

# Appreciating Differences, Celebrating Similarities:

## An Experience of Learning in Culturally Diverse Contexts

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Every story has a beginning. This particular story began in the Indonesian city of Bandung where I grew up and received my early education. When I graduated from high school in 1994, it occurred to me that I needed to decide the major I wanted to take for my undergraduate study. Motivated by inclinations towards understanding myself better and, altruistically enough, towards helping others find happiness, psychology became the non-contested choice. I decided to take the course in Maranatha Christian University where the first private school of psychology in Indonesia was established in 1965. Through the course I was introduced to the classics of Freud, Skinner and Maslow—the forefathers of psychology.



### Barefoot Aussie Girls!

After graduation, in 1998, I flew to Australia to pursue a Masters' degree in the University of New South Wales (UNSW). I arrived in Sydney with more than 40 kg worth of luggage and, fortunately, the check-in staff did not detect the excess “baggage of pride and self-esteem” I carried along in me, for someone who has just graduated *cum laude* just a week earlier. Life was exciting, and promised of many good things to come. Basic changes such as food and accommodation, or not so trivial ones like a new language and a new pace of life, have to be learned and eventually adapted to. Nothing prepared me for what I would encounter in my very first lecture. It was summer. Twenty minutes after the lecture began, an Australian girl knocked on the door. She strode in wearing what appeared to be a courageous combination of shorts and mini tube. What's more, she was even bare-footed!

Having been acculturated in conservative Indonesia for the first 22 years of my life, I asked myself, “How could she wear that beach attire to the classroom?” Indeed, the girl was a surprise and a mystery (then) to me. I was naïve, of course. It was beyond my imagination that the encounter was to be the mildest of the surprises that I was going to uncover. As time went

by, I found out that Australian classes were conducted in a pleasantly laid-back manner in which students were allowed to munch on snacks or bring in soft drinks while the lecturer is teaching. It was common for Australian students to address a professor by his/her first name. Moreover, without intent of disrespectfulness, students could even challenge, criticize and disagree with the professor's ideas when engaging in discussion. In contrast, Indonesian classes are typically more formal. Perhaps, one could describe it as more traditional: the guru (teacher) imparts knowledge and the students receive information diligently; students hardly, if ever, critically question or examine the knowledge taught by the teacher or obtained from their books. No food or drinks are allowed into the classroom and proper attire is a sign of respect for the teachers, or as far as I knew at least for Psychology students. And the list goes on...

These experiences made me realize that Indonesian and Australian classes operate in different fashions. It was simply fascinating to me how each type of classroom functions in its own cultural context, and it intrigued me enough to want to find out more about the reasons behind the differences.

### **Parallel Play at Singapore McDonalds**

In July 2001, I started my PhD study at the National University of Singapore (NUS). Inspired by the experiences I had in Australia, my initial doctoral research proposal was related to acculturation and cross-cultural adaptation of international students in Singapore. This research seemed like a good idea, especially since the Singaporean government was, and still is, aggressive in promoting a "foreign talent" policy, inviting eligible global citizens to work in Singapore, or to study (then to work), so as to contribute to the country's economy.

After a few months of stay in Singapore, I noticed an interesting cultural phenomenon: it is common for local students to congregate at cafés or fast food outlets, such as McDonalds. Typically, a group of four to six sits together; their tables are occupied with things, not so much with food, but with books, papers, pen, colorful highlighters, and calculators (in some cases, only a large Coke shared among them); at times they discuss things as a group but more often they work quietly and individually; some of them are listening to music using a pair of earphones and some don't, but both groups share a similarity: they appear extremely focused on their work! These characteristics are completely different from those of the students in Indonesia and Australia. This observation piqued my interest even more.

## **About the Author**

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Towards the end of my first semester, I had a chat with my Ph.D. supervisor, Elizabeth Nair. I told her I wanted to change my original proposal to something that could address my curiosity to understand the differences that I observed in the ways students from different cultures learn. Because of her open supervision style, it was not too difficult for me to convince her. With the new research idea, I began to wonder, where should I begin, and how?

### Discovering Watkins & Biggs

One afternoon, I made a serendipitous discovery when I was in the NUS Co-Op bookstore. Being an Indonesian of Chinese descent myself, I happened to lay my eyes on a book which immediately caught my interest, *The Chinese Learners: Cultural, Psychological, and Contextual Influences*, edited by David Watkins and John Biggs (1996). Based on the Student Approaches to Learning (SAL) theory, the book focuses on the academic behaviors of East Asian students who, although often misunderstood for being primarily motivated to study by extrinsic motives and heavily relying on rote learning—a combination called a surface approach to learning—they have consistently performed well in international comparative studies of academic achievement. So, spurred on by the interesting discussions in the book, I began to do extensive research in the field of learning approach. The SAL theory is a learning paradigm that takes seriously contextual influences on the adoption of learning motive and learning strategy. It was my encounter with this book that kindled my interest in approaches to learning, surely marking one of the important milestones in my doctoral study.

In the course of my research I was involved in a stimulating series of never-ending discussions with two “informal supervisors” (the official one being Elizabeth, of course). They were Paulus Hidajat Prasetya, my former undergraduate lecturer, and Allan B. I. Bernardo, a young and inspiring professor from the Philippines. In spite of their busy schedules, they were patient, and always lent a listening ear to a Ph.D. student struggling with his research ideas. Also, considering the fact that we all resided in different countries and most of our conversations had to be done through e-mail, I was indeed fortunate that none of them stopped replying to my queries after the third letter. Like the four musketeers valiantly defending the battlement, Elizabeth, Paulus, Allan and I slowly and surely worked together to shape what was to become my research thesis.



Arief Liem with Nandita Chaudhary, Deputy Secretary-General and chair of the selection committee.

## Dissertation Approaches

So, inspired by my personal cross-cultural experience and observation, I wanted to understand how “culture” influences the ways students approach learning. Since, as John Whiting pointed out many years ago, it is important to “unpack” culture (e.g., Matsumoto & Yoo, 2006), my next step was to search for a measurable individual-level construct that can mediate culture. One of the strong candidates to take this role is, of course, values! And, drawing upon my Australian sojourn, I conjectured that the ways students interact with their peers and teachers could be another mediator. So, I set off to investigate the role of students’ value priorities and classroom social interactions in their approaches to learning. Luckily, as my research was more than adequately funded by the Singapore Millennium Foundation, I was able to extend the range of my research to students in culturally different countries: Singapore, Indonesia, Australia, and the Philippines (thanks to Allan, of course, for an access to the latter). To this end, three measures were used: the Portraits Values Questionnaire (Schwartz et al., 2001), the Cultural Learning Environment Questionnaire (Waldrup & Fisher, 1999), and the Learning Process Questionnaire (Biggs, 1987).

Being an inexperienced researcher, I was amazed after analysing the data, how a well-developed questionnaire can capture and explain the real life phenomena I personally experienced. My research convinced me that there is nothing more critical than a valid and reliable measure, perhaps mirroring what Lewin famously said, “there is nothing more practical than a good theory.” Supporting my

cross-cultural academic experiences, the findings showed that, among others, living in a society where a hierarchical pattern of interaction is strongly emphasised has implications for students and teachers: the Indonesian students are more conformist and less self-directed learners and teacher-student relationships in the Australian learning environment are more egalitarian than in the three Southeast Asian classrooms. Because Singapore is a pragmatic, highly competitive and achievement-oriented society, the Singaporean students are inclined to study hard to compete with their peers, regardless of their intrinsic interest in a subject. Being influenced by both Eastern and Western traditions, the Filipino students lie “in the middle position” between the Indonesian and Singaporean samples, on the one hand, and the Australian sample, on the other, on many of the variables studied. What was more important was the finding showing that the dimensions of values, classroom social interactions, and approaches to learning of the students in the four cultural groups indicated similar nomological



**Data collection** Arief Liem with some of the Australian students participants, after a focus group session, in 2003 winter.

patterns. This is interesting because I set out to study differences but in the end I discovered that value-attitude-behavior relationships are cross-culturally similar. All in all, the findings confirmed my basic hypothesis that the importance attributed to values and the classroom social interactions mediate the effects of culture on the ways students approach their learning.

### To Spetses With Thanks

As always, all stories end somewhere. This particular one ended on the Isle of Spetses in Greece where I received the Harry and Pola Triandis Doctoral Thesis Award. Looking back at the many hours and sleepless nights I had gone through in putting the thesis together, I realized that I could not have done this Sisyphean task without the selfless help from the people mentioned earlier, and also John Keeves in Australia and Shalom Schwartz in Israel for their valuable help in the data analysis. I also thank the award committee for trusting this recognition to me, and to Harry himself whose dedication to the field has inspired me, or for that matter, other young scholars and many others.

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**Harry & Pola** At the National Archaeological Museum of Athens, July 2006.

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