A Cross Cultural Framework:
Implications for Improving the Academic Library Experience for East Asian Students

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Abstract

Academic librarians have a unique opportunity to engage with international students and meet their information needs. The purpose of this paper is to explore recent efforts within academic libraries to prepare East Asian international students to utilize library services and develop a comprehensive set of guidelines for improving cross cultural communication in academic libraries. For the purposes of this paper, "East Asian" refers to Chinese (from mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan), Japanese, and Korean students. The services provided by academic librarians within East Asian countries often differ from those provided by American university librarians, which can result in East Asian students avoiding the reference desk entirely. Language barriers and cultural differences also make it difficult for librarians to effectively communicate with East Asian students. Librarians can successfully engage these students through the use of cross cultural communication. To date, there is no comprehensive framework related to implementing cross cultural communication within the context of academic libraries.

Article Type: Conceptual paper

Introduction

Applying cross cultural communication within academic libraries has the potential to improve the library experiences of both international students and librarians. Culturally sensitive librarians recognize the way culture and language shape an individual's behavior, while remaining aware of the context of a situation. Situations that require the skills of culturally sensitive librarians include, but are not limited to, the reference interview and information literacy lectures. An academic librarian's ability to communicate effectively with individuals from other cultures is essential to increasing student satisfaction with the library and fostering a collaborative work environment amongst library staff.

Although increased cultural sensitivity amongst librarians can be beneficial for all international students, this paper will prioritize the needs of East Asian students for practical and humanitarian purposes. From 2014-2015, students from China, Japan, and Taiwan comprised 36% of all international students studying in the United States (Zong and Batalova, 2016). As the number of East Asian students grow on academic campuses, librarians have a responsibility to meet their educational needs. Centering on the needs of East Asian students is also valid from a social justice perspective. According to Ruble and Zhang, stereotypes of Chinese students range from the benign "smart and hardworking" to the negative "not assimilated and annoying" (2013). Such

stereotypes have the potential to negatively influence the academic and social experiences of Chinese students. Culturally sensitive librarians can play a pivotal role in creating spaces that encourage diversity and tolerance.

The purpose of this paper is to develop a framework for improving cross cultural communication in academic libraries. Building upon the best practices and strategies outlined in the current literature, this framework will emphasize collaboration, cultural education, practical application, and assessment. This paper will explore the studies related to the library use of East Asian students, and how these experiences present both challenges and opportunities. The proposed framework will focus on the following components: collaboration between librarians, other university departments, and students in order to foster cross cultural communication, a cross cultural training program for librarians that includes a variety of formats to optimize learning, empowering librarians to practically apply cultural sensitivity on the job, and the importance of self- and manager-assessments in determining how to utilize cross cultural communication in the long term.

Literature Review

East Asian Students and the Academic Library

The current body of literature regarding the international student experience in American academic libraries provides a valuable foundation with which to further examine the experiences of East Asian students. Many authors have taken into consideration the differences between East Asian and American university libraries, and have developed suggestions to improve library services for East Asian students. These authors advocated for increased collaboration between library staff and faculty in promoting diversity. Another common recommendation within these studies is to provide resources for using the library in languages other than English. The themes present in the current body of literature evolved from general guidelines relating to international students to a nuanced approach of the experiences of East Asian students.

Early literature regarding international students in academic libraries identified the linguistic and cultural barriers that impacted these students' library use. In their 1987 seminal article "Foreign students, libraries, and culture", Ball and Mahoney identified the unique linguistic and cultural struggles international students face when interacting with academic librarians. These range from differences in the perceived acceptability of maintaining eye contact to being unaware of the services reference librarians offer (Ball & Mahoney, 1987, p. 163). Ball and Mahoney also identified possible misconceptions and prejudices academic librarians may have towards international students, and implored academic librarians to be cognizant of cultural differences. The authors also note the differences between American university libraries and international libraries, such as the educational background of librarians and the accessibility of the stacks (Ball & Mahoney, 1987, p. 164). Ziming Liu similarly identified the difficulties Asian students encountered using open stacks and card catalogs (1993). Although the authors' suggestions on how to implement cross cultural communication in the reference interview are achievable in many academic libraries, both Ball and Mahoney and Liu did not attempt to predict any student population changes or technology trends that may affect how international students interact with librarians in the future.

By the twenty-first century, scholars incorporated the perspectives of academic librarians in their analyses. In "Communication in academic libraries: An East Asian perspective," Zhang provides a comprehensive set of possible services academic librarians can offer East Asian students. Zhang suggested that libraries give handouts in both English and East Asian languages with a map of the stacks and a list of common library terms with their definitions (Zhang, 2006, p. 172). Zhang emphasized the importance of hiring librarians from multicultural backgrounds and liaising with faculty members to develop programs and workshops on diversity (Zhang, 2006, p. 172). Similarly, Mu suggested

liasing with International Student Services and making the library's website more user friendly in "Marketing academic library resources and information services to international students from Asia" (Mu, 2007, p. 574). Mu's work took a holistic approach regarding students from Asia, whereas Zhang focused exclusively on East Asian students.

Another prominent suggestion in the current literature involved hiring librarians who specialize in East Asian culture and languages. After observing the library use of Chinese engineering students at the University of Oklahoma in 2012, Chen and Brown determined that "fostering and promoting an understanding of Chinese culture and Chinese university library systems by recruiting culturally sensitive librarians and continuing education will help provide customized library services that meet Chinese engineering graduate students' information needs and in turn enhance their educational experiences in the United States" (Chen & Brown, 2012, p. 341). According to Shao, Scherlen, Johnson, Xu, and Hu's "Chinese students in American academic libraries: A survey of Chinese user satisfaction with U.S. library experience," 42% of those students surveyed answered "no" as to whether they were helped by a librarian who specialized in assisting students from China (Shao, et. al, 2013, p.30). Furthermore, 73% of students surveyed answered "no" to questions concerning whether the library's website was available in Chinese and whether the stacks contained Chinese language materials (Shao, et. al, 2013, p.30). Based on these findings, increased multiculturalism within the library's staff will greatly benefit the user experiences of East Asian students.

Academic Expectations and Perceptions of the Library

Academic libraries within East Asian countries differ from those found in American colleges and universities, and this informs an East Asian student's understanding of what services the library offers. Confucian values are reflected in many East Asian university curriculums in the form of "observing, rote learning, and imitating,"

as opposed to learning by participation and critical thinking within American universities (Zhang, 2006, p. 167). Although the term "Suzhi Jiaoyu," which refers to a "quality" or holistic education, has made its way into Chinese higher education since the 1990s, many Chinese students entering American universities are familiar with an exam based education as opposed to an education based on critical thinking (Shao, Scherlen, Johnson, Xu, & Hu, 2013). Similarly, Japanese students often misunderstand American assignment guidelines and are unfamiliar with the expectation to use multiple sources rather than one textbook (Ishimura, 2013, p.22). In general, East Asian students are also unfamiliar with the concept of plagiarism and often do not have experience citing sources (Mu, 2007, p. 573). When considering these observations, however, it is necessary not to stereotype East Asian students on an individual level, as Ruble and Zhang warn (2013).

Another key difference separating East Asian academic libraries from those in the United States is the role of the librarian. According to Mu, librarians in many Asian countries do not answer reference questions or provide individual consultations on a specific subject (Mu, 2007, p. 573). As a result, East Asian students are unaware that American academic librarians are available to answer reference questions (Mu, 2007, p.573). Although some librarians may provide reference services to students in East Asia, many students do not necessarily use that service as most of their work is based on exams and textbook reading (Mu, 2007, p.573). Furthermore, librarians in East Asia are not required to hold a Masters in Library Science degree (Mu, 2007, p.577). Mu succinctly stated that East Asian students "tend to view the library as a place to study and librarians as bookkeepers rather than information providers" (Mu, 2007, p.573). Open communication between librarians and students is a key step in advertising the credentials and expertise of the library staff.

The experiences of East Asian students in meeting their information needs are an invaluable resource to consider when developing

library services. In Japan, 80% of university libraries provide information literacy courses, but only 10% provide academic support services (Donkai, Toshimori, & Mizoue, 2013). East Asian students studying in the United States often turn to others in their peer group to gain information. According to a study at the University of Maryland, "web searches, online/mobile maps, friends, and online communities were among the top five information sources" for Chinese and Korean students (Oh, Butler, & Lee, 2014, p.1). Freshmen Chinese and Korean students used often their student associations' social media pages to connect with senior students to share helpful information (Oh, Butler, &Lee, 2014, p.1). Results from the questionnaires and interviews show that the participants valued "information that is essential for their living, navigating, and settling in the unknown environment than information that is helpful for recreation" (Oh, Butler, &Lee, 2014, p.7). Mu argued in favor of developing a comprehensive information literacy curriculum for international students comprised of online tutorials on using the library catalog and website, developing critical thinking skills, and learning research methods (Mu, 2007, p.575). For example, librarians at the main campus of Rutgers University developed library orientation programs and instructional booklets in English, Chinese, and Korean (Liestman and Wu, 1990). This program fulfilled a need for library instruction in East Asian languages. Post-orientation assessments showed that students found the orientation informative. As Lo, Sun, Womack, Wu and Yang observed two decades later, however, these efforts only targeted walk in students and those students who attended library orientation, and was a missed opportunity to reach out to other East Asian students (Lo, et.al, 2009). Information literacy instruction that reflects the technology use of international students has the potential to acclimate East Asian students into an unfamiliar library.

Furthermore, observing the information seeking behavior of international students may be the key to overcoming linguistic and cultural barriers. Allen's 1993 survey, "International students in academic libraries: A user survey," assessed how international students perceived and used the library. By examining the computer habits of international students, Allen observed that many students whose first language is not English had difficulty using library terminology. Many terms that are common in American libraries do not have an equivalent in other languages. Allen suggested that librarians must recognize the different information needs of undergraduate vs. graduate students and plan accordingly (Allen, 1993, p.333). According to a 2003 study by Whitmire, international students of color are more likely to use the library to read or study, ask the librarian for help, and use basic reference services than native born white students (Whitmire, 2003, p.150). This research indicates that international students are becoming more aware of the services within American academic libraries, but still require guidance from librarians. Cross cultural communication is a viable tool in providing library services to international students who may have a different cultural understanding of what services the library offers.

Cross Cultural Training Programs in Review

There is a consensus within the current literature regarding the components of a successful cross cultural training program, which includes relevant cultural content and the use of different instruction formats. For many authors, cultural awareness must be at the center of cross cultural training programs. According to Wang and Frank, training programs must first identify that cultural differences exist, and then recognize that although an individual's behavior is shaped in part by their culture, context is always key (2002). Based on her experiences working with Indigenous collections in Australian libraries, Blackburn argued that the first step in cross cultural communication must be an appreciation for other cultures while also assuming that both sides of the cultural divide are acting in good faith (2009). Brislin and Toshida also argue in favor of teaching cultural awareness. In their view, cultural differences are often taken for granted in everyday life (similarly to breathing), but that reflecting on these differences fosters cross cultural understanding (Brislin & Toshida, 1993).

A cross cultural training program that recognizes the different learning styles of students by utilizing a range of teaching methods and course formats has the potential to increase student learning. Brislin and Toshida recommended that cross cultural training exercises should include role playing, group discussions, tasks dependent on diverse contributions, and "homework assignments" that require students to apply what they learned in their own social circles (1993). Brislin and Toshida also suggested that role playing exercises address the emotional challenges that may be encountered when learning a new way to communicate (1993). Similarly, Rosen, Spatz, Gaaserud, and Abramovitch argued in favor of centering cross cultural training workshops on group discussion (2004). For Putranto, Gustomo, and Ghazali, field trips to culturally relevant destinations were shown to be the most conducive to student learning (2015). According to these authors, a diverse curriculum provides multiple opportunities for student engagement based on post-assessment questionnaires.

Limitations to Cross Cultural Communication

A significant development in the current literature is an examination of the limitations of cross cultural training. In their deconstruction of cultural intelligence, Dutta and Dutta "critique the discursive moves through which CQ is presented as a competitively advantageous tool for global organizations, deconstruct its theorization and measurement, and discuss its role in perpetuating transnational hegemony" (2013). According to Dutta and Dutta, the scholarship surrounding cultural intelligence training does not take into consideration how transnational organizational practices perpetuate unemployment and exploitation abroad (2013). In contrast, Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars argued that cross cultural training synthesizes different cultural experiences into a unified whole (2006). One opportunity for further research is examining the correlation between organizations that send employees abroad and any shifts in cultural norms of the local population.

The Benefits of Cross Cultural Communication

In order to provide the best services to students regardless of their cultural backgrounds, academic libraries ideally must become global libraries. A cross cultural communication framework is necessary to aid librarians in dismantling any linguistic and cultural barriers that impede a student's educational path. Communication styles are often informed by cultural values and mores. According to Zhang, the high context communication style prevalent among East Asians has its roots in the Confucian ideals of respect and conflict avoidance (Zhang, 2006, p. 167). Speakers who use high context communication often rely on implied meanings, and put the burden of understanding upon the listener (Zhang, 2006, p. 167). In contrast, low context speakers (such as those in the United States) rely on clear and explicit messages while placing the burden of communicating effectively on the speaker Zhang, 2006, p. 167). Consequently, at the reference desk, an East Asian student may nod while a librarian speaks as a gesture of politeness and attentiveness, but may not full understand what the librarian is explaining (Zhang, 2006, p. 167). High context speakers also focus on unified or circular logic, whereas those from low context cultures prefer analytical thinking (Zhang, 2006, p168). East Asian students are more likely to start with general questions at the reference desk and then arrive at specific questions, which may be confusing for librarians who are accustomed to speaking in the specific first followed by general supporting statements (Zhang, 2006, p. 168).

Non-verbal communication may also present challenges during the reference interview. Non-verbal communication includes tone of voice, eye contact, facial expressions, and the concept of personal space (Zhang, 2006, p.169). At the reference desk, an East Asian student may avoid direct eye contact with a librarian as a sign of respect, but the librarian may interpret this as disinterest or inattentiveness (Zhang, 2006, p.169). Some forms of non-verbal communication differ between East Asian cultures. Chinese speakers often smile to

express embarrassment or frustration, but Korean speakers only smile during assured instances (Zhang, 2006, p.169). Librarians may interpret not smiling as a sign of hostility, similarly to interpreting a nod of the head as a symbol of understanding. Furthermore, librarians from individualistic cultures, such as the United States, value direct communication, linear thinking, and showing emotions overtly (Zhang, 2006, p.170). In contrast, the collectivist cultures of East Asia value harmony between speakers and avoid the use of direct communication (Zhang, 2006, p.170).

A cross cultural communicative framework has a potential to be a powerful tool in helping librarians navigate confusing situations like those provided above. Such a framework can boost a librarian's confidence while allowing them to view interacting with East Asian students as a rewarding opportunity, rather than a formidable challenge. Ideally, the framework will provide a strong foundation of communication skills that academic librarians can use throughout their careers.

Framework for Improving Cross Cultural Communication

The framework set forth in this paper will build upon universal best practices in the field of cross cultural communication. These authors' frameworks acclimate well to academic libraries, unlike other training programs that were designed to meet the needs of international businesses specifically. Rather than pursue a holistic framework, this paper will argue in favor of tailor made instruction dependent on student population and library resources.

A pivotal step in facilitating cross cultural communication between international students and academic librarians is to engage in collaboration and active listening. In their seminal study from 2001, Baron and Strout-Dapaz emphasized collaboration between international students and academic librarians. The authors suggest designing focus groups with international students, offering students the opportunity to work part time in the library, and updating the library's collection development

policy to incorporate the needs of non-native English speakers (Baron & Strout-Dapaz, 2001, p.320). Osa, Nyana, and Ogbaa's training manual for librarians, also emphasized the importance of reaching a common linguistic ground. The authors advised avoiding the use of slang and colloquial humor with which international students may be unfamiliar in favor of open ended questions (Osa, Nyana, & Ogbaa, 2006, p.22). According to Amsberry's article "Using effective listening skills with international patrons," the difficulty listeners may have comprehending speakers with foreign accents can be remedied with practice. Amsberry suggested that librarians practice listening to various foreign accents via recordings and listen to the context of words rather than their sounds (Amsberry, 2009, p.15). Bridging the language gap between international students and academic librarians is key to developing mutual understanding.

According to Overall, a framework for cross cultural training can be divided into three domains: the cognitive domain, the interpersonal domain, and the environmental domain (2009). The cognitive domain refers to cultivating self-awareness and knowledge of other cultures (Overall, 2009). The interpersonal domain focuses on building cultural appreciation, an ethic of caring, personal and cultural interaction, and reflecting on institutional values (Overall, 2009). The environmental domain gives credence to the physical space of the library (Overall, 2009). For Littrell and Salas, the three best practices of cross cultural communication are design, delivery, and assessment (2005). Littrell and Salas argue in favor of using multiple methods of delivering culturally relevant material and assessing the strengths and weaknesses of training via various criteria (2005). In these authors' view, cross cultural training must focus on the cerebral, interpersonal, and physical spheres.

The following framework will emphasize collaboration, cultural education, application, and assessment:

A. Collaboration.

Collaboration between the library and all university departments is critical to fostering cross cultural communication. As part of this framework, collaboration should take place in the following ways:

- Librarians collaborate with their directors and HR representatives to hold cross cultural training programs at the beginning of each semester or as needed.
- Librarians collaborate amongst the entire library staff to remain aware of the needs of international students and celebrate the differences among staff members.
- Librarians collaborate with International Student Services to help acclimate international students to a new environment. This can include offering guided tours of the library and translations of library guides with common terms, maps, etc.
- Librarians collaborate with faculty to ensure that international students understand the university's academic expectations. Librarians can design information literacy instruction specifically for internationals students, and collaborate with faculty on assessing the challenges international students may have in completing research.
- Librarians can collaborate with international students by encouraging these students to pursue work study positions in the library. Librarians can also facilitate peer tutoring.

B. Cultural education.

One critical step in improving cross cultural communication in libraries is offering comprehensive cultural training. Ideally, cross cultural training will offer instruction related to the following components:

- *Cultural education*: Librarians should familiarize themselves with the customs and cultural mores of other cultures to facilitate communication with international students. This training should also cover aspects of international librarianship to make librarians aware of the experiences international students may have had with librarians in their home countries. This training can be delivered in a lecture, group discussion, or role playing format.
- *Language instruction*: Librarians can utilize free language software, such as Pronunciator or Babble, to learn common phrases in other languages that may be helpful in making international students feel welcome. Additionally, this training should include practice with interpreting accents. This can be accomplished with listening to sound recordings, role playing, or working with a qualified ESL teacher.
- *Behavior adaptation*: In conjunction with cultural and language education, a cross cultural training program should include instruction on behavior modification. Certain gestures, such as putting one's hands in one's pockets, are considered disrespectful in other cultures. Behavior modification training will prepare librarians to be aware of how the tone of their voice, hand gestures, etc. can impact an international student's level of comfort. Role playing is the ideal format for this type of training.

C. Practical application.

A critical step in ensuring that cross cultural communication is effectively implemented in academic libraries is to form a strategy with the goal of application. Training should focus on practical scenarios that librarians may encounter often. A strategy for applying cross cultural communication should include the following components:

- *The reference interview*: The reference desk is often the first point of contact that students encounter when entering the library. Reference interviews assist the librarian in ascertaining a student's

information needs. In order to communicate effectively, librarians should apply their cultural knowledge by asking open ended questions. The librarian should not assume any technical knowledge on the student's part, and pay attention to the context of a student's words while recognizing cultural differences. In the event of miscommunication, librarians can ask the student to write down their questions.

- *Information literacy instructio*n: Information literacy instruction often includes the librarian in the role as lecturer. For international students, however, this format may not be conducive to learning. Applying cross cultural communication in the information literacy classroom may involve increased student participation. Librarians may find it helpful to have a representative from International Student Services or a bilingual librarian act as a teaching assistant. Employing collaboration in the information literacy classroom can facilitate greater cross cultural communication.

D. Assessment.

Assessing the strengths and weaknesses of a library's cross cultural communication efforts on a continuous basis can ensure future success. Self and manager assessments should take place after each cultural training program and at the end of each semester to monitor a library's growth. The following examples are ways in which library directors can assess the cross cultural competencies of their staff members:

- Librarians can complete self-assessment questionnaires after cross cultural training to determine what they learned, and what future programs should include.
- Librarians can write reports at the end of the semester detailing the ways in which they used cross cultural communication on the job.

- International students can be given questionnaires at the end of an information literacy course rating the teaching style of the librarian. These can also determine what they learned from the course, and what else the course should include.
- Student satisfaction surveys can be kept at the reference desk throughout the year.
- Library directors can formally and informally interview their staff throughout the semester to track their progress.
- Library directors must be prepared for possible opposition from employees, board members, etc. This pressure can be alleviated by acknowledging budgetary restraints while demonstrating how cross cultural education complements the mission statement of the individual library.

Conclusion

Applying cross cultural communication within academic libraries can improve the experiences of both international students and librarians. Meeting the information needs of East Asian international students requires a sensitivity to the linguistic and cultural challenges these students encounter when attempting to use the library. Culturally sensitive librarians have the potential to bridge the gap preventing these students from using all the services available within the academic library. This paper developed a framework for utilizing cross cultural communication in libraries that included a focus on collaboration, cultural education, practical application, and assessment. Employing cross cultural communication in public and digital libraries has the potential to create visibility for the library and enhance user experiences. Consequently, cross cultural communication is a valuable tool for librarians to use when reaching out to diverse communities.

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