A comparative study on the students' concepts on learning

Ao, Xue-Lian
College of Education, Minzu University of China, China (aoxuelian999@126.com)

Ching, Gregory S. ✉
Graduate School of Educational Leadership & Development, Fu Jen Catholic University, Taiwan (gregory_ching@yahoo.com)

Lin, Pei-Hsuan
Department of Applied Foreign Languages, Lunghwa University of Science and Technology, Taiwan (d984411046@ms.lhu.edu.tw)

Abstract

As the world around us change, aspects of our daily living also changes. With the advancement of technology; students' access to information has totally changed. Such phenomenon has all together changed how students perceived learning. Recently, in Taiwan, higher education institutions are focused on increasing their international student populations. With this in mind, a qualitative study is undertaken to compare the different insights between international and local students' concepts on learning. Participants are volunteer international and local students of a technical and vocational university in Taiwan. A series of focus group interviews is conducted on various student groups, coming from different countries such as: Vietnam, Korea, Finland, and Taiwan. Similar questions regarding the students' perception on the concepts or goals (objectives) of learning are asked. Findings are able to provide valuable insights and suggestions to the various stakeholders in the academic community, such as administrators, faculty, students, and parents. More importantly, in order to become competitive in the future, students should be exposed to a more positive learning environment, which can foster and develop the students' positive concepts of learning.

Keywords: student learning experiences; qualitative study; focus group interview; honor and integrity in student; positive learning environment

A comparative study on the students' concepts on learning

1. Introduction

The invention of the world-wide-web and the rise of technological advancement have drastically changed the way we conduct of daily lives. Similarly, technological change has also brought interconnectivity to all aspects of life, wherein people maintain connected to each other by means of various type of technology (Chambers, 2004). With the changes in the society and learning environment itself, increasing concerns on the question regarding are 'students learning' and their 'perception on the concepts of learning' have been observed (Arum & Roksa, 2011). Such changes in the perception of learning has been argued to be made easier with the prevalent use of information and communications technologies (ICT) in education (Harper, 2006; Jill Austin & Brown, 1999; Underwood & Szabo, 2003).

In Taiwan, a recent MOE (2011) statistics report mentioned that within the last ten years, international students population in Taiwan have since tripled in numbers. With the rising number of international students' mobility towards Taiwan, concerns have been raised regarding the international students' experiences in Taiwan (Roberts & Ching, 2011; Roberts, Chou, & Ching, 2010). Recently, higher education institutions in Taiwan have started to place strong emphases in fostering students' honor and integrity, however, studies regarding on the students' concepts on learning are still lacking. In response, this qualitative study will utilized the focus-group interview method to compare the different insights between international and local students' concepts on learning.

Initial research questions are as follows:

1.   What are the international and local students' concepts, goals, and/or objectives of learning?

2.   What are the factors that influence the students' concepts on learning?

3.   What is the role of technology in influencing such concepts on learning?

4.   What are the different perceptions on academic dishonesty?

2. Concepts on Learning

Learning is quite important for the development of human beings in order to interact, individually and collectively. However, with the advancement of technology and changes in the society itself have triggered the issue regarding are 'students learning' and their 'perception on the concepts of learning' (Arum & Roksa, 2011). While going through higher education is expected to accomplish many tasks. Ultimately, what students make out of a higher education degree depends on their own concepts, goals, and/or objectives of learning.

In Taiwan, many students have been focusing their effort in acquiring industry certification and civil service examination. Furthermore, students who wanted to work within the business occupations, securing both international and local certifications (Language, Information Technology, and many other types of certification) would be the best choice of action.

The oxford dictionary defines learning as synonymous to knowledge which is acquired through study, experience, or being taught (Oxford, 2014). As for most people, attending college is primarily to pursue a field of study that is of ones' interest. Furthermore, subjects taken are said to expand on the previous knowledge gained during the high school years (eHow, 2014). Ultimately, one major goal of having a college degree is the opening up opportunity for future employment.

3. Research design

This study employs a qualitative descriptive research paradigm. The descriptive research paradigm is a qualitative research that is to explain how something that exists is related to some preceding event that might be affected by a present event (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007). Best (1970) noted that descriptive studies are mostly concerned with the conditions that exist, practices that prevail, beliefs and points of views that are ongoing, and being felt. Hence, to understand the current comparative point of views of the students' concept on learning; a descriptive study is employed.

3.1 Participants and research process

To understand the different concepts of learning, a series of focus group interviews is accomplished with the various student groups. Focus group interviews is one of the most common qualitative research tools in the social sciences studies. A group represents a number of interacting individuals having a common point of interest; while an interview is the use of a moderator as a focal for eliciting information (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). Convenience sampling was used to select the participants. Within the current case, both local and international students from a science and technology university in Taiwan were selected as participants.

An invitation was send out to all the international students of the university. Besides the use of the convenience sampling method; snowballing sampling technique was also used, wherein international students refers their friends (through word of mouth) to join the focus group interviews. A total of 10 focus group discussion interviews were conducted on various student groups, coming from different countries such as: Vietnam, Korea, Finland, and Taiwan. Similar questions regarding the students' perception on the concepts or goals (objectives) of learning were asked. In addition, questions regarding the international study experiences in Taiwan and their overall perception on the Taiwanese education were also collected.

After the focus group discussion interviews, data analysis and interpretation of the results was accomplished. Documentation and analysis followed Stenhouse's (1988) categorization style of case data. While, Glaser's (1978) notion of constant comparison was used in going through the previous reviewed studies and forming similar categories into dimensions. Lastly, conclusion was drawn together with the provision of insights and suggestions to the various stakeholders in the academic community, such as administrators, faculty, students, and parents.

Table 1 shows the background demography of the participants. A total of 95 participants joined the focus group discussions. Male and female students have almost the same number of participants. Backgrounds of the students are from Taiwan around 73.70% or 70, Vietnam 23.20% or 22, Korean 2.10% or 2, and 1 Finland student.

Table 1

Background demography of the participants

Items	n	%
Gender		
Male	47	49.50
Female	48	50.50
Country		
Taiwan	70	73.70
Vietnam	22	23.20
Korea	2	2.10
Finland	1	1.10

4. Results and discussions

4.1 What are the international and local students' concepts, goals, and/or objectives of learning?

After the focus group information is compared and analyzed that they are tabulated into two categories; one for the international students' reasons for studying and the other for concepts on Taiwanese education. Table 2 and table 3 list the top answers for both the international and local students.

Table 2

International students' reasons for studying

a. University education can help students acquire skills and become useful
b. University education is a basic threshold to secure a job
c. University education is the road to a good future
d. It is an honor to have an education
e. Realize one's dream
f. I enjoy learning
g. Follow the trend (it seems almost everyone does it)
h. I study because of my family
i. Just to get a diploma (degree)

Table 3

Local students' reasons and concept on learning

a. University education is the road to a good future
b. University education is a basic threshold to secure a job
c. University education can help students acquire skills and become useful
d. University education is limited, one needs to survive by themselves
e. To prepare for civil service examination
f. Learn the methods of learning
g. To prepare for one's career
h. Realize one's dream
i. Students can choose what courses they want to learn
j. Variety of teaching methods can help students learn more
k. There are many ways to go to a university
l. Achievement tests are similar to using scores to determine everything
m. Teachers' attitudes determine how students react on homework
n. To prepare for further studies
o. Students go to a university just to get credits
p. Bachelor degree is quite common
q. Just to get a diploma (degree)

Comparing the two lists, both local and international students realized that a university education is important for acquiring the necessary skills and to become successful in the future. However, one distinct difference is that international students think that a university education is hard to come by; while students in Taiwan claimed that its bachelor degree is quite common.

Local students express the need for a university education (college degree) in having a good job in the future.

In our society, to get a good job, we need to finish college. LS-021

Today, almost everyone needs to have some kind of university degree. It is hard to find a job if did not graduate. LS-007

While, international students also agrees with the notion, however, stresses that higher education is a privilege and not everyone is entitled to have one. Besides the economic (financial) issues; university education should be carefully planned and taken seriously.

In our country, it is not easy to get a college degree. I remember my parents only have the opportunity to study up to secondary education. Taiwan students are very fortunate. IS-V-002

Having a university degree is a dream come true. In order to realize your dream, you need to pursue it. I believe that after graduating and having a good job will help you accomplish your dream. IS-K-001

Students in Taiwan would tend to go into a master degree program or take a civil service examination to get a job working for the government. Further differences are also seen on the local students' reaction towards examinations and the way teaching is accomplished in school. Many local students also noted the already prevalence of individuals who are taking or already finished their graduate studies. These all together increases the need to prepare well during university studies.

I think my college education can prepare me for my future examination or certification and help me get a job in a government office. I think this is a way to have a secured future. LS-054

For me, I want to study MBA after graduation. Right now many people have graduate education. I think it I need to become competitive so I can get a better job. LS-033

In addition, issues such as the "*Variety of teaching methods can help students learn more*" and "*Achievement tests are similar to using scores to determine everything*"; easily shows that local students are quite concerned on things that affect their learning.

Results indicate that there both some similarities and differences among the international and local students' concepts on learning and having a college degree. Similarities in terms of they both value the need for having a degree in order to secure a job, and in turn have a brighter future. For as in terms of the differences, local students tend to have a more relax attitude as compared to a more serious mindsets of some of the international students. Local students believed that with the current number of students, universities lack students; hence, it is easy to get into one.

4.2 What are the factors that influence the students' concepts on learning?

According from the previous mentioned lists students are majority influenced by three factors, namely: environment or societal issues, family (more specifically parents), and self. With regards to the environment and societal issues; students' perception of what is the current situation in the industry would affect their judgment such as course or major selection. For instance, many local students would tend to take up foreign language courses such as English; so as to enter into the banking or financial industry or even the tourism industry. In addition, the news and media also affects the students' decisions. Not only the print media, but also television news and the internet, brings current information regarding new careers and high valued course programs that are of interests. Students both local and international are quite affected by such information, which inevitably affects their concepts on learning.

Similarly, the students' family (more importantly their parents) affects their career choices. However, this is far more common in Asian students. Since, the majority of the participants are of Asian origin; results are limited to students from this region. Furthermore, the students' upbringing (growing up experiences) also affects their career choice decisions. For instance, a role model in the family; a parent (mother or father) who is a teacher might be the trigger for future academic inclination towards education and also becoming an educator.

I remember since when I was in my junior high school, my parents always told me that I should become an engineer in the future and follow my dad's footsteps. LS-003

Lastly, students now are quite independent, although some of them might be influenced either by their environment or by their family; still many have their own notion with regards to their learning. Students tend to become more involved in their learning, they give comments and are quite concern on their learning.

4.3 What is the role of technology in influencing such concepts on learning?

The role of technology within the concepts of learning can be separated into two main sections; positive and negative. For the positive factor, students would treat technology as a source of information. Information that is available with a press of button or a few clicks of the keyboards. However, too much dependent on technology for information, people tends to become lazy and not study anymore; which can be considered as a negative aspect of technology. Furthermore, too much attachment or dependent on technology can become a distraction and may sometimes become harmful to studies.

For me I use the internet to look for information that can help me in my studies, some of the lessons is online so I need to use the internet at a regular basis. LS-018

I think having the internet so freely available is good, but sometime too much dependence is also bad. IS-011

4.4 What are the different perceptions on academic dishonesty?

For the various perceptions on academic dishonesty, students both international and local are asked to tell their experiences on cheating. Below is a list of the most frequent answers. Table 4 shows that the students know both the good and bad aspects of academic cheating. Furthermore, results can be said to be both positive and negative, since student knows the right thing to do when encountered by academic dishonesty; however, students did mention that did cheat on some of their exams.

Table 4

Students' concepts on academic dishonesty

a.	Getting high grades are more important than acquiring knowledge
b.	Getting a degree is important, so it is okay to cheat
c.	No matter what type of exams, any means of cheating should be avoided
d.	Cheating is a way to get great benefits with minimum effort
e.	Cheating influences the formation of one's character
f.	Some students don't cheat at all

Table 5

Reactions on academic dishonesty

a.	When I see a student cheating, I will persuade him/her of honesty
b.	When I see someone cheating, I will tell the teacher
c.	If the teacher is not a strict proctor, I will choose to cheat
d.	When my classmates ask for help during the exam, I will refuse them

Table 6

Reasons for cheating

a.	Having no time to study
b.	Did not study
c.	I will feel embarrassed if I did not pass the exam
d.	Teachers are easy markers
e.	I cheat in order to help my classmates
f.	Scope of exams are unreasonable

Table 5 shows the reactions when academic cheating arises, while table 6 shows the common reasons for

cheating to occur.

5. Conclusions

The study points out that there are many similarities between international and local students, such as their concepts on studying. However, there are also differences in their notion of a bachelor degree. In Taiwan, the students claimed that university degree is quite common and it is becoming more often that students would go and take on a higher degree such as a master's degree. Furthermore, the study also listed several reasons why students cheat; the good thing is students know what is harmful.

5.1 Significance of the study

Recently, much concern regards for 'college students learning' and 'the students' concepts on learning' were observed. Such phenomenon is not limited to higher education institutions in Taiwan alone, but likewise in countries overseas. With the concern that the concepts on learning while studying leads to future behaviors in the workplace. This shall study is able to provide various important implications to the different stakeholders in the academic community.

a. The results shall bridge the gap between students and school (faculty and administration) with regards to the students' needs and perception on learning.

b. With the realization on the goals of learning, students shall become a better person that can better served the society in the future.

c. Understanding the role of information technology in the students' concepts on learning.

d. Having a clearer picture on the notion of academic dishonesty in the current era of technological advancements.

6. References:

Arum, R., & Roksa, J. (2011). Are undergraduates actually learning anything? Retrieved February 15, 2012, from http://chronicle.com/article/Are-Undergraduates-Actually/125979/

Best, J. W. (1970). *Research in education*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Chambers, C. (2004). Technological advancement, learning, and the adoption of new technology. *European Journal of Operational Research, 152*(1), 226-247. http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0377-2217(02)00651-3

Cohen, L., Manion, L., & Morrison, K. (2007). *Research methods in education*. New York: Routledge.

eHow. (2014). The advantages of having an education Retrieved January 19, 2014, from http://www.ehow.com/list_6551701_advantages-having-education.html

Glaser, B. G. (1978). *Theoretical sensitivity: Advances in the methodology of grounded theory*. Mill Valley, CA: Sociology Press.

Harper, M. G. (2006). High tech cheating. *Nurse Education Today, 26*(8), 672-679. http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.nedt.2006.07.012

Jill Austin, M., & Brown, L. D. (1999). Internet Plagiarism: Developing Strategies to Curb Student Academic Dishonesty. *Internet and Higher Education, 2*(1), 21-33. http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S1096-7516(99)00004-4

Ministry of Education. (2011). Major educational statistics [In Chinese]. Retrieved December 28, 2011, from http://www.edu.tw/statistics/content.aspx?site_content_sn=8869

Oxford. (2014). Learning. Retrieved January 19, 2014, from http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/learning

Roberts, A., & Ching, G. S. (2011). Concepts, contributions, and challenges of the contemporary university community in Taiwan. In J. Palmer, A. Roberts, Y. H. Cho & G. S. Ching (Eds.), *The internationalization of East Asian higher education* (pp. 41-62). New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Roberts, A., Chou, P., & Ching, G. (2010). Contemporary trends in East Asian higher education: Dispositions of international students in a Taiwan university. *Higher Education: The International Journal of Higher Education Research, 59*(2), 149-166. http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s10734-009-9239-4

Stenhouse, L. (1988). Case study methods. In J. P. Keeves (Ed.), *Educational research, methodology, and measurement: An international handbook*. Sydney: Pergamon Press.

Stewart, D. W., & Shamdasani, P. N. (1990). *Focus groups - Theory and practice*. Newbury Park, California: Sage Publications.

Underwood, J., & Szabo, A. (2003). Academic offences and e-learning: Individual propensities in cheating. *British Journal of Educational Technology, 34*(4), 467-477. http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/1467-8535.00343