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An autoethnographic narrative on Chinese student's quietness: A reflection on experiences of learning and teaching in fashion design.

Keyword: Autoethnography, Chinese Students, Quietness, fashion design.

Introduction

Ellis (2004), Bochner (2014) and Denzin (2014) point out that autoethnography is a study and writing approach of the self that aims to capture and analyse (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to make sense of cultural experience (ethno). Ellis (2009) is the advocate of meta-autoethnography, she points out that autoethnographers review their own collection of work in order to gain insights from personal experiences. Autoethnography allows for a certain variability of speech within an academic writing discourse, which provides inherent opportunities for non-English native speakers to generate an informal register where reflection may arise. In the section below, I would like to share some reflective writing on a teaching experience from a fashion design workshop in China.

Quietness

Chinese students' "quietness" has been a recurring adjective I have heard ever since I started to study fashion design in London in 2004 and again when I started to teach fashion design in London in 2015.

The word quietness has many connotations. But when connected with Chinese students it becomes more like a criticism, a problem, a stereotype and a perplexing question.

“ Why are you so quiet? All you Chinese students are the same. You only nod and you don't speak.” (A comment to me from a former fashion design course leader when I was studying on the fashion design course in 2007.)

“ Our Chinese students are so quiet and they just don't speak. They don't engage and they don't ask me anything.” (A comment from a lecturer who presented her research on teaching Chinese students at the Advanced HE education conference, 2017.)

The word “quiet” appears in these two contexts, the first one was addressed to me when I was an international fashion design student; the second one was presented to me when I was an international fashion design educator.

In the summer of 2017, I was invited to deliver a series of fashion design workshops across five different cities in China. I was asked to deliver all the workshops in English as much as possible, as the organizer wanted their students to practice speaking the language.

The first stop was Beijing. I had 9 students attending the workshop. The workshop started with an ice breaker activity where all of us shared who we were and why we

were there. I remember the quietness, the exchange of glances, the discomfort of deciding who should speak first, and the downcast eyes, in hope of not being called upon.

I smiled and shared one of my experiences as a student studying in Junior High school in Taichung when I was 13 years old. From memory, I said something like:

“I always loved my art and home economics classes. I loved reading comic books and I loved chatting to my friends.

However, I was rebuked by my teachers in different classes if I looked elsewhere, passed notes, quietly whispered to my peers sitting next to me, doodled on the textbook, one hand holding my chin, two hands holding my chin, or slouched. I failed at almost every subject during that time because I found study was hard. I was disciplined by my teachers using a ruler that was hit on the back of my hands or my bottom every time I failed a test.

I was told to sit straight, look up and face the blackboard, be quiet and pay attention. I was told to study harder.

Three years passed, I stopped laughing out loud, I gradually stopped drawing, doodling, and I noticed that I didn't enjoy studying. I was afraid to get called upon answer questions, I was quiet, and I kept my head down and I was like everyone else in the class.”

I stopped sharing my reminiscences at this point, and looked at my students in the fashion design workshop. I asked them, “ Do you recognise this experience?”

A few nodded their heads and one of the girls said, “ I had that experience too. “

Some of them started to speak to each other and we started the activity in the workshop.

Analysis of the reflection

In this section, I would like to unpack three aspects of the reflection. Firstly, the student’s fear of failure and discipline. Secondly, the control of the teacher in a teaching and learning environment. Lastly, the interaction between the narrator and the Chinese students in the fashion design workshop in Beijing.

The fear of failure and discipline. Students’ perspectives of achievement can vary based on their motivation to prevent failure and pursue success (Atkinson, 1957). Yang (1986) says that Chinese culture values hard work, dedication, and endurance which stems from the influence of Confucianism. Salili (1996) also observes the cultural effect of a strong feeling of collectivism seen in social and family groupings. She also points out that academic achievement would be considered a source of pride for the whole family, therefore, the students’ hard work contributes towards a sense of shared success. So, we might assume that a fear of failure will arise when the student not only wants to avoid discipline, but also prevent bringing shame to the family. Atkinson, Yang and Salili are studies of students’ motivation and academic

achievement where the two latter texts focus on Chinese students' learning approaches and cultural impact.

Secondly, the control of the teacher in a teaching and learning environment. The reflection describes the teacher's approaches including reproach and discipline. The discipline is referred to as corporal punishment. Lv's publication is on *Analysis of the Causes of Corporal Punishment in Chinese Children's Education* (2022) where she describes corporal punishment as commonly imposed by teachers and parents on students and children. Foucault (1975) identifies the most visible form of power is repressive power. He explains that the rules do not create fear, instead, the fear comes from the consequences of breaking the rules. This helps to understand repressive power. Such power is extremely effective. The teacher controlling the students' behaviour is connected with applying repressive power. Looking back on the reflection of the narrator's fear, it is not only the fear of failing, but furthermore the fear of the consequences of failing, which can lead to physical punishment. Therefore, the quietness became a way for the narrator to prevent punishment.

Lastly, I would like to discuss the interaction between the narrator and the Chinese students in the fashion design workshop in Beijing. The narrator is empathic towards the quietness of the Chinese students. The act of sharing a personal experience of the discipline that led to her quietness was to provide a memory association which connects with empathy and shows understanding of the formation of quietness in the education environment. The student's responses to the narrator resonated with the experiences. This allows there to be another kind of quietness, one I also

experienced in China, the quietness of concentration that is the sound of satisfied making in the fashion design studio.

To conclude, this autoethnographic reflection shares an insight into the Chinese students' quietness, and how empathic approaches of sharing personal experiences can offer shared understanding to the students in an international fashion design workshop. It helps to explain the experience of mainly western tutors when judging Chinese student's quietness?

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