrude. While students in M-time cultures may typically want to complete the task as quickly as possible, Asian students may feel compelled to give time to (unplanned) activities or to people with whom they have a particular relationship. They may also take more time to get to know their learning partners and to build group trust before commencing the task. An interesting example can be found in a study of cooperative working between Dutch and Hong Kong students (Vogel et al. 2000). Figure 2 illustrates the differing periods that the two groups maximised their efforts.

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, suggesting schedules for the joint assignment. However, many were disappointed with the limited initial input from the Hong Kong students who, at this time probably still needed time to get to know their partners. This resulted in a dip in the Dutch students' commitment to the project. Towards the end of the project, the work rate of the Dutch students rose once more because of the pressure of deadlines. At the same time, that of the Hong Kong students also increased, even higher than that of their partners, because, it seemed that at this point they had established satisfactory trust with their Dutch partners and were ready to cooperate. However, the M-time

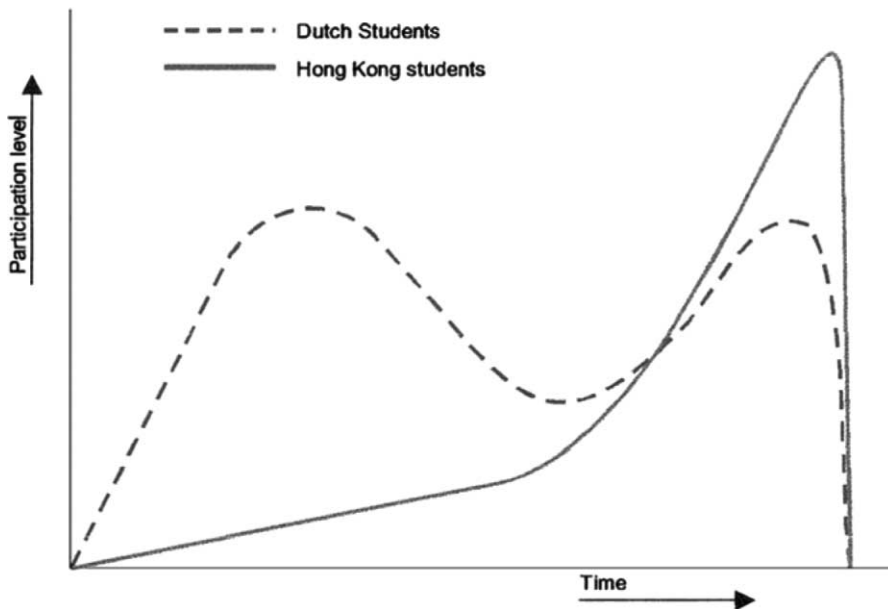


Figure 2. The contribution rate of Dutch and Hong Kong students.

framework did not work for these P-time students; the moment that they were maximally geared for cooperation came just before the deadline, somewhat too late for the fruitful completion of the task.

Differing conceptions of time affect the quality of bonds between group members. For students in P-time cultures, relationships tend to be seen more in instrumental terms. The focus upon discrete time intervals also seems to be advantageous for the separation of means from ends, in that the relationship among members grouped together in CL is not wholly entered into for its own sake but, also, in order to pursue individual study goals. This is the reason why western-based CL researchers recommend that the structure of groups should keep changing throughout the school year in order that no student would work in the same group on a large number of tasks (Kagan 1992, 6:4).

For Asian students, relationships combine past, present and future with ties of affection and memory. The relationship is its own justification and is enjoyed as a form of durable companionship extending both far back and far forward. In an investigation by Phuong-Mai et al. (in press), Vietnamese teachers reported that the CL approach is primarily meant to promote existing group solidarity and to prepare students to have mutual responsibility for their future lives. Such perspectives highlight an interesting distinction. CL initially attracted attention in the west largely because of its potential to raise academic achievement, while in the east it is likely perceived as a vehicle to reinforce relationships, with its impact upon cognitive achievement usually being seen as less important. Thus, frequent changes of grouping, as suggested by Kagan may be less appropriate for Asian school contexts.

### General discussion

Graves (cited in Shwalb and Shwalb 1995) offers an interesting observation that the use of CL has become most widespread in cultures where one might anticipate

that it would be least welcomed (western individualistic cultures), and least common in places where it should have been most welcomed (Asian or African collectivist cultures). In fact, despite the successes widely recorded in western educational publications (Johnson et al. 2000), the application of CL in non-western contexts has not always proven productive or culturally appropriate (Phuong-Mai et al. 2006). Messier's (2005) finding is likely to have confused and disappointed many Asian educational leaders. Studying 145 Chinese middle school students, it was found that those following a programme of *traditional lecture-based learning* obtained higher achievement scores than those pursuing *Cooperative Learning*. It was concluded that integrating western methods into an eastern educational programme has a number of problems, particularly when this is initiated by researchers who are biased by their (western) culture, by their training as western-style scientists, or by their association with western colleagues (Shwalb and Shwalb 1995).

However, while the origins of CL are closely associated with western theorists, it is misleading to suggest that small group learning approaches do not exist in Asia. For example, the traditional Asian family and most Asian social institutions exemplify the modern principles of group building. As the economist, Astorga (2002) sardonically observes:

...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. (1)

Clearly, making use of collective brain power in learning is not a new phenomenon in Asia. Tang (1996) observes that it has been normal practice for Chinese students to form study groups outside the classroom to help each other with homework and other learning tasks. Similarly in Viet Nam, *học nhóm* [learning in a group] has always been common among students. Such activity typically takes place in a home location most convenient to all. In both these cases, learning takes place without any prior instruction or advice from teachers. Rather, students simply perceive a need to work together, such spontaneous collaboration typically being orchestrated outside of the classroom. It is, perhaps, unfortunate that, influenced greatly by western trends, some Asian educational leaders have failed to recognise that the foundation of CL already exists within existing educational traditions. In the rush to reform and modernise, new innovative western methods are enthusiastically adopted, while, at the same time, our own cultural heritage is neglected and opportunities to develop and research a CL method that is unique to, and culturally appropriate for, Asian students are missed.

## Conclusion

The analysis in this paper addresses issues of neocolonialism in education: the inappropriate wholesale adoption of western educational theories and practices. Through examination of the operation of CL in Asian contexts, we have highlighted the potential for mismatch when educational approaches are transferred across

cultures without sufficient consideration of the norms and values of the host society. Cross-cultural cloning, increasingly fuelled by western-oriented globalisation, may result in academic ineffectiveness, serious neglect of cultural assets, weakening of the host culture's own research capacity and at the same time, may help to perpetuate a sense of dependency on the part of formerly colonised host cultures. In order not to fall prey to such outcomes, it is important that such countries resist being swamped by colonial and neocolonial influences emanating from the west and look to their own cultural and social values and practices:

Resistance to Eurocentricism, and hence development, can only come from non-Western concepts and categories. The non-Western cultures and civilizations have to reconstruct themselves, almost brick by brick, in accordance with their own world views and according to their own norms and values. This means that the non-west has to create a whole new body of knowledge, rediscover its lost and suppressed intellectual heritage, and shape a host of new disciplines. (Sardar 1999, 57)

However, there is a danger that once a bandwagon has begun to roll, once governments have become politically and financially committed to moving in a certain direction, once educational leaders have bought wholesale into the promise of 'modern' pedagogical methods and have become preoccupied with international standards, such movement is difficult to reverse. For this reason, more than ever before, comparative research that locates educational practices within a specific culture, at the level of classroom, school and system (Elliott and Hufton 2003) is needed. Only by comparison can we reveal, alongside each culture's particular mix of uniqueness, heritage, values and practices, powerful continuities which transcend time and location (Alexander 2001).

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