

# Teaching Cross-culturally in China: An Initial Look at Western Faculty Members' Lived Experiences

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**Abstract:** *This qualitative, phenomenological study presented Western faculty members' lived experiences educating students at International Branch Campuses (IBCs) in China. Chinese IBCs struggled to retain Western faculty. Little is known about their lived experiences. Based on data collected and analyzed, this study suggested the participants' lived experiences are valuable but frustrating.*

**Key Words:** Western faculty members; lived experiences

Transnational higher education is a new phenomenon emerging as internationalization of higher education grows. It has various delivery modes (Doorbar & Bateman, 2008). One of the delivery modes is the International Branch Campus (IBC). This study used Becker's (2010) definition of IBC: "International branch campus is an off-shore entity of a higher education institution operated by the institution or through a joint venture in which the institution is a partner (some countries require foreign providers to partner with a local organization) in the name of the foreign institution" (p. 2).

China is currently hosting 43 IBCs in partnership with universities from 11 countries (C-BERT, 2017). The IBCs in this study were co-established by American universities and their local partner universities in China. All participants have had work experience at the IBCs that are attached to American Universities but operate in China.

IBCs intend to replicate the home campus of a university outside the host country. However, the problem is that lack of Western faculty willing to teach at IBCs would make it hard to offer education of comparable quality (Becker, 2010). Little existing literature has explored Western faculty members' lived experiences in China. This study will contribute to filling a research gap on IBCs through the lens of Western faculty experiences. Faculty members are critical to the success of IBCs because teaching and research are the core activities of an IBC (Shams & Huisman, 2012).

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study is to present an understanding of Western faculty members' lived experience educating students. The participants' lived experiences could help policy makers be aware of their needs so that Western faculty can better be supported. Accommodation will contribute to improving their retention and further ensure comparable teaching quality.

The research question that guided this study is: What are the lived experiences of Western faculty members educating students at IBCs in China? The research question was supported by interview questions.

### **REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE**

IBC's were explored from several perspectives: trends and directions (Altbach & Wit, 2017; Becker, 2010; Verbik, 2006), challenges and risks (Alam, Alam, Chowdhury, & Steiner, 2013; Chalmers, 2011; Lane, 2011; McBurnie & Ziguras, 2007; Ozturgut, 2008;), sustainability (Altbach, 2010; Borgos, 2016), and management (Shams & Huisman, 2012). The current empirical studies include research on IBCs in Japan, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates (Borgos, 2016). Within the context of China, literature focuses on Chinese policies regulating IBCs (Huang, 2003), evolution of internationalization (Huang, 2003); and transnational higher education (Yang, 2008). Despite the understanding of various aspects of IBCs, few empirical studies have been conducted to explore Western faculty members' lived experiences.

Faculty teaching at IBCs face both opportunities and challenges (Leask, 2008). Their ability to teach in a multilingual and multicultural environment impacts their teaching quality (Chalmers, 2011). One issue is that they do not receive sufficient preparation to teach students from a diverse cultural background (Gopal, 2011). Faculty members who are not sufficiently prepared by their institutions may face challenges teaching at IBCs (Gopal, 2011). They tended to leave if they felt the challenges were insurmountable.

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This study sought to understand the meaning the participants ascribe to the phenomenon of teaching at IBCs in China. A qualitative, phenomenological research approach was selected to guide this study.

#### **PARTICIPANTS**

All 14 participants are full-time professors who have taught at IBCs in China for more than one semester. The participants represented a variety of academic backgrounds in social sciences and natural sciences. Most of them travelled internationally extensively. The participants' age range distribution was unequal and the majority of participants are experienced educators in their middle or late academic career. Their age ranges from early thirties to mid-sixties. Thirteen out of 14 of the participants, which is 93% of the total, hold a Ph.D. degree.

#### **DATA COLLECTION**

This study relied on interviews with 14 purposefully selected participants who have had lived experiences teaching at IBCs in China. Upon the approval of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the researcher's university, the researcher started to contact possible participants. Data were collected through Skype or WeChat interviews on a one-to-one basis. Fourteen semi-structured interviews were conducted. The interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed.

#### **DATA ANALYSIS**

An overall guideline of data analysis in a phenomenological study is a process of meaning reduction. Phenomenological reduction focuses on explicating the essential nature of the

phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). To reach the essence of the participants' lived experiences, this study reduced the raw data to statements, meaningful units and then to themes. The researcher first approached the data by identifying meanings of statements using psychologically sensitive language. The statements were reduced to non-repetitive and non-overlapping meaning units, which themes later evolved from.

## **RESULTS**

Themes are clustered meaning units according to Moustakas (1994). Themes in this context are broader meaning units of information which provide a foundation for interpretation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Four themes emerged as a result of this study: (1) Adjustment of instruction; (2) Combination of the West and the East; (3) Students' learning styles; (4) Plagiarism.

### **THEME ONE: ADJUSTMENT OF INSTRUCTION**

Most participants felt there was a need to adjust their instruction styles given Chinese students' limited English language proficiency, absence of knowledge of related background information, interaction patterns with instructors, and limited free access to information. Instruction adjustment put an emphasis on a reduction of the amount of readings, adding more background information, slowing down speech pace, changing the difficulty level of exams or quizzes, and building up Chinese students' confidence to speak in class.

### **THEME TWO: COMBINATION OF THE WEST AND THE EAST**

All participants had an awareness of the context in which they teach. They described this context as a combination of the West and the East. They taught in English using western curricula but their students' first language was Mandarin. They taught in China but they earned American salaries. The working context was a joint venture between an American University and a Chinese partner. They were academically supervised by American universities but locally supported by Chinese partners. This combination provided unique insights to their lived experiences.

### **THEME THREE: STUDENTS' LEARNING STYLES**

Chinese students were respectful to instructors. They interacted with instructors in a different way than American students. Normally they did not question instructors in class. They were used to lecture-style classrooms. They were less likely to speak about their opinions in class. Their parents' influence on them was considerable. Parents had nonadjustable expectations about their academic performance. Chinese students were motivated to learn. Most participants felt it was relaxing working with them although it took time for them to adjust to Chinese students' learning styles.

### **THEME FOUR: PLAGIARISM**

Most participants felt plagiarism is more active at IBCs in China than in the U.S. Some participants were shocked by how prevalent and serious plagiarism was. Plagiarism took various forms, such as copying without giving credit to authors and cheating on exams. To help students better understand the concept of plagiarism, the participants had to work hard to explain it. Western faculty members also made their expectations very clear to avoid plagiarism.

Following the four themes, essence of the participants' lived experiences was formulated into a whole. Essence is a term derived from the Greek *ousia*, meaning "the inner essential nature

of a thing, the true being of a thing” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 177). Essence of the participants’ lived experiences comprised two components: value and frustration. All participants felt their lived experiences were valuable. Teaching Chinese students was rewarding. The participants perceived that the students experienced a transition between a Chinese k-12 education style to a Western style that the participants adopted at IBCs in China. As time went by, both instructors and students adjusted to each other’s styles. Students were perceived as being more interactive in class. Students’ changes in improved English language proficiency and academic growth have been considered as rewarding. In addition, exposure to Chinese culture was valuable experience to the participants. Local exploration allowed them to get to know people and places in-depth.

A feeling of frustration was experienced. Participants felt they should have been better prepared prior to their start of their job at the IBCs. They wished they had been notified regarding what to expect prior to arrival to China. The external environment was also frustrating due to limited freedom to information, with them having to rely on VPN to access outside information blocked in China. Students’ constantly shown plagiarism bothered most participants.

#### IMPORTANCE TO THE FIELD

This study contributed to a better understanding of Western faculty members’ cross-cultural teaching experiences at IBCs in China. For administrators from American universities, this study is significant to prepare new faculty members to function at IBCs in China and rethink the partnership model. For administrators from the Chinese partners, this study helped them be aware of challenges Western faculty faced and thus better support and retain them. For researchers, this study generated a reflection on the complicated interwoven factors that may impact Western faculty members’ lived experiences in a Chinese context. For future study, it would be worth further efforts to research on how Western faculty members describe the core principles underlying IBC, a Sino-U.S. joint venture.

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