

## **A Vacuum of Legitimacy: Students' experiences of constructivist pedagogy online.**

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Online flexible learning and internationalization have been two major stimuli to the recent change in the university landscape in Australia. A third force that is also gaining popularity in this landscape is constructivist pedagogy, which is believed by many supporters of the new technologies to be compatible with online learning. At present, the online learning literature is dominated by claims about the educational potential of the coupling of online learning and constructivist-inspired teaching approaches. For example, it is believed that this convergence provides a rich context for learning, which, in turn, leads to active and reflective learning, and learner empowerment. However, there is little empirical backing for these claims. In particular, the effects of online education for students are largely unknown. In the relatively small body of research conducted so far, there has been a tendency for studies to concentrate on *either* the learner *or* the learning context rather than on relations between the two. That is, previous studies have not systematically described or theorised learners' educational dispositions, the nature of the learning context, or the outcomes of the meeting of the two. International students are the concern of this paper for two reasons: they account for a significant percentage of the student population in Australia (26%), bringing more than AUD14 billion a year to Australia; secondly, international students are in a situation that renders their learning experiences particularly interesting to the authors of this paper – they are studying online while being on campus in Australia.

This paper draws on the code theories of Bernstein (1990, 2000) and Maton (2000, 2007, 2009; Moore & Maton, 2001) to explore the effects of online flexible learning on international students in Australian higher education. We were especially interested in examining whether the claims about the educational benefits of constructivist teaching practices in online contexts are realised in these students' experiences. Bernstein's educational knowledge codes enabled us to analyse, characterise and, thus, compare the underlying structuring principles of the educational practices experienced by students in their home and host cultures in terms of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. Maton's legitimation codes of specialisation, by additionally bringing the knower dimension into the analysis of social fields, then provided us with a further means of analysing the coding orientation students bring to the online learning context, the codes underpinning this context and the relations between the two sets of codes. This enabled us to more fully conceptualise the student participants' online educational experiences in Australia.

Specifically, the paper reports on the experiences of Chinese students, who presently comprise the largest international student cohort in Australia. We present findings from a qualitative case study of postgraduate Chinese students' online experiences in the Faculty of Education at an Australian university. The paper addresses three questions:

- (1) What are Chinese students' educational dispositions? How have these dispositions been shaped by the characteristics of the teaching practices in China?
- (2) What are the characteristics of the online teaching practices at the Australian university, including the pedagogical beliefs underpinning them?
- (3) How do Chinese students interpret and respond to these online teaching practices?

To address these questions, the research on which this paper is based involved conducting: focus groups with Chinese students from various faculties; interviews with Australian teachers of online units in the Faculty of Education, and a review of their unit outlines; and multi-session interviews with individual Chinese students who had previously been or were currently enrolled in an online unit in the Faculty of Education.

A major finding of the study discussed in this paper was that there was, in the terms of legitimation codes, a 'code clash' between the students' prior 'knowledge code' educational experiences (where explicit procedures, skills and specialised knowledge are emphasised) and the teachers' 'knower code' notions of education (where learners' dispositions are emphasised as the basis of achievement). This code clash in the students' online learning experiences led to 'relativist code' consequences (where neither specialist knowledge nor particular dispositions is emphasised – a kind of vacuum of legitimacy), which were associated with feelings of isolation, guilt and depression. We argue that online constructivist teaching assumes a particular kind of knower, with particular socially-based dispositions and experiences, and systematically disadvantages other kinds of knowers. In this paper, we also discuss our findings in relation to constructivist teaching practice and online learning.

One contribution of this paper is that it expands the knowledge base concerning Chinese learners' experiences with online flexible education. More prominent and enduring contributions of this research, however, reside in the wider application of the findings to other learner populations, and in the demonstrated utility of exploring online educational practice and experience through a sociology of knowledge approach. The paper shows how Maton's concepts of epistemic and social relations build on Bernstein's concepts of classification and framing. By developing an external language of description for these two sets of concepts, we demonstrate the differing manifestations of these concepts with respect to curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. The study presented also contributed to Maton's theory by highlighting a particular kind of knowledge code that is based on atomised knowledge, and different kinds of knower code that are based on different social attributes of knowers.

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