

## **Dialogues with dragons: Assisting Chinese students' academic achievement**

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### **Introduction**

New Zealand earns \$1.76 billion from the education of international students, and \$1.3 billion of this comes from North Asian students (NZMFA, 2003). The Ministry of Foreign Affairs records that export education is worth more to New Zealand than its fourth largest export industry (the seafood industry). China is New Zealand's largest international education market, and over 30,000 Chinese students studied in New Zealand education institutions in 2002, double the number from 2001. If China stopped sending students, several tertiary institutions would face financial difficulty (Holmes, 2002, p. 3). There is concern then both from New Zealand and China (NZPA, 5 November 2003) that the quality of learning that the students receive is high and well worth the cost to the Chinese families.

The title of this talk "Dialogues with Dragons" was initiated by a conversation with a Chinese colleague who told me that many of the Chinese students on the Massey campus were sent to New Zealand to "become dragons". This was his metaphor for the high status, good job and powerful position sought by Chinese parents for their one child. The metaphor also seemed to symbolise the contrast between China and New Zealand.

On the one hand the dragon stands for happiness, fertility and good deeds (Lekka, 2003), and on the other a dangerous creature to be slain by knights in shining armour. These differences are equally strong in the expectations of Chinese and New Zealand teachers and learners, both encultured by their respective learning environments. Our goal was to work through this enculturation to maximise students' learning while teaching them learning and writing strategies appropriate for the New Zealand tertiary setting.

There was no shortage of information to help us on our journey. Studies were replete with recommendations, observations and models (for example, Ballard & Clanchy, 1992; Biggs, 1999; Gravatt, Richards & Lewis, 1997; Nield, 2001; Watkins & Biggs, 1996). The difficulty with these approaches is that they often suggest changes that Universities are already making. Moreover the research has focused primarily on adapting lectures and group activities, rather than on providing individual assistance when students request help. This paper describes our experiences of adapting our teaching dialogue to communicate more effectively with Chinese students, and on the basis of this we suggest another approach in which the central focus is empathy.

First, Heather will talk about her experiences assisting Chinese students with writing, and then I will discuss my experiences with them in relation to studying. As Heather now works in the Department of Communication and I am from the Student Learning Centre, when we refer to dialogue we are referring to all student learning situations, and not necessarily those at Student Learning Centres.

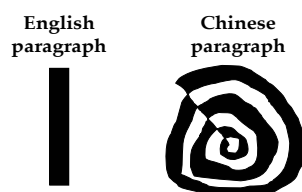
## Writing

I had long felt uncomfortable hearing descriptions of Chinese students' writing in terms of deficits like "poor structure" and "bad grammar", but it was Chinese author Fan Shen's description of how learning to write English meant, "not to be my Chinese self" (1989, p. 461) that shed light on my uneasiness. Teaching students to write in English using topic sentences, linear structure, fastidious grammar rules, and individual thought, appeared to be inherently ethnocentric. It seemed to me that Chinese students purchased their education at more than a financial cost; to write in English also meant sacrificing their identity.

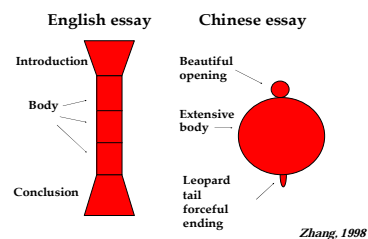
This cultural unease climaxed when one of the Chinese students came to my room, her face streaming in tears, her Kiwi friend had suicided, hanging himself in a park. Xiang Ling burst out between sobs, "My grandparents give all their money, my parents give all their money to send me here to find the meaning of life".<sup>1</sup> The meaning of life? China - home of the world's great philosophers, most exquisite poets, breathtaking artworks - and Xiang Ling was looking to us for meaning? It was not difficult to see how we had led her to this expectation. Had we not in our teaching implicitly given the impression that our culture was superior, the source of higher knowledge? Export education - what exactly were we selling?

Consciously or not, we have sent a message to international students that Chineseness is something to be suppressed. Early on I discovered that whenever a Chinese student was stumped over an assignment, the question, "What would you do if you were writing this in China?" liberated them to express ideas and often unlocked reservoirs of knowledge. It was during one of these discussions that a Chinese student introduced me to Kaplan's (1972) work. Kaplan was the first to observe that English writing tends towards a linear way of composing paragraphs, and this differs from other cultures, illustrated in Figure 1.

**Figure 1: Differences between English and Chinese paragraphs (from Kaplan, 1972).**



**Figure 2: Differences in English and Chinese essay structure (from Zhang, 1998).**



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Chinese writing is more likely to be circular, looking at the subject from several angles and building up a foundation for later stating one's point.<sup>2</sup> The idea of starting each paragraph with a topic sentence, the hallmark of a hurried society that needs to satisfy the reader quickly, is at odds with the Chinese style of slowly savouring a topic, and conflicts with Confucian ethics and Chinese writing textbooks that instruct the writer to progress from the outward to the inward (Shen, 1989).

I began to pour through the literature and found further differences in essay structure (Brick, 1996; Crosling, 1993; Zhang, 1998). (See Figure 2). English essays have three parts, an introduction containing a thesis statement which shows the focus, a

body containing paragraphs that each start with topic sentences explicitly supporting the thesis statement, and a conclusion summarising the main points. In Chinese essays the topic is introduced more subtly as it is considered impolite to jump in with one's own viewpoint. In the body the writer builds a case. As each successive step unfolds, both the reader and writer arrive at the same conclusion together. When, in the last paragraph, the writer finally discloses their point of view, the reason behind it is crystal clear, "I look to the heavens and it comes to me" explained one Chinese student. During this whole process, euphony (the musical sound of the words), is as important as content.

We can use either structure at University and get an A pass. However, the Chinese style with its emphasis on beauty, and delicate balance of subtlety and clarity, requires an extensive knowledge of the native language, and Chinese students explained that it is easier for them to use an English structure when writing for a New Zealand university. Several commented that they compose eloquent sentences in Chinese, but when they translate them into English they sound juvenile, echoing Fu's interviewee's comment, "When I write in English it is just like fighting without good weapons" (1998, p. 5). To exasperate matters, the translator machines they rely on produce a stream of non-standard English interspersed by an occasional sophisticated sentence, and this has led several to being falsely accused of plagiarism.

But why is English so difficult – and not just for non-English speakers? Our experience of grammar checks tells us that even a computer cannot learn it. A search through the literature led me to psychologist, linguist Steven Pinker (1994). Pinker records how eighteenth century grammarians and publishing houses made huge profits from producing fastidious rules of English grammar, which helped prevent the uneducated from penetrating the upper classes. Many of our difficult English grammar rules, Pinker argues, are not based on logic, but on economic greed, and he calls this the "scandal of the language mavens" (1994, p. 412). It is sadly ironic that Chinese students bear this bourgeois legacy.

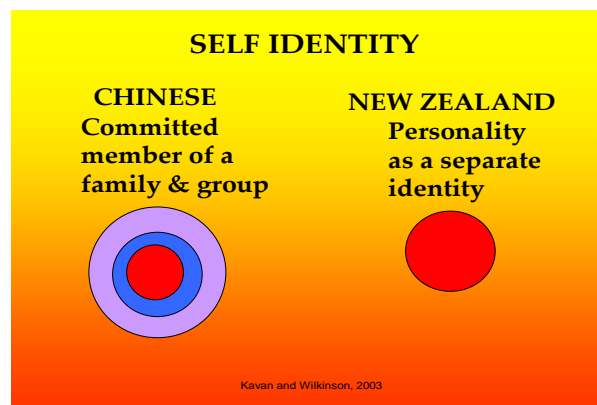
In contrast to English, Chinese writing is essentially pragmatic, and there is no room for unnecessary grammar rules as the meaning is usually clear from the context (Li, personal communication, 23.10.03). There are no plurals, tenses, or articles. Also, while English is a noun-prominent language and academic English uses many verbal nouns, Chinese is verb prominent, and verbs and nouns are often the same form, for example, *I won't participate in the negotiate*. Moreover, English sentences follow the SVO subject-verb-object order, while Chinese sentences follow topic-command order. By discussing what I had learned with Chinese students, who seemed excited by my interest, I was able to forge a connection with them, and shift from a value-laden focus on error correction. I was also fortunate that my writing lectures were videotaped so I could evaluate my communication, see aspects that I would otherwise have been unaware of, and make adjustments.

These discussions also led me to more insights about Chinese culture. When I asked a student how she would indicate time in Chinese, for example whether she would write, "Today I went for a walk", "I today went for a walk" or "walk I today went on", the student replied "Those would sound uneducated. Far better to write, *As the spring bloomed and our clever government introduced a new policy that improved my life, I went for a walk.*" While her answer reflects school composition writing, and is

not indicative, for example, of business writing, it shows the influence of the Confucian teaching that deference to rulers is as natural as the grass bowing in the wind (Confucius, 1958). One can barely imagine a New Zealand student composing a similar sentence.

As I mulled this over, my mind went back to twenty years ago when I read a sentence I will never forget. Foreign correspondent Dennis Bloodworth, describing Mao Tse Tung's appeal in China, wrote that we may never understand the Chinese mind because we've never had to sell our children to buy our next meal (1967, p. 408). Historically, flooding and famine have killed Chinese in their millions and survival depended on people banding together for protection and submerging self-interest to the common good. This was Confucius' basic ethic (Confucius, 1958), and the reason why China rates lower than New Zealand - and in fact any country in the world - on the Hofstede scale of individualism (Hofstede, 1980; Williams, 2003). Their self-identity is based more on being a close and committed member of a group, rather than on developing their personality as a separate entity (Hsu, 1971).

**Figure 3: Differences in self identity  
(adapted from Scollon & Scollon, 2001)**



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For this reason, whenever I was certain that a Chinese student clearly understood something I had explained to them that would improve their mark, I asked them to tell all their friends. At times it seemed that the Chinese grapevine was more effective than lectures, workshops, and tutorials combined.

As the Chinese concept of a person includes relationships with their family and culture, they write with multiple voices, compared with Westerners who tend to define the self as the biological individual, and are more likely to write in a single voice (Scollon & Scollon, 2001). This may be why, even when all the grammar is corrected, we can easily differentiate a Chinese assignment from a Kiwi assignment. There are several voices: the student's polite, deferential voice at times using extravagant praise, such as calling their supervisor honoured and noble; the timid voice ("This report is limited by my lack [of] business experience"); the Taoist voice of simplicity and artlessness; the moralistic Confucian voice with a tendency to turn an essay into a homily; and the Communist voice that comes out in case study reports where the student accuses people of being greedy and disrespectful. Most memorable, however, is the Cultural Revolution voice. In one Communication paper, students were asked to analyse a business situation in which management and staff

humiliated a fellow member at a meeting by each having a turn at accusing him of his shortcomings. Several Chinese students were puzzled by what were they expected to write, saying that this was acceptable in their culture. They were as uncomfortable speaking about the Cultural Revolution as we might be as we might be if an outsider tacitly pressured us to make a negative comment about the Treaty of Waitangi.

I have sometimes heard staff members say that Chinese students seem to lack critical skills (see also the discussion in Chalmers & Volet, 1997). I believe that we need to differentiate between thinking and expressing criticism, as in China it would be immodest to promote one's own ideas over others. Also, where as New Zealand is a low context culture in which people are open about conflict, China is a high context culture where disagreement may be communicated silently (Hall, 1973). This was brought home to me one day when a Chinese student was confused. Deng Yang had been making an enquiry in a computer shop when he was charged for a service he didn't receive. He'd explained to the shop assistant that he didn't think this was fair and the manager was brought in. Deng Yang believed that, as he was in the right, it was imperative that he now allow the manager to save face, therefore he politely said to her "You are right, mistake is my fault". He expected that because he had allowed her to save face she would say that he didn't have to pay the money. Instead she demanded it. He was confused, and I explained to him that in New Zealand if you tell someone they are right they think that you actually mean it. He looked downwards as if trying hard to understand the most complicated puzzle, and asked, "You mean that New Zealanders don't think deeply?" After this conversation, I began explaining to Chinese students that if they don't express criticism in their assignments, New Zealanders may think that they haven't got any, and I encouraged them especially to consider whether the academic theories they studied were culture bound.

A challenging aspect of assisting Chinese students was their distress if they received a low grade. They worked hard on their assignments, and emptied the library shelves of books, borrowing cars to take cartons of them home. With IELTS scores of six or seven, compared to the nine required for understanding the books, it often took them more than two days to read 100 pages. If I failed one of their assignments, it was sometimes with the knowledge that they had taken two to three months to write it, and would be deeply humiliated. Students rarely fail in China, most marks fall into the 70-90% range and, as the pass mark is 60%, a substandard assignment would still get 59% (Skyrme, personal communication, 6.10.03; see also Turner, 2003).<sup>3</sup> Moreover, for Chinese students there is so much at stake. In China if a person fails they lose everything – money, power, status - and while in New Zealand a beneficiary or cleaner can walk down the street with body language indicating self confidence, this is not the case in China where there is open contempt and abuse for people who are not in good jobs (Li, personal communication, 23.10.03).

To cheer Chinese students up, I asked one of them to write *Don't worry, be happy* in Chinese to put on my wall. I was inspired by Li Dong who said that Chinese feel safe when they see their characters, and if they are deprived of them for long, they will feel uncomfortable. (N.Z. China Friendship Society lecture, 31 July 2003). The student typed the characters for me and returned. He gave me the sign *Don't worry be happy*, and then proudly produced an alternative sign for me to use instead. "This says, *You have worked hard so you will succeed, therefore don't worry be happy*. Much more Chinese," he explained. And in that moment, clutching my

piles of papers and books, my head aching from lack of sleep, a myriad of incomplete theories and non sequiturs spinning through my mind, I understood the Chinese writer.

## **Studying**

NZ education has, for several decades, fostered learning through discussion facilitated by teachers, with critical thinking, problem solving and creative thinking increasingly valued (Ministry of Education, 2003, p.4). However, in China it is only recently that there has been evidence that creativity should be fostered in schools (Zhang, cited by Pierik, 2003). Instead, teaching has emphasised accuracy through teacher-directed use of models, largely because of the Confucian belief that education is extremely important for advancement and prosperity, and that through the effort one puts into learning from a teacher, anyone can become a “sage” (Lee, 1996). The centuries old belief that education is the means to upward mobility (to be dragons) still reigns.

Because of its value, there is great competition for places in tertiary education. To succeed in China, students need to be very dedicated and develop high achievement motivation. The quotation that the student gave to Heather shows the link between effort and achievement that Chinese students subscribe to. Belief in effort as an important aspect for both the outcomes and process of learning has long existed in China. Confucius, Xunzi, and Mencius all wrote of its role, even though their conception of human development differed (Lee, 1996). Recent research conducted on attribution (for success and failure) has found that Chinese students ascribe success to effort (and ability which they see as able to change) while Western students of the same age ascribe success to ability (which they see as stable). Indeed Salili (1996) says Chinese parents will encourage effort and endurance even when the chance of success is low. Part of what Biggs (1996) calls the paradox of the Chinese student is that strong beliefs in personal effort and determination exist in a schooling system that is teacher led and examination oriented within a collective culture.

Other research has linked students’ motives to learn with three types of learning approaches labelled surface, deep and achieving. Research findings, for example Watkins (1996) and Salili (1996), show that Chinese students are more likely to report using deep and achieving approaches than Western students. Many Chinese students combined approaches to meet specific goals, even when they were learning in their second language, and observations of their learning had led many people to believe that much of their learning was merely rote.

When Chinese students come to NZ to study, they are not only a long way from home, but their community literacy, school literacies and personal literacies<sup>4</sup> (as defined by Hollingsworth, 1994, cited by Manathunga & MacKinnon, 2003) vary from those of their NZ counterparts. It is not surprising that students transfer their different learning behaviours and approaches to the New Zealand setting, but this has led to what Devos (2003) calls “othering” in that these differences, rather than being seen just as that, are perceived as deficits, and stereotyped statements about Chinese students tend to maintain a sense of our superiority and their inferiority. Statements such as,

*They don't join into discussions; They prefer lectures; They are so passive; They just memorize; They copy straight from the book; They always want to talk to me after a class*

are similar to those quoted by Ballard and Clanchy (1991) and I have heard all of these on our campus too. I want to talk in particular about two of these statements. My thesis is that we need understand the cultural literacies of Chinese students and in a manner suggested by Jin and Cortazzi (2001) use the notion of cultural synergy to clarify “expectations of practices” and to expose “underlying presuppositions about academic cultures of learning as they apply to the local institutional context and target disciplines”(p.2). This synergy requires teachers to reflect on the metacognitive and meta-affective aspects of learning of both cultures.

### *They just memorise*

The other paradox that Biggs (1996) examines is the often observed use of memorisation by highly successful Chinese students. (Ballard & Clanchy, 1991; Lai, 2002; Pierik, 2003). It is a generalisation that worries me. In one interpretation it means that “to memorise” is bad. Presumably this refers to the notion of memorisation being rote learning, and being a form of learning that does not enhance understanding, a surface approach, a position also discussed by Biggs (1996) and Mageean and Hai (2003). Yet as a learning consultant I encourage the use of various means of rehearsal of material for easier recall in tests and exams. I believe all successful students memorise and the use of this word to describe one aspect of the study process does not necessarily imply that Chinese students are only doing rote learning.

The literature suggests Chinese students do have to use memorisation throughout their schooling to learn their written characters (Biggs, 1996). Also, most school tests and exams in China are composed of problems requiring convergent thinking towards the one correct solution (Lai, 2002; Pierik, 2003). On such tests (as for our m-c tests) accurate recall of concepts, definitions, equations and how to manipulate formulae bring a good result. Chinese students who come to New Zealand to study will be used to scoring high marks, and to study in a country where a median score for a test may be 50% is a strange experience.

Secondly, the inclusion of the word “just” in the phrase “they just memorise” implies either inflexibility towards study or inability to do anything else but memorize. Combined with the notion that memorization equals rote and therefore less meaningful learning, the statement becomes as damning as the idea that they cannot ‘think critically’.

An increasing number of papers are questioning oversimplifications like these and the role of memorisation in the learning process. Hopefully the use of terms like “drill and kill” (Pierik, 2003) will disappear and the usefulness of memorisation for all students be reinstated. Mageean and Hai (1998) discuss the role of memorisation and its relationship to automaticity and practice. They also discuss whether memorisation can be sub-divided into deep memorisation and rote memorisation, with the two strategies being intentionally applied to deep or surface tasks and they do not believe that memorisation and understanding are separate processes but that there is a two way relationship between them. The process of trying to memorise can enhance understanding, and working on or reading material repeatedly creates memory.

This belief is supported by the research of Li and Chang (2001) who probed the use of “rote” learning by Chinese students. They found that 92% of their students reported

using repetition strategies but this was not perceived as passive learning. Students in this study reported that the more times they were exposed to the material the “deeper it will sink in”, that it was “psychologically comforting” and imbued confidence for interaction, and that by doing many exercises and problems they were learning to cultivate their thinking ability (p.6).

It is true that Chinese students are very concerned about tests and exams and will seek clarification about them. High motivation to do well, avoidance of loss of face, weaker understanding of English instructions all combine to increase their anxiety about a new and different (first time) test situation.

I believe that Chinese students should continue to use their memorisation skills and that learning skill tutors need to guide them as to how to use the information to construct a good answer which meets the expectations of NZ written answers. In one-to-ones, I seek to demonstrate with diagrams how you need to learn the

“theory” and then the pros and cons

“theory” and its differences from other similar ones

comparing two theories and having a list of the reasons why one is better

A constantly used handout is the one on key words in essay topics and their meanings.

If students are worried about their study notes, I spend time discussing the clues that our text books give to what is important. I model skimming to get the broad view of a chapter and to arouse my prior knowledge and I do this by talking aloud as I skim. I show the bits I would miss out, and I mark the bits I want to come back to for summarising. This is not magic stuff but I find it is necessary to affirm that they do not have to read the whole chapter. I sometimes use post-it notes which I place on the page and write what they have said about something on the page like an example or an “I think ...” statement. I then give them some to use.

I use a handout on transitions so they can learn to follow the links in NZ text and therefore find the embedded details, and with some students I have combined this with building a mind map. I have found support for this approach which encourages both content and process strategies in Watkins (1996) in his discussion of surface and deep processing, and in Kirby, Woodhouse and Ma (1996) who compared the use of deep and surface strategies by Chinese students when reading and summarising.

### *They are so passive*

The second issue is the quietness of many Chinese students in class. Research would suggest that this quietness is encultured both by their society and their schooling (Biggs, 1996; Hu & Fell-Eisenkraft, 2003). In Chinese society there is still a greater sense of hierarchy and respect due than in NZ. Indeed western descriptions of Chinese schools and schooling are characterised by the silence of the students, the teacher centred instruction, the respect for the teacher’s words and the reactive behaviour of students (in contrast to proactive) especially the lack of questioning. As with creating a written debate, to question may cause loss of face, especially for the teacher (Biggs 1996; Turner, 2003). Silence then is part of their literacy. The word passive does not seem an adequate description of obedient, respectful silence and it labels their encultured learning behaviour with a negative connotation.



I found one study that had probed Chinese students' silence in a western school. Using in depth interviews with Chinese students in the USA, Hu and Fell-Eisenkraft (2003) asked the students to write about their silence in tutorial classes. Analysing the students' responses revealed four main sources:

- 1) shyness (though this was context related and some students were not shy with friends)
- 2) fear of giving a wrong answer
- 3) "psychological" shyness, that is silence conditioned through childhood as appropriate for certain times and places
- 4) language difficulties (concern that native students would not follow their English expression of their ideas)

In our one-to-one meetings most Chinese students often made their initial request to "have my report/writing/grammar checked" but then left it to the consultant to "run" the session. Our adaptation of consultations required a more 'delicate' use of questioning to overcome their 'silent' acceptance of what we felt were 'teacher-led' sessions in which we usually decided which writing issues to address. We wanted to increase their learning and understanding of western written argument by increasing their participation to beyond checking the meaning of a suggested word on their electronic translator.

We adopted a style of initiating the session with all open questions and "prompters": "Tell me about your assignment"... "and"... "and then"... "So have you any particular concerns?" From there on we tried to increase their participation in the session by using a combination of open and clarifying questions, and I found the use of either/or questions particularly useful.

"I think you could rephrase this in your own words ..... or you could put it in quotation marks."

"I am not sure that this word is right for this sentence. What exactly are you saying here?"

"Can you think of an instance in China where this would apply?"

Asking students to relate theory to their own previous experience seemed to elaborate understanding, even if they would not directly use that instance in their assignments, and even if, as Heather said, it was the opposite of the New Zealand experience.

I do not know which of the four sources of silence were represented in our students. When we tried, at the beginning of this study, to find out what they wanted from our sessions and whether we had been helpful, we received effusive praise and we ourselves were silenced. The students I worked with were usually those with weaker writing skills. Two of the students had weak spoken English; all were respectful and courteous even in debate. Three students who I have worked with several times over two semesters will now articulate their concerns and lead the session, a delightful change from the quiet, expectant students I first met. All have increased their dialogue with me and commence a session in a proactive way and lean forward, pen in hand, expecting to be involved.

## **Conclusion**

Our observations could be interpreted in terms of the Hawthorne effect. This refers to the phenomenon in research where, regardless of what experimental manipulation is

employed, the situation improves simply because the researcher expresses an interest in trying to perceive the situation as clearly as possible (Mayo, 1933). While there were many things that we successfully tried, (varying our questions, using cultural comparisons, utilising the grapevine, giving handouts, having signs with Chinese characters), the fact that we were concerned about the students, conscious of our dialogue, and enthusiastically welcoming intercultural knowledge, seemed to enhance learning.

For this reason, we suggest teachers shift from a prescriptive approach to a more phenomenological approach. While the prescriptive approach is teacher-led, and is based on 'you shoulds' (for example, improve your grammar, use topic sentences, reference correctly) the phenomenological approach is based on collaboration, empathy, and above all, never assuming that we speak from a higher level of truth. This makes it a mutual learning experience. Although empathy may be difficult to evaluate (when I asked Chinese students how I could improve my communication, they responded by bringing me presents) videoing our interaction with them provides a relatively objective means of assessing empathy – and usually a few surprises.

To return to our dragon metaphor, there is a Chinese proverb, "A dragon will be teased by local shrimps in shoal water", which means that people thrive in their own territory, and can't bring out their talent in an adverse or unfamiliar environment, instead becoming underdogs of those who have been there longer. Ethnocentric myths about Chinese students have led many to feel that they are the University's underdogs, and have hindered the expression of their talents. Our experiences suggest that dragons can thrive in unfamiliar waters so long as the waters are enriched by mutual learning and respectful dialogue.

## **Endnotes**

1. All student names are pseudonyms.
2. These are tendencies and therefore subject to individual variation.
3. This may partly explain Colleen Ward's finding, presented at last year's (2002) conference, that 87% of Chinese students expect to get good grades in New Zealand, but only 37% report getting them.
4. Hollingsworth's (1994) definitions: Community literacies are "the appreciation, understanding and/or use of interpretive and communicative traditions of community and culture." School literacies are "the interpretive and communicative process needed to adapt socially to school settings, maintain a good sense of self, and gain conceptual understanding of school subjects." Personal literacies comprise "ways of knowing and beliefs about self and personal communication norms arising from historical, or experimental and gender-specific backgrounds" (cited by Manathunga & MacKinnon, 2003, p.142).

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