Article

ADAPTING TO CHANGE: PEDAGOGICAL INSIGHTS FROM CHINESE TRANSNATIONAL PROGRAMMES IN CHENGDU AND DALIAN

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INTRODUCTION

As I skated across the icy paths of Dalian during mid-winter, the piercing cold provided an interesting contrast to the uncertainties I had previously encountered in New Zealand. These troubling doubts had been created due to the recent pandemic and not knowing whether I would be able to find the time to be able to travel to China to complete my observations. This moment also marked an important stage of my doctoral research, embarked upon in 2019, which concerned improving my understanding of the evolving practices of Chinese Transnational Education (TNE). Although the weather was frigid, I was still happy that I had finally been able to travel to Chengdu and Dalian, as these cities were the cornerstone of my research project. Chengdu and Dalian are diverse cities making for interesting comparisons. For reference, Chengdu is the capital of Sichuan province and as the crow flies is around 1,800 kilometres from Beijing. Dalian lies much closer to Beijing, being only 460 kilometres from China's capital. Reflecting in the moment, it was surreal to consider that I had finally been able to travel to China, and the recent feelings of melancholy just melted away.

The purpose of this article is to explore the evolving practices and engagement strategies of two Chinese TNE programmes. The specific research question I have addressed is: How have Chinese TNE programmes adapted their teaching practices and learner engagement strategies in response to the COVID-19 pandemic? Making use of my prior TNE experience, this study examines the adaptations made to maintain both educational continuity and quality. My goal throughout the study has been to explore some of the key factors that have led to successful adaptation and to provide insights for how TNE practices can be improved. In writing this article, I have employed an autoethnographic approach, as advocated by Ellis and Bochner (2000), combined with a qualitative descriptive (QD) methodology. My methodological choices have anchored my experiences within the wider academic discourse and have as a result given me a more rigorous position.

The article is enriched by the reflective contributions of my academic mentors, as their insights complement and contrast with my own experiences, delivering an output that is both diverse and connected. These contributions, the first from Martin Andrew and the second from David Woodward, not only triangulate the findings but also emphasise the collaborative nature of doctoral research, reflecting the input of a broader academic team. In many academic disciplines, co-publishing with mentors and supervisors is a common practice. This collaborative effort showcases the rigorous and comprehensive nature of this research. Ethics approval (number 876) was granted in 2022.

BACKGROUND

Transnational education (TNE) commonly refers to educational programmes where learners can be studying in a country different from the one where the awarding institution is based (UNESCO, 2001). Such programmes are a critical component of global education (Naidoo, 2009). A primary motivation for expanding offshore programmes is the pursuit of greater internationalisation and institutional capacity development (Smith, 2010). These types of programmes are not only potential revenue sources for institutions (Smith, 2010), but they also provide opportunities for enhancing institutional brand and reputation (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2013). Notwithstanding these benefits, TNE also requires more extensive research and faces gaps in the exchange of best practices (British Council, 2013; Henderson et al., 2017). In terms of Chinese TNE developments, there is also a growing focus on the quality and outcomes of teaching and learning methods (O'Mahony, 2014). Supporting this argument, Rajaram (2020) stresses the importance of continuous research to address cultural and social challenges faced by Chinese learners in international settings. The COVID-19 pandemic has also precipitated the need for significant reflection on delivery (Bolatov et al., 2022) due to providers having to change their approach (Clerkin et al., 2022).

The COVID-19 pandemic created immense institutional strain, as it required almost instant efforts from educators to move from traditional in-person classroom settings to hybrid teaching approaches. This shift in teaching approach has created both challenges and opportunities in delivering effective education across borders. In both cities, keeping learners engaged while they were studying online was a major challenge. Moving all classes online required educators to become more innovative. As there was limited in-person interaction, it was certainly a tough time for educators to be able to build a sense of community among learners. Nonetheless, I saw evidence that WeChat and other social media tools helped to overcome the loss of in-person interactions. Such tools gave learners a way to connect and collaborate outside of formal classes. As part of these changes, I observed new ways of working, to ensure learning objectives were achieved. Effective technology practices were also an important component in creating effective learning experiences.

Notwithstanding the many negatives associated with the recent pandemic, significant new learning has been taken from the experience and this has led to improved practice. For example, educators have improved their digital literacy skills and assimilated a greater understanding of what is required to work best in hybrid learning environments. Institutions have also been given a roadmap for a future that will increasingly see greater levels of digital learning being implemented (Kapogiannis, 2023).

METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

I selected qualitative description (QD) as the methodology for this study as it offered me an opportunity to integrate the opinions and lived experiences of my participants (Sandelowski, 2000). According to Bradshaw et al. (2017), QD is a valuable research methodology due to its capacity to provide detailed and clear descriptions of real-world phenomena. This method offers researchers considerable flexibility in study design, and opportunities for more nuanced understanding. When employing QD, researchers typically aim to collect fundamental information about the participants, the nature of the event, its setting, and perspectives of those directly involved (Tamayo et al., 2020). Furthermore, QD research projects often integrate the researcher's perspective as a participant, offering a unique angle to explore how the researcher's experiential knowledge in their professional practice can contribute to the study's objectives (Bradshaw et al., 2017). To gather the evidence, I utilised semi-structured interviews and participant observations.

Rubin and Rubin (2012) argue that researchers can gain different perspectives and positions through integrating semi-structured interviews into their study. Such interviews were conducted using Microsoft Teams during the first half of 2023. The 16 participants included two programme managers, six educators and eight learners. All the semi-structured interviews were transcribed through Otter, with participants self-selecting their respective

pseudonyms. This approach aimed not only to preserve anonymity but also to enhance researcher reflexivity (Lahman et al., 2023).

To enhance the study's rigour, I included participant observations. LeCompte and Schensul (2010) contend that observations can reveal the broader context of a scenario, proving especially useful at uncovering underlying processes. In total, I completed eight observations in Chengdu and a further eight observations in Dalian. As depicted in Figure 1, my aim during the observations was to be unobtrusive and document significant events as they happened. As McKechnie (2008) argues, for effective observations to take place, a researcher must aim to document what is happening in front of them as soon as is practical. In terms of upholding rigour during the observations, the writing of analytic memos assisted me in challenging my position encouraging me to become more reflexive in my practice (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019; Saldaña, 2016). The important criteria I focused on during every observation included classroom management, engagement techniques, use of technology, and learner participation.

I employed Reflexive Thematic Analysis to evaluate evidence. Reflexive Thematic Analysis involves finding and understanding patterns or themes in qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2022). As mentioned by Braun and Clarke (2020), it is a process where the researcher actively creates the themes rather than just discovering them. This back-and-forth approach helps researchers really immerse themselves in the evidence, making sense of both what is there and the deeper ideas behind it (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

Figure 1. A Dalian classroom observation: Analysing pedagogical interactions (Source: Author).

INITIAL RESULTS AND INSIGHTS: A COMBINED APPROACH

Before I arrived in China, some interesting patterns had been revealed in the online interviews. One of the most significant and recurring themes was the extent of disruption learners felt their studies had experienced due to the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, "Leo," a Dalian learner, espoused a common learner perspective:

> I think online courses have many problems. A large part of people don't listen carefully in class. They just stay at home. I think it belongs to the COVID-19 as the world just stopped and we have no idea what to do. I just want to lay on the bed at home.

Leo's opinion needs to be viewed in the context of the difficulties that TNE programmes faced during the COVID-19 pandemic. The constantly evolving pandemic situation necessitated the adoption of online classes as a means for institutions in China to continue their programmes during lockdown periods (Ma & Lee, 2021). The shift to online learning, however, posed ongoing challenges, as institutions had to quickly expand their online offerings. Common challenges identified over this period included technical issues, online classroom management practices, and mixed levels of learner engagement (Friedman, 2020). Interviews with Chengdu and Dalian programme managers also confirmed recurring and broadly similar challenges faced during the pandemic. For example, here "Alexander" shares his intense frustrations about how the pandemic has disrupted institutional teaching efforts:

> Obviously, the disruptions relate to students not being able to attend class. That's the biggest one. For our joint programme where we teach in China for the first three years of the programme, our staff have not been able to travel to China. And so it's lost a vital face-to-face component of the programme.

Despite the majority of participants expressing reservations towards an online teaching approach, some participants shared the advantages of leveraging technology for enhanced learning, particularly through the use of WeChat in the classroom. For example, both programme managers were enamoured with how WeChat could be used by both educators and learners. "James," another programme manager, said the following:

> I guess, yeah, some of our asynchronous group work is done offline as well. Then, I mean, increasingly, things like WeChat, QQ groups are used as a bit of a community of learners with the teachers involved as well.

WeChat and QQ are both popular Chinese social media platforms developed by Tencent (Negro et al., 2020). WeChat serves as a versatile app integrating messaging, social media, and mobile payment functions, and is widely used in China for personal and business communication (Xue et al., 2021), while QQ is an older platform primarily known for its instant messaging service (Huang et al., 2013).

The sentiment that WeChat could be used in the classroom for a more positive learning experience was shared by both programme managers and learners. For example, "Coco" expressed just how useful WeChat can be for learners, particularly those who may be reluctant to speak up in class: "Of course, if we have any questions, we will send a WeChat to ask the teachers to solve the problem."

The interviews also brought to light the innovative practice of flipped classrooms, and particularly how Chengdu educators utilised this approach in response to the restricted teaching conditions. Educators creating a flipped classroom will typically invert traditional teaching models by delivering instructional content outside of the classroom, often online, and moving homework into the classroom to allow for more personalised instruction (Bishop & Verleger, 2013). Here, James discusses the strategies educators employed to sustain learner engagement throughout the pandemic:

> We wanted to make sure that every student was engaged in some way, shape or form. And I think that worked well. And the way we did that was by giving almost kind of a flipped classroom approach where we give the students a lot of reading, we might give them PowerPoint presentations with voiceovers or with a video narration.

With these early perspectives emerging from the interviews, I felt that heading to China to observe teaching practice in situ was not only going to be informative, but would specifically offer interactions between learners and educators and possible changes in practice caused by having had to deliver all prior classes through an online teaching approach. I arrived in China in November 2023 and the Chengdu observations took place first. I have included below an extract from my first Chengdu observation demonstrating just how effective a face-to-face

delivery approach can be. The extract corroborates what had emerged in the interviews about just how much learners value learning together in a physical classroom:

> A highly enriching experience for learners was provided where it was evident that learners had achieved the learning outcomes and were interacting constantly with their classmates in a very positive manner. I felt that the positive interaction of learners was a reflection of the high level of trust that had been created in the classroom by Mei.

On observing further classes in Chengdu it was evident that WeChat, as had been mentioned in the interviews, was being used in impactful ways. For example, in my fourth Chengdu observation, I was struck by how WeChat could offer a collective space for learners to overcome learning difficulties and to be a space for online exploration. The following extract represents reflections on my fourth Chengdu observation when "Bill" was covering his recommendation for how learners could work together for a forthcoming assessment task:

> Also, another really useful point that Bill shared today was about WeChat and blended learning and how WeChat could be used to create an online community of practice (OCoP) for learners. Specifically, WeChat was mentioned in the class as being a place to review problems and a place to share documents amongst all learners.

An online community of practice (OCoP) is essentially a collective of individuals who engage in sharing and evolving their knowledge, beliefs, and experiences around a shared activity, leveraging technology for communication (Liu, 2012). Social media platforms such as Facebook and WeChat can also promote greater interaction and collaboration among learners, thereby delivering an improved learning experience (Alammary et al., 2014; Miron & Ravid, 2015; Zhang, 2015).

Another important reflection that I documented was how effectively a flipped classroom approach could be used with second language learners. As noted in the interviews, a flipped approach had been used throughout the pandemic. However, with the return to face-to-face delivery, educators were now having to manage the complexities of large groups of eager learners in a lecture room and having to cover difficult concepts in only two 45-minute class periods. Here is an extract from my seventh Chengdu observation where I reflect on the struggles I noted when learners had to deal with technical terms like demographic analysis and bivariate analysis:

> As previously noted, it's crucial for learners to have engagement opportunities and for educators to eschew the delivery of information in large blocks of text. A key piece of learning that I took away from this class is that educators need to consider carefully how to deliver an engaging learning experience when they have to deliver large lectures. Understanding and applying English concepts like the data analysis techniques I observed could be a struggle for some learners. I felt that at times the concepts were challenging and maybe having a flipped classroom approach to delivering class could have been helpful. Learners could potentially have undertaken many of these challenging exercises at home and then used the lecture as a place for feedback and creating more of a shared learning experience.

Completing the observations showed me just how important it was for educators to keep learners engaged through using interactive and flexible teaching strategies. Digital tools like WeChat were helpful not just for communication but also for building a sense of community (Xue et al., 2021), which in my experience is a key determinant in successful online learning. Social media platforms such as WeChat offer unique advantages over traditional learner systems, particularly in creating a community and real-time interaction among learners and educators. Given its flexibility and accessibility, WeChat is a helpful tool to help extend the capabilities of learners within Chinese TNE programmes. To go beyond some of the limitations seen with additional Learning Management Systems, WeChat offers considerable promise (Gan & Wang, 2015; Harwit, 2017). Teng and Wang (2021) also mention that, in the context of learning in China, WeChat plays an important role in delivering

successful interactions between educators and learners. Therefore, integrating platforms like WeChat should be considered a key strategy for reflexive practitioners.

Another standout conclusion emerging from the findings was the need for educators to consider a flipped classroom approach. This approach is essential to meet the diverse needs of learners as it allows for a much more comprehensive exploration of topics (Jong, 2023). Sun et al. (2022) also mention that in the post-COVID educational landscape, particularly in TNE programmes where the learning challenges can be even more complex, implementing a flipped classroom model can lead to improved levels of engagement.

Reflecting on what challenges TNE programmes face today, the evidence suggests a need for ongoing support and training for both educators and learners. This support needs to go beyond just technical help to more structured guidance to help educators and learners make better use of the available digital tools. This includes pedagogical guidance on how to effectively integrate the available tools into a teaching and learning context. As Joshi (2023) argues, technology is going to play an increasingly greater role in education, as it can empower learners for the future due to its potential for greater accessibility and inclusivity. Notwithstanding this promising future, training will be necessary if these tools are going to realise their full potential.

Mentor 1's contribution

When mentors walk alongside learners in their learning trajectories, they draw on their own autoethnographies and create analogies with their own experience. As a transnational educator in Education both in China and Vietnam, I was able to draw on my own cultural and educational experiences with learners, programmes, curricula, and material environments. This process enabled me to discern alignments with the topic of adapting to educational change. In my own ten years in TNE, up to and including 2023 and the COVID period, I gained a sense of the pressing issues for learners and organisations during times of sociopolitical reform and educational disruption.

My experience-led insights align with Jeremy's key insights about TNE deliveries in Asia: the need for enhanced blended learning models, particularly ones allowing flipped learning and reflective spaces, and the importance of social media (and potentially discussion board spaces) for building community. The teacher is linked indirectly via the sharing of their updated discourse, and the need for tailored support in integrating technology. Since both nations are infused with Confucianist educational culture, despite having contrasting strategies during COVID, disruption foregrounded similar issues. First, after years of positivist domination, the pandemic uncovered the viability of educational research informed by reflection, as demonstrated in a common yet new pedagogy using discussion forums for sharing reflective learnings. Second, with paper resources (which had long been an expected norm) not circulating in classrooms, learners adapted to portable e-tests disseminated via social media and mobile spaces. While not all learners have access to computers (for instance, those in rural or mountainous areas), all are literate in mobile digitisation. E-communities and critical friendships emerged organically from this move to digitisation, and the pedagogical strategy is still used today. Third, the greatest challenge was a lack of technical support, especially in ensuring lecture and conferencing software were fit for purpose in nations where many learners possessed old computers. This problem was addressed by having monitors from the administrative team in the digital classrooms, instructing, problem-shooting, and finding workarounds.

The key findings in this paper echo my own experience in analogous spaces. As a mentor, this fortuitous alignment brings support for and arguably validity to the key findings in this paper. When the experiences of the learner and their mentor fuse in professional practice epistemology, there is a strongly supportive sense of resonance, alignment, and commonality.

Mentor 2's contribution

Participant observations of transnational education programmes in Chengdu and Dalian by Jeremy Taylor provided contextualised data that corroborated his semi-structured online interviews. This qualitative descriptive methodology of observations would not have been possible 12 months earlier, due to COVID-19 restrictions in China. The global pandemic transformed education pedagogy, forcing classrooms online. Jeremy's work clearly indicates that this approach, on its own, does not engage learners to learn. A more learner-centred approach helps to engage learners and the use of tools such as flipped classrooms, WeChat, and training in technology, will assist in this process. Jeremy's use of analytic memos results in a more reflexive practice and provides academic rigour for this reflexive thematic analysis. TNE programmes may be seen as role models for providing the precision and innovation to transform learning, with a flow on effect for pedagogical delivery domestically within Chinese tertiary institutions.

CONCLUSION

This article has shown that TNE programmes need to consider incorporating more flexible and adaptive teaching methods if they want to better meet the needs of their learners. This point is especially pertinent when we consider the impact that COVID-19 has had on practice. Social media platforms like WeChat play an important role in promoting more real-time interactions between educators and learners and therefore should be encouraged as part of any future-facing teaching toolkit.

Another key takeaway from this research is that digital tools and innovative teaching approaches should not be viewed as ephemeral responses to the pandemic but as reflections of broader trends in Chinese TNE. The evidence suggests that these approaches will be increasingly necessary for creating fit-for-purpose learning environments.

As we ponder the future of TNE programmes, it is evident that practices are changing. TNE programmes should be equipping their learners with the necessary skills, knowledge, and adaptability to succeed in a globally connected world. This study provides insights into how to overcome some of the inherent difficulties of an increasingly challenging global education market. If TNE programmes are to remain relevant they must continue to promote innovations in the classroom and be open to greater collaboration.

This journey through the evolving practices of TNE offers countless opportunities for further research, particularly in understanding how the findings could be applied across wider TNE domains.

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Martin Andrew operates as a creative mentor in postgraduate programmes, including master's and doctorate degrees in Professional Practice. Prior to his five years supporting the College of Work Based Learning in Otago, New Zealand, he had sojourned away from his hometown of Ōtepoti/Dunedin with two honorary posts at Melbourne universities in Creative Industries and Transnational Education (TNE). His work and research have become increasingly focussed on doctorate education and supporting learners to reach their own personal best

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