

Academic Literacy Focus Group – September 18 2008.

Overview notes

The Chinese students who attended the discussion generally feel out of their depth at the level of referencing required and the detailed and formal substantiation of material required in written assignments.

In China paraphrasing a source in a written assignment is apparently accepted, whereas it might be seen as tantamount to plagiarism here.

Also it appears that not providing a formal reference for material quoted or paraphrased is acceptable in China.

However, this is not to imply that they misunderstand or reject the idea of plagiarism. As one participant straightforwardly commented:

Copying should be punished ...

In relation to properly referencing sources used in written work:

- Writing formal essays and assignments is a much smaller part of a student's work in undergraduate study in China. However it was commented that formal references are expected in a dissertation.
- English language difficulties contribute to their problems, both in understanding lecturers [teachers who speak in heavy accents or very rapidly or using extensive colloquial language] and in working in the written language. They also comment that they feel there is not enough face to face contact with their teachers, which limits their opportunity to understand what is expected of them by asking their teachers.
- Students in the group said they were not sure how to approach the whole process of finding references and of using and citing them. They seem to want a more structured approach, such as being provided with a full list of references that might be used and detailed instructions on how to use and cite them.

In relation to critical thinking and analytical thinking they also seem to want more structure and direction, such as examples, in the material provided by their teachers. However, at least one of the participants made it clear that critical thinking had been encouraged in his secondary education as well as at university, so teaching such skills is certainly not completely absent. Further, the sorts of problems they have in developing their critical thinking are very probably the same as for many native students.

Another aspect of the problems these students have is that they are uncertain about social protocols in Western society, even in simple matters such as how to address their teachers ['Lecturer?', 'Sir?].

So what could be done to help?

- While they may gain something from the Academic Literacy website, it does not seem that a lack of understanding of the concept of plagiarism is a central problem. However, since idea of just what constitutes plagiarism may well be something of an impediment, some specific communication in this regard may be worth considering. The website may deal with this, but possibly the 'western' examples are less than ideal.
- It may be possible that simpler, clearer instructions in both spoken and written communications would help them.
- Given their lower levels of experience in 'western' referencing, some specific training may be useful, if it is not provided already.
- Perhaps it might be useful to provide notes on social protocols.

In relation to critical thinking and creative writing, as the difficulties identified may be more a common problem rather than a Chinese/cultural difference, there may not be any need for a different approach for this group.

Finally in relation to the website, the participants all agreed that they would look at it and provide feedback.