Cultural Diversity and Classroom Experience: A Phenomenological Case of Graduate Students' Response to New Classroom Experience

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In this study we analyse students' lived experiences in a cross-cultural classroom context, with the aim of understanding: (1) What is the impact of a culturally diverse classroom experience on graduate school students' learning? (2) Which larger ramifications, if any, exist from this experience? The participants were PhD and Masters Students in a university in Thailand. This was a phenomenological study. Themes emerging from complex cultural practices of international students, professors and Thai students inform, hinder and promote learning. Findings from this study can inform pedagogy particularly at graduate school level, where cultural diversity matters in classroom experience.

Keywords: cultural diversity, learning, classroom experience, higher education, Thailand

> You are a sponsored student, why are you seeking help from me?
>
> *A participant in the study*

Introduction

Culture is an integral part of human behaviour and environment (Herskovits, 1948). It consists of both physical components (such as tools, buildings and works of art) and subjective components (such as roles, values, attitudes). It entails common values, beliefs and behaviours within groups who share a nationality, ethnic heritage, disability, sexual orientation, or socioeconomic class, as well as to those who share a corporate identity, occupation, sport, or college campus (Goldstein, 2008). In Europe the legacy of nationalism has become part of its education culture even though this impacts negatively the minority who does not belong to the dominant national culture (Dietz, 2007). This experience suggests that the historical evolution

of the State and the education policy values have over the past decades dictated the hegemonic education culture in schools.

Differences in national culture mean that contemporary students are often exposed to unfamiliar language rules and communication norms (Charmine, Lloyd, & Singhal, 2010). This conflict exposes individuals to cultural diversity as distinctions in the lived experiences (Marshall, 2002). Diversity does not only manifest itself through conflict, but also through a sense of awareness and acceptance of differences in communication, worldviews and definitions of health and family (Cross, Bazron, Dennis, & Isaacs, 1989). Because of the literary politics, cultural diversity has been marginalized to the extent that little has been done to create mechanisms for including cultural diversity in education and practice (Meacham, 2014). In a study on cultural diversity among campus students carried out by Yearwood, Brown, and Karlik (2002), participants perceived diversity as personal and largely associated diversity with colour.

Both diversity and internationalization are needed to create diverse learning environments to prepare individuals who are willing and able to engage with those who are different from themselves (Bennett & Bennett, 1994). Furthermore, the critical importance of discussing cultural diversity at higher education has been emphasized in the Gurin expert report (1999) in which students in late adolescence and early adulthood are at a critical stage of development, and where diversity (racial, economic, demographic, and cultural) is crucially important in enabling them to become conscious learners and critical thinkers, as well as in preparing them to become active participants in a democratic society.

How individuals understand themselves, view others, and interact with others in a new international classroom setting is important to the study of cultural diversity and new classroom experience. Therefore, in a globalized context, universities should lead in providing the best opportunities for understanding and utilizing diversity in education (Jiang, 2011). This will enable students to develop their identity, and mature their socio-psychological capabilities in order to improve themselves, and contribute to education and society (Gurin, 1999).

Symbolic interactionism assumes that the social world is socially constructed through social interactions and experiences (Griffin, 1997). Likewise, a sense of oneself is developed from childhood to adulthood. George Herbert Mead observed that one's sociability grows based on the approval by others (Schaefer, 2010). This theory brings to this study the view that: (1) early socialization affects an individual's later behaviour, (2) socialization is a continuous process, and (3) a change in the context can lead to some changes in social experiences, norms and socialization.

Studies indicate that supporting student encounters across different cultures is linked to improved student outcomes (Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-

Pedersen, & Allen, 1999). Moreland, Levine, and Wingert (1996) argued that diversity is associated with both positive and negative outcomes. Negative impacts of diversity is related to group cohesion and conflict (De Dreu & Weingart 2003), while positive impact of diversity is related to superior group performance (Sommers, Warp, & Mahoney, 2008).

Experience is an integral part of constructing knowledge (Robinson, Wolffe, Hunt, & Hoerr, 2002). Cultural diversity for instance positively affects performance. Similarly, racial diversity has positive effects on complex thinking (Antonio et al., 2004). Likewise idea generation in the learning process is higher within racially diverse groups compared to racially homogeneous groups (McLeod, Lobel, & Cox, 1996). A cross-national study on OECD countries shows that an increase in international students improves the performance of both international and native students (Konan, Chatard, Selimbegović, & Mugny, 2010). Chang (2006) suggests that cultural diversity in university class rooms can be utilized to facilitate learning and teaching processes through the concept of 'transcultural wisdom bank.' This is because interaction and exposure is high in such a class (Pike & Kuh, 2006).

Gurin's report (1999) also confirms that racial diversity and student involvement in activities related to diversity have a direct and strong effect on learning and the way students conduct themselves in later life. When students' cultural background is compatible with the dominant culture of the educational institute, this compatibility creates a conducive learning environment for students. However, conventional type of classroom culture is more prone to exclusion (Samuel & Burney, 2003). Therefore, it is the responsibility of the educators to figure out the possibilities of marginalizing the students in a culturally diversified classroom and come up with some strategies to restore and acknowledge the cultural diversity into the classroom.

Campus communities that are more racially diverse tend to create more richly varied educational experiences, which is good for a democratic society (Chang, Denson, Saenz, & Misa, 2006). Further, it can also lead to more openness to diversity, critical thinking skills and greater personal development (Hu & Kuh, 2003). While an increase in international students has positive effects on academic performance, a study on Chinese students in New Zealand indicate that inter-cultural interaction has been largely about tolerance and has not moved to cultural diversity (Jiang, 2011). This shows that a level of inter-cultural openness, which is required in cultural diversity learning and sharing in institutions of higher learning, is yet to be attained.

As one of the competitive economies in the Asian region, Thailand is striving to improve its quality of human resources through the means of internationalization of its higher education and promotion of cultural diversification among the students and faculty across the world. Thailand's ap-

proach to internationalization and cultural diversity has been: (1) Providing a regional hub for international and local academic institutions, (2) Exporting academic experts abroad, and (3) using foreign scholars and professors in Thai institutions of higher learning. However, there is little focus on fostering cultural diversity and intercultural understanding among people (Kitcharoen, 2011). Over the recent years, Thai institutions have also provided scholarships for international students to come and study in Thailand.

While many studies in Thailand explored on internationalization and higher education, limited focus has been given to the way students experience a learning process through a culturally diversified classroom, particularly at graduate school level. In this study we analyse students' lived experiences in a cross-cultural classroom context, with the aim of understanding: (1) what is the impact of a culturally diverse classroom experience on graduate school students' learning? (2) Which larger ramifications, if any, exist from this experience?

Research Methodology

Research type and Research Design

This is a phenomenological case study. In phenomenology, the researcher suspends his or her prior knowledge and assumptions about the subject and like a stranger approaches the subject from the sense of newness. The focus is on the lived experiences of the participants, their feelings, beliefs, thoughts, and perceptions of the subject or issues in question. The purpose is to elicit and describe what participants experienced and the meaning they made out of it. To analyse the impact of culturally diverse classroom experiences on graduate students' learning, a self-regulation model of cultural diversity was used. This self-regulation model of cultural diversity assumes that individuals are active problem solvers whose behaviour is a product of their cognitive imaging or representation of a cultural diversity situation, issue or activity. When individuals encounter a cultural diversity situation, issue or activity, they image it, and emotionally respond to it. If they image it as threat, they will respond accordingly. From these responses, the meaning individuals make out cultural diversity can be elicited in ways that can show the impact of a culturally diverse classroom experience on the graduate school students' learning. To a large extent, implications for improving culturally diverse classroom environments for better learning can be drawn (Creswell, 2013).

Sample and Participants in the Study

A sample of 15 participants was purposively selected from international students attending a university in Thailand. Participants were from developed and developing countries like Bangladesh, Ghana, Pakistan, Thailand,

Nepal, Slovakia, China and USA. All the participants had prior cultural diversity classroom experience in their previous studies in other universities. Some had studied in other countries like the UK, China and the US as foreign students before coming to study in Thailand. Others had studied in their own countries like Ghana, Slovakia, Nepal, US, and Bangladesh, but had cultural diversity experience while studying with foreign students before coming to Thailand. In this case, their reflections were at times comparative.

The participants were graduate students undertaking various Masters and PhD programs in different schools of the University. The basis of selection was: availability, willingness to participate in the study, prior experience in an international classroom context, and previous familiarity, interactions, and informal relationships with the researchers.

Research Process

This study was done as part of on-going internal research practice at the university. No external permission, except informed consent from participants was required. In this regard, researchers contacted the participants, negotiated the study, and obtained informed consent after which interviews were set and conducted upon consensus with the participants. Interviews were conducted for a period of 3 months. Interview sites were decided upon by the participants. All the interviews were conducted on the campus. Interview sessions lasted between 20–60 minutes, and proceeded until the issues were conclusive. The length of the interviews also depended on whether the participants were story tellers who shared more about the subject or 'straight to the point' individuals who gave straight to the point precise answers, and did not want further probes or reported to think about the subject. The interview structure followed a three tire pattern (Rossman & Rallis, 2012) which is: (1) interview on whether participants ever had another cross-cultural classroom experience before, (2) interview on the details of the cross-cultural classroom experience at the time of the interview, and (3) interview on the reflection on the meaning of the cross-cultural experience to the participant's learning.

Participants were asked the following questions: what is your experience with a culturally diverse class? Have you ever studied in another cross-cultural class before? What feelings come to your mind? How would you describe your experience learning in a culturally diverse class? What meaning does it have on your learning? Notes on the interview including background information were written after the interviews. No video or tape recording was done. Follow-up questions were made where necessary. The following technical issues were examined in the study: peer debriefing, checking for negative case analysis, checking for progressive subjectivity, member

checks, triangulation of data sources, triangulation of investigators, referential adequacy, and reflexivity (Chilisa, 2012).

The following ethical issues were examined in this study:

- *Informed consent:* Participants were identified, contacted, and requested to voluntarily participate in the study.
- *Privacy:* Participants chose, based on their understanding of the research, which information to share. Information sharing was only for the purpose of the study, and it has been used in ways that protected the participants' privacy.
- *Confidentiality and Anonymity:* All interview sessions were conducted in a confidential manner, and data kept, analysed and written in a manner that protects the name of the institution and participants. Peer reviews were conducted to establish professional standards. Sensitive information or comments seen to cause harm were not included in the final analysis and writing of the report.

Issues such as dragging it all up, exploitation, coercion, and sanctions were avoided in the study. No monetary benefits were given in the study, since the study was voluntary, and as part of on-going efforts helping others research practices, where graduate students engage in on-going research exercises utilizing social capital resources shared across the study professional study community (Boeije, 2010).

Data Analysis

A phenomenological method of analysis was used. In this method, all written transcripts are read several times in order to obtain the overall feeling. From each transcript, significant phrases or sentences that contain direct lived experiences are identified and extracted. Meanings are then formulated from the phrases or statements. These formulated meanings are then clustered into common themes across participants, as well as unique themes emerging from the experiences of particular participants. Finally, the results are integrated into an in-depth description of the phenomena. New data, which emerged later, was included in the description (Colaizzi, 1978, in Creswell, 2013, p. 332).

Results of the Study

From the analysis, significant statements from participants' lived experiences were identified. Formulated meanings were drawn from the statements to indicate the impact of the cultural diversity classroom experience on students' learning in light of the self-regulatory framework for cultural diversity. The following themes were also identified and analysed.

Factors Indicative of Cultural Diversity

Participants viewed cultural diversity in many different ways. While it is difficult to comprehensively define what diversity is, participants described cultural diversity by associating it with the following indicative factors.

1. *Academic background.* Participants viewed diverse academic backgrounds of students (for instance economics, political science, and engineering) as a resource bringing different contributions to the class. 'If one does not know things about other areas during the class discussions and during the class-break discussions, they can learn from each other,' a participant observed.

2. *Social background.* Some participants also saw their prior social experiences or prior social experiences of other students as a resource for cultural diversity beneficial for learning. This prior experience helped them make decisions on how to relate to other people in class, and to know the difference between contexts. A participant having experience in China with international students made the comparison with the Thai context: 'In China, I can bring constructive criticism against instructors and it is considered.'

3. *Nationality.* This means that because you come from a different country, therefore you are different and you carry a difference to class with you. This was seen as a positive thing that promoted new learning.

4. *Capabilities in understanding* subject matters, presentations, and academic writing. This promoted useful sharing of knowledge, energized students to study and compete more, and enriched classroom discussions.

5. *Faculty.* Participants saw foreign and Thai professors bring to class different experiences, perspectives, professional experiences and values. Apart from this exposure, they also viewed diversity as varied areas of specialization of the foreign and Thai professors from which insights and perspectives were shared and which enriched learning.

6. *Culture.* Culture was viewed as different values, perspectives, dress-up and fashion designs students used, as well as the conflict between the individualistic Western culture, and the community-oriented cultures of Asia and Africa.

7. *Age.* The gap between older and younger graduate students enriched or hindered learning.

8. *Occupation.* Diversity was also seen in terms of comparing full-time students who were not working at the time of the study, and the part-time students who were working.

9. *Size of international students* in a school compared to the native stu-

dents. Smaller size of international students in a school was seen as denial or absence of, or lack of real diversity.

10. *Responsive policy* intended to have cultural diversity, yet absence of the opportunity and support to know and understand other cultures. This shows cultural diversity as a prevailing yet unrealized social reality.

11. *Lack of support mechanisms* to help new students adjust to the new environment, and promote intercultural dialogue and co-existence.

Race and Cultural Diversity

Race relations in class were seen as impediments to learning in a cross cultural context. While participants did not report any act of deliberate racism, they viewed people from different countries, cultures, and languages as contributing to hindrances they experienced in learning. Issues such as different English accent and tones limited understanding. Basic values such as touching or hugging a person appeared to be more difficult to practice across races than within a race. In some classes, classroom discussions were dominantly led by European students. As a result, a participant said she preferred individual assignments, even though class discussions were helpful.

Age and Cultural Diversity

The gap between older and younger graduate students enriched or hindered learning. Age factor was seen as the realized gap between the thinking of two generations in class. The older generation comprised of individuals with decades of experience, while the younger generation consisted of young individuals who had graduated recently, and had advanced to postgraduate studies immediately. Interaction between these two generations was at times an emotional one. Sometimes conflict arose over expression of emotions. Younger students appeared more aggressive, while elderly students appeared calmer. While in the Western and African students' cultures, young people working with older people is a normal thing, and even though the individuals are aware of the age differences, participants suggested that, in the Thai society, respect, which sometimes demands not going against what older people say, and other hidden socio-cultural structures and rules hindered working relationships between older and younger students.

Mature international students took the lead and at times dominated classroom discussions. This was partly because they found relevant to share in class their comparative experience. On the other hand, young students with limited experience found discussions less engaging, because they viewed discussions as a preserve of the experienced. Therefore,

they preferred continuous independent studies instead of discussions. Few young students participated in discussions. Some appeared annoyed when others asked questions leading to discussions.

Group Work and Cultural Diversity

Participants identified two types of groups, namely: (1) instructor-directed groups and (2) voluntary-oriented groups. Voluntary-oriented group is when students voluntarily chose to form discussion groups, while instructor-directed group is when the instructor directs students' work together in a group. When groups are voluntarily formed, participating international and Thai students form separate groups. Some participants viewed this as the result of communication and convenience. Another challenge realized in instructor-directed groups was that participating Thai students preferred a slow and more reflective group discussion while international students tended to move fast on issues. Some participants observed that Thai students preferred to work with Thai students rather than international students, because they felt if they did this way, they would share information and help each other better.

Some participants observed that in instructor-directed groups, some students did not share equal responsibilities. Best students in the class preferred working individually. Some participants also observed that there was resentment against fully-funded students. Self-financed students viewed fully-funded students as favoured by the university. A participant shared his experience while seeking academic assistance from a self-financed student. The participant had sought help on how to do an assignment given in class. 'You are a sponsored student, why are you seeking help from me?' the participant was told. This feeling negatively influenced the working relationship between sponsored students and self-financed students. In this case, voluntary groups worked better where a sense of informal ties like friendships or synergies, such as averagely performing students, already existed. Due to time constrains, some participants thought that there was not sufficient time to share thoughts. As a result, students decided to use group emails to supplement face-to-face group work. This approach was not interactive enough to generate critical views on the subject. Other challenges included punctuality, willingness to work in groups, reliance on others, and difficulties in meeting deadlines. Even though at times it was difficult to get cooperation in group work, voluntary groups were common during exam periods.

Some participants viewed group discussions as a mechanism to train students to work in cross-cultural teams then and in the future. 'We are being trained to be good team players, which is part and parcel of the globalized, integrated world,' a participant observed. For some students, it was

the first time they learned how to work with other people from different cultures, how to make use of group discussions, lead, assign tasks, motivate themselves and others. Even though at times students faced the problem of free-riding, cross-culturally diverse groups enabled students to learn unique aspects of leadership, because students had unique opportunities to practice leadership skills sometimes under complex circumstances.

Classroom Discussions and Cultural Diversity

Usually, class discussions were led by international students. These classes had more Thai students and few international students. On the contrary, weekend classes, which consisted dominantly of part-time Thai students, class discussions were led by Thai students. Participants viewed cross-cultural classroom contexts as a representation of the real world experience. 'Classroom discussions allow us to appreciate the real world, and understand stereotypes, discrimination, cultural communication, and interaction with other people,' a participant said. Classroom interactions were largely described as dependent on the professor. 'Some professors prefer promoting student interaction, while others prefer doing one way instructions in the class, which feels like being in the school,' one participant observed. Allowing opportunities for discussion depended upon the teaching characteristics of the instructor. Some would allow discussions, while others would not. At times, when professors had a lot more things to teach in the class, they limited the classroom discussions, in favour of lectures. Some students viewed this as more or less restricting, while others thought it was better for professors to deliver knowledge than students to discuss. This represents the complexity in the expectations and views of students in a cross-cultural classroom context.

At times, participating Thai students were reluctant in engaging in classroom discussions compared to international students. As a result, there were more perspectives from international experiences than Thailand, even though the majority of the students were Thai. Limited participation of Thai students in classroom discussions was partly attributed to the submissive attitudes among Thai students, an attitude they expressed by keeping quiet, or showing reluctance to talk rather than debating issues in class. This form of expression meant showing respect and loyalty. On the contrary, international students debated with Thai professors who did not appear to be disapproving of class discussions. In some cases, professors pushed for class discussions. Some professors provided incentives for discussions such as promoting opinions, guidance, motivation, supervision, equal listening.

Classroom discussions also helped students to learn cross-cultural tolerance. Some students turned emotional when things were said against their culture. A case was mentioned where Thai students were angry at a Thai a

professor, who critiqued Thai culture by saying that Thai system goes with collectivism. The professor had encouraged students to embrace diversity. Some participants found classroom discussions open to all and without restrictions. Others thought discussions were topic- or leader-dependent. Some issues of interest motivated discussions, while the leaders of the discussions influenced the dimensions and extent discussions would go. These factors were not solely dependent on culture.

The nature and extent of discussions depended on the number of students in the class. For some students, it took longer time to get acquainted with discussions in a cross-cultural context. During the first semester, there was little classroom interaction. Some students who were competent in English contributed more and at times dominated classroom discussions, while others were largely observers and silent participants. After the first semester, many students found it comfortable to engage in classroom discussions. While some students discussed class discussions as opposed to lectures, other students discussed class discussions following lectures. In case of foreign lecturers, lectures were used as stimulants for discussions and group work.

In some classes, participants observed that there were limited interactions. Participating Thai students sat in one group, while international students sat in another. Compared to international students, Thai students were polite but difficult to get involved in discussions. In these classes, lectures were the dominant mode of instruction. However, a participant observed that 'Class room discussion is an in-built mechanism for assessment. It is useful. Learning is not always formal, it is sometimes informal, and getting the practical aspect outside the classroom even from uneducated people comes under the informal category.'

Nationality and Cultural Diversity

This means that because one comes from a different country, therefore one is different and carries a difference to class. On one hand, this was seen as a positive thing that promoted new learning. On the other hand, it was seen as a measuring rod for Thai students, who at times found it intimidating. Some Thai students did not like the comparison made by professors between Thais and sponsored international students. They viewed it as negatively discouraging. Some international students interviewed on the subject felt it was meant to encourage positive cross-cultural competency in higher education.

Cross cultural-Communication and Cultural Diversity

'I want to hug her, but I don't know what she will think, so I just fold my arms,' a participant observed. The participant spoke in reference to cross-

cultural communication constrains endured for about three years while studying in Thailand. This student had studied in the UK before where open communication and culture, though with its reservations, enabled foreign students to easily adjust to the new culture and learn to communicate cross-culturally. However, in the Thai culture, it was more complex to understand communicable feelings, because in most cases, culture teaches individuals to hide feelings by practising what is called 'saving the face.' Saving the face basically means that one does not need to openly express feelings whether sad or happy. Maintaining calm is highly cherished, and what some cultures may consider normal expressions of feelings like crying of speaking louder when happy or disappointed can be sometimes be seen as madness in this context. As an antithesis, the statement 'I want to hug her, but I don't know what she will think, so I just fold my arms' was said in spite of the appreciating the fact that the university had provided adequate resources for learning during this period. A heavily stocked library, available expertise in the academy, a conducive living and learning environment, and supportive friends did little to free the participant from the cross-cultural communication constrains. This affected the participants learning, because communicating cross-culturally under constrains does not amount to the freedom one needs in order to effectively share in the cross-cultural learning environment.

In the Thai culture, avoiding confrontation, including academic controversies, can sometimes be expressed to demonstrate one's maturity, rather than agreement or disagreement over a debatable matter at hand. In the context of two extremes, the outspoken Western or African cultures, and the quiet Thai culture, it took longer for foreign and Thai students to understand how to work together successfully. Even though in the Thai culture open disagreements even constructive ones are quite rare, it took longer for international students and Thai students to get along in academic interactions, because Thai students expressed reluctance to debate openly before learning and understanding the complex cultures of the various foreign students in the classroom. 'This is just part of the wider Thai approach to foreigners: smile, be kind to foreigners but remain suspicious and closed until you learn and know them better,' a participant observed.

Occupation and Cultural Diversity

When full-time and part-time students were in one group, sometimes the nature of their occupation and free time did not allow them to give sufficient input and contribution to the group. As a result, some assignments were delayed, while in other cases full-time students felt some part-time students were not serious, hence became free-riders. Therefore, some full-time students preferred group work as a preparation for individual assignments, and

not as an assignment in itself. A participant observed that 'when dealing with part-time students, they are of the view of that, since many international students are full-time, they have to work hard on their behalf.' Some participants observed that some full-time students, especially young ones, had limited working experience. As a result, their contribution to class was largely based on theoretical backgrounds.

Outlier Elements of Cultural Diversity

Some participants observed that they need to engage African professors and more African students from African countries in their classes. These students had not studied with African students before, and had not had learning experiences with professors from Africa. They had a desire to learn more about different issues on the African continent. Other students also expressed desire to study with students from the Thai public sector in order to learn more about issues in Thailand. Even though these students were undertaking international programs, they expressed the desire to engage more with local and international experiences across the board and as inclusive as possible.

With regard to presentations conducted following assigned readings, a participant observed that, in most cases, international students focused on the broader picture of the article and commented on it, while Thai students took few points from the article and drilled deeper. This is an interesting observation that requires further systematic study to determine whether international students and Thai students have different learning approaches, particularly regarding listening, focusing and discussions.

A participant observed that voluntary formation of some study groups provided opportunities for students who were left behind, abandoned by other groups, or found themselves out of place to join and learn with others who accepted them. Unlike other groups that were formed around common ties and synergies, this type of study groups served as an academic and social support group for students with special needs. This type of group needs to be studied further, particularly the pastoral type phenomena of study group. Participants did not discuss gender as an aspect of cultural diversity with effect to learning. This might be as a result of the sampling process. In this case, there might have been other participants who might have given a perspective on gender and cultural diversity if they were selected for the study.

Discussion

Enhancing the learning experiences of the students is one of the goals of pedagogy. However, to a large extent, studies in education and training focus on knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis,

and evaluation. While this is important, limited focus is given to the way students experience the learning process, particularly at graduate school level. This study provides insights relevant to pedagogy in higher education.

In this study, socio-economic factors, such as the academic backgrounds of students (for instance economics, political science, and engineering) as a resource bringing different contributions to the class. This is because diverse class backgrounds also brought to class capabilities in understanding different subjects, presentations, and academic writing. This provided a resource pool for sharing knowledge, which energized students to study and to compete more, and enriched classroom discussions. Diversity was also seen in terms of comparing full-time students who were not working at the time of the study, and part-time students who were working. Challenges emerging from these issues included among other things: delayed assignments, free-riding in group work, constrained learning process. A study in the US context shows that socio-economic factors, such as expectations, learning formats, social organization, economic status, and expectations, limit opportunities for disadvantaged individual students to succeed ('Individual Differences – Ethnicity,' n.d.).

Nationality means that one carries a difference. This was seen as a positive thing that promoted new learning, even though at times nationality attracted resentments, especially when local students viewed international students as favoured by the university. Participants saw foreign and Thai professors bring different experiences, perspectives, professional experiences and values to class. Apart from this exposure, they also viewed diversity as varied areas of specialization of foreign and Thai professors from which insights and perspectives were shared and which enriched learning. This promotes the idea of looking at cultural diversity in education from an internationalization point of view. It also encourages embracing the perspectives and values of the minorities or the under-represented as part of education (Robinson et al., 2002).

Culture was viewed as different values, perspectives, dress-up and fashion designs students used, as well as the conflict between the individualistic Western culture and the community oriented cultures of Asia and Africa. At times cross-cultural communication hindered learning. This is similar to experiences in the US where classroom experience is challenged by various languages and ethnic backgrounds (Terry & Irving, 2010). Increase in international students has a more positive effect in developing countries (Jiang, 2011), some of which are evidenced in this study.

The gap between older and younger graduate students enriched or hindered learning. Age factor was seen as the realized gap between the thinking of two generations in class. The older generation comprised of individuals with decades of experience while the younger generation consisted of

young individuals who had graduated recently, and had advanced to post-graduate studies immediately. A study by Banks et al. (2001) found ethnic identity, social class gender, religion, sexual orientation, abilities and dis-abilities, language and race as factors indicative of diversity. The study did not consider age as a diversity factor. On the other hand this study found that age was a factor but did not find gender and religion as factors of di-versity in classroom experience, particularly the impact of these factors on learning.

Theoretical Elements

A self-regulation model of cultural diversity assumes that individuals are active problem solvers whose behaviour is a product of their cognitive imaging or representation of cultural diversity situation, issue, or activity. When individuals encounter a cultural diversity situation, issue or activity, they image it, and emotionally respond to it. If they image it as a threat, they will respond accordingly. From these responses, the meaning individuals make out of cultural diversity can be elicited in ways that can show the impact of culturally diverse classroom experiences on graduate school students' learning.

There were cases where cultural diversity was seen as a threat to learning. Some of these cases were: when Thai students encountered international students for the first time and were reluctant to engage them in discussion and learning, when full-time students perceived part-time students as free-riding in group work and at times preferred to use group discussions as preparations for individual assignments, when professors limited discussions or replaced them with lectures, when international students sat separate from Thai students in class, when international and Thai students formed different study groups, and when international students dominated class discussions at the expense of Thai students. When this occurred, cultural diversity impacted negatively on the learning process.

On the other hand, cultural diversity was also viewed as a resource for learning: when international students and Thai students formed separate groups for study, which contributed more to classroom discussions, especially after the first semester, when synergies were created, like friendships based on which they worked together, when brought together by a common threat like exams and therefore ignored their diversity differences and improved their cross-cultural working skills. When this occurred, the learning process was positively impacted. Students with limited experience learned new things from those more experienced. Students isolated by some groups were adopted by more caring ones.

From a sociological perspective, symbolic interactionism holds the view that human behaviour is centred on meaning, is socially constructed and

shaped by social experiences, and is negotiated through language and symbols. The new classroom experience as exemplified in this study provides to the individual varieties of new symbols, languages, and social experiences. This new setting demands that an individual's learning in a new international classroom context take into account renegotiating the meaning of things, and reconstructing a new social world that is highly conscious of diversity.

Given that the early socialization affects later life, and that socialization is a continuous process, one's sociability in a new international classroom context is challenged when an individual interacts with others through group discussions, assignments, lectures, and informal relationships. This new setting brings to an individual's life a new global world, in which the individual struggles to swing between the earlier national world and the new international world. While syllabus may be completed as planned at the end of the semester, the social struggle to learn together in an international context represents a new challenge, that is, learning to learn together in ways that maximizes the benefits of cross-cultural diversity.

Limitations of the Study

The advantage of this topic is that it brings to the literature pedagogic perspectives from lived experiences of graduate international students who have experienced cultural diversity in a new international classroom setting. Insights from this topic can inform experts in education to devise teaching and learning approaches that help students maximize the benefits of cultural diversity and reduce realized impediments to learning. The disadvantage of this topic is that the study focused on one university. As this is a phenomenological study, the results of this study cannot be generalized. The sample is small, hence the experiences are not typical. Difficulties in some participants expressing themselves also limited the amount of data and consequential meaning obtained from their experiences.

Practical Implications

From this study, we can infer the following implications:

1. More focus in the future should be on how to craft teaching, learning methods and wider education systems that reflect the diversities we encounter in class.
2. Students orientation should include preparations on cross cultural diversity and learning.
3. Education policies should go beyond cultural awareness and include the creation of cross-cultural oriented support systems for both international and local students.

Further Research

There is need to conduct further research on the following issues:

1. Enhancing cultural diversity in the Thai higher education.
2. Explore whether there are varied treatments of students in cross-cultural classroom contexts and how that affects learning.
3. Explore whether Thai and International students have different ways of participating in and focusing in the classroom when different teaching formats are applied.
4. An analysis of study groups as social organizations for care and support.

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