

## **Incorporating Eastern and Western Learning Perspectives into a Western Learning Environment**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This paper focuses on incorporating Eastern and Western learning perspectives into an American learning environment. The design-based research approach is employed. The following principles influenced by the Eastern and Western perspectives of learning were implemented in course design: providing pre-sequenced materials with high structure and flexible options, valuing group collaboration and individual autonomy, and promoting diverse ideas and critical thinking. Responses from 38 participants show that students from the Western learning environment also favor the pre-sequenced course materials with high structure. Even though they prefer independent and individual work, in an online environment a certain degree of collaborative work is necessary to create interactive dynamics and a sense of presence. Critical thinking in an online environment is not always adequately executed, which does not support the Western learning perspective of favoring critical thinking.*

**Keywords:** Autonomy, collaboration, critical thinking, diverse ideas, structure

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### **INTRODUCTION**

The world itself was never isolated. International students from all over the world choose to study in other countries (Moody, 2019). The enrollment of international students since 2016-2017 is decreasing as follows: in academic year 2016-2017, enrollment was 903,127; in 2017-2018, it was 891,330; and in 2018-2019, it was 872, 214 (*Enrollment trends*, 2019). One of the factors causing the decreasing enrollment of international students is the competition

from European and world universities for international students (Moody, 2019). Competition for international students can become fierce, and the policy restrictions on international students who pursue higher education degrees in the United States will lead to a further decrease in international enrollment, even though such impact is currently not very obvious (McKivigan, 2020). To attract more international students, it is necessary to develop world-class universities with foreign faculty (Horta 2009; Munene, 2014). Some universities may not have many international students; nevertheless, it is important for them to hire foreign-born faculty members because their wide perspectives on teaching and research and their voice on globalization in higher education are important in connecting universities to the rest of the world and can also help students expand their horizons and their knowledge in a bigger context (Theobald, 2013).

Foreign-born faculty members have the advantage of providing different perspectives and diverse interpretations of events due to their foreignness and authentic approach (Alberts, 2008). Foreign-born faculty “bring linguistic and cultural diversity, different worldviews, and international skills to American colleges” (Bista, 2016, p. 23) and, in turn, these worldviews to their students and institutions.

However, faculty from foreign countries are challenged due to their cultural identity, affiliation, and the culture of their affiliated institution (Munene, 2014). “In the classroom, students’ expectations clashed with professors’ language and teaching styles, leading to tensions and, sometimes, student aggression” (Munene, 2014, p. 464). Alberts’s (2008) study indicated that an accent is not a major obstacle for foreign-born professors. The challenge lies in their adaptation to the American cultural and educational systems while at the same time maintaining their own cultural and belief systems. Alberts (2008) stated that “the professors struggle more with trying to adjust to the American system. Even though they may not agree with some practices, they recognize that they are the ones having to make most of the adjustments since they are teaching in the US” (p. 197). Adapting to the learning environment in U.S. is necessary for foreign-born faculty.

There is a considerable amount of studies on foreign-born faculty members in the United States (e.g., Alberts & Hazen, 2013; Lalwani et al., 2019; Mamiseihvili, 2010; Sun et al., 2019). Considering that the largest number of international scholars in American universities from 2018 to 2019 are from China (47,964 or 35.1%) (*Places of origin*, 2019), in this paper, I will specifically target how I as a foreign-born Chinese faculty member adapted to the American learning environment, and at the same time incorporated Eastern and Western learning perspectives into an American learning environment since this intersection of learning perspectives is rarely discussed in the literature. The research questions were: (a) How are the Eastern and Western learning perspectives integrated into America’s learning environment in course design? and (b) How do students react to or evaluate

such course design? Specifically, do they like or dislike such course design? If they dislike it, what are their suggestions? In this paper, “foreign-born faculty members” refer to the faculty members who were born in foreign countries, had lived and studied in foreign countries for a period of time, but now work in United States. They can be American citizens, residents, or permanent residents. I used the abbreviated name of America or American to refer to United States of America.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

In this section, I will review Western and Eastern perspectives of learning. The Western perspectives here refer to the perspectives influenced by Western civilization and culture of the United States, a place advocating for freedom, liberty, equality, and prosperity (McNeill, 1997). The Eastern perspectives here refer to the perspectives influenced by Confucianism and Chinese culture.

### **Individual Learning Versus Collaborative Learning**

The Western perspective of learning favors questioning, exploration, analysis and reflection (Bybee, 2002). Learning is individual driven, self-directed, independent, and rational (Merriam et al., 2007). It favors direct and explicit communication. It values learning through rigorous scientific method (Merriam et al., 2007). Liu et al. (2010) stated that compared with Eastern students, American students are independent and confident, and they prefer individual work to group work. American learning environments value a learner-centered, process-oriented style and focus more on interaction and participation. Based on the literature reviewed, Kang and Chang (2016) stated that the Western perspective of learning values dialogue and interaction and problem-solving skills in real life. It values open curriculum and self-directed learning, which combines the multiple learning resources as the course contents and multiple perspectives, instead of mainly focusing on the limited contents from textbooks. Even training in mathematics is not purely repetition. It highlights “the intersectionality of different categorical lines in influencing participants’ experiences” (Heng, 2019, p. 615).

### **Less Structured Peer Learning Versus Structured Authority Learning**

The sequence of instruction in an American learning environment “was less structured and more inductive in the U.S. (i.e., teaching from examples to general principles), while Eastern education was highly structured and more deductive in its instruction approach (i.e., teaching from general principles to examples)” (Liu et al., 2010, p.185). Dewey (1907) stated that the purpose of education is not just the acquisition of new knowledge and skills, but to help students relate new knowledge and information to their prior experiences and real life. Influenced by Dewey’s

educational thought, American education emphasizes learning through experience and generating general principles or knowledge from examples and activities (inductive learning).

Eastern perspectives of learning maintain hierarchical structure and surface harmony and do not challenge the authorities (Corcoran, 2014; Elashmawi, 2001; Marquardt et al., 2004). It values personalized networks based on mutual benefits (Elashmawi, 2001). For example, Chinese culture respects authority and values compliance with norms. Criticism is not appreciated since it challenges another's authority and can cause the other to lose face (Guo, 2013). Because of this, the Chinese are not active in sharing their thoughts or asking questions, and they were comparatively quiet and reserved compared with American students. American students have a higher rate of critical thinking and dealing with complex issues compared to Chinese students taught through memorization (Donnellan & Edmondson, 2019). In the United States, critical thinking and applications of theories are highly encouraged.

Influenced by Confucius culture, Eastern learning perspective values authority knowledge from teachers; they emphasize pre-sequenced, well-structured learning activities/materials; and they use explicit and measurable criteria to evaluate students' learning progress (Chen & Bennett, 2012; Liu et al., 2010). These perspectives were observed in Wu's (2017) study about how teachers' practices were influenced by their cultures and assumptions: Tracy, representative of the Eastern learning perspective, valued order, rules, students' full attention to teachers (teacher-initiates-student-responds structure), and collaborative participations among students; and teachers were the authorities who transferred knowledge to students. Bei-Jen, representative of Western learning perspective, valued freedom, creativity, student-centered, individual autonomy, and interactive environment; teachers are facilitators and cheerleaders who support students' explorations in learning. Reports from the observers of this research indicated that both perspectives have their own advantages. For example, students learned more knowledge from Tracy's class influenced by Eastern learning perspective, and students were active and creative in Bei-Jen's class influenced by the Western learning perspective.

### **Divergent Thinking, Creative, and Open-Ended Learning Versus Abstract Thinking, Reasoning, and Essential Knowledge Acquisition**

American teachers, under the Western perspective, value students' creativity, divergent, and open-ended problem-solving ability; Chinese teachers, with an Eastern learning perspective, value students' abstract thinking, reasoning, and interconnection of complex concepts (Wang & Lin, 2005). Based on the existing literature, Wang and Lin (2005) stated that Chinese teachers in mathematics "offer more complex explanations and feedback to their students" (p. 7). Unlike U.S. teachers who perceived mathematics concepts as "arbitrary collections of facts and rules and saw

mathematics learning as following established step-by-step procedures to arrive at solutions” (p. 6), Chinese teachers saw these concepts as interconnected concepts which required students to use reasoning, justification, and multiple approaches to find solutions (Wang & Lin, 2005).

Eastern perspective learning, impacted by Confucius, valued pragmatic learning, behavioral changes and essential knowledge acquisition (Huang & Cowden, 2009; Tweed & Lehman, 2002). This is echoed by Song and Trybus (2018) who observed that Chinese professors usually elaborated the contents in detail, and they expected students to grasp in-depth contents, which is different from American scholars who generalized topics without detailed elaboration since they required students’ pre-class preparation based on required readings.

### **Low Context Based Learning Versus High Context Based Learning**

Under the Eastern perspective of learning, communication is highly context based and is not transparent; thus, information is filtered through a subjective perspective rather than objective facts. Inexplicit knowledge is gained in local context (Marquardt et al., 2004). In a high contextual society such as China, messages are context based; they are not coded or explicit as that of a low context society such as America. People living in a high context society gain knowledge and information through communicating in close relationships and networks among friends, family members, and colleagues. That is also one of the reasons why collaboration is valued more than individualism. This is different from people from the low context setting of Western society, who gains new information through elaboration and extensive communication to clarify explicitly about background information (Guo, 2013).

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

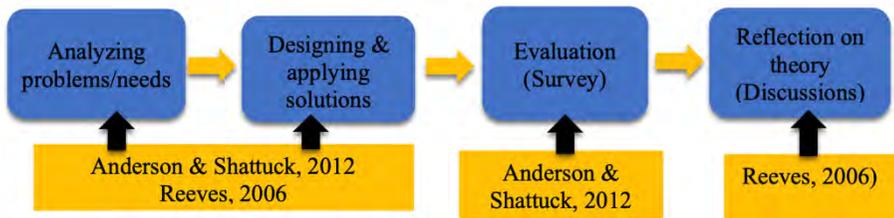
This study employed the design-based research approach. I used design-based research because of its advantage compared with the traditional qualitative research methods. It can help us understand how theoretical ideas can be transformed and implemented into practice. It can generate plausible causal factors to the problems in learning context by analyzing the outcomes of the interventions and “linking processes to outcomes in particular settings” (The Design-Based Research Collective, 2003, p. 6). Design-based research is action based and can solve the practical problems through designing and implementing interventions, which is different from traditional qualitative research which studies a subject to understand its underlying principles.

There are various models of design-based research. In this study, I used the models from Anderson and Shattuck (2012) and Reeves (2006) as a frame of reference since I incorporated some elements from their models in designing the interventions in my courses (please see Figure 1). Both models

include the process of analyzing the problems in practice, designing solutions to the problems, and applying solutions to practice. The final step of Reeves’s (2006) model is to reflect on the theoretical ideas and practical implications, and the final step of Anderson and Shattuck’s (2012) model is to evaluate and modify the solution. In this study, I will introduce how Eastern and Western learning perspectives are implemented to address the issues/problems in the selected courses, followed by the responses from 38 participants who evaluated these courses. Based on the responses from these participants, I will reflect on the theoretical and practical insights.

This project is a qualitative design of three online graduate courses in a research university in the Eastern part of America, each with separate subject matter. Western and Eastern learning perspectives were integrated into course A, course B and course C. Course A is about adult learning theories, course B is about strategies of how to teach adults, and Course C is about the foundation of adult/communication education. Even though the course contents were different, these courses have a similar course design. That is, the Eastern and Western learning perspectives were used to frame the overall course design. In May 2020, sources were collected from students’ open-ended survey. The questions were approved by the IRB committee. Data were inductively analyzed, with the research questions and theoretical perspectives in mind.

**Figure 1:**  
*Model of Design-Based Research*



*Note.* The step of Evaluation is reflected in the survey where students evaluated the courses and provided their opinions of the courses. Reflection on theory is reflected in Discussions where I summarized students’ evaluation and relate the findings of their evaluations to the theoretical ideas in literature.

The courses were taught during similar terms (Course A and B were taught in Fall 2019 and Spring 2020, and course C was taught in Fall 2019). The class sizes were also similar, ranging from 14 to 18 students. The age of the students ranged from 20s to 50s. Demographically, students were 90% white, and there were several international students. Some students have been enrolled in online courses before.

## My Philosophical Views on Education

As I mentioned in research methodology, this is not a traditional research paper, but a design-based research. I included my philosophy on education in this paper since my personal philosophical views on education, influenced by both Western and Eastern learning perspectives, guided me in designing these courses. I was raised in a culture which highly values academic excellence. As a member of the ethnic Han group in my home country, China, I was not aware that I was a minority in America when I studied for my doctoral degree program. For years, I was not aware of the necessity of “adjusting from majority to minority status in the USA” (Hernandez et al., 2015, p. 534). However, after years of studying and teaching in American institutions of higher education, I have been gradually influenced by American culture and the American system of education. As a result, my education philosophy has been influenced by both Western and Eastern perspectives.

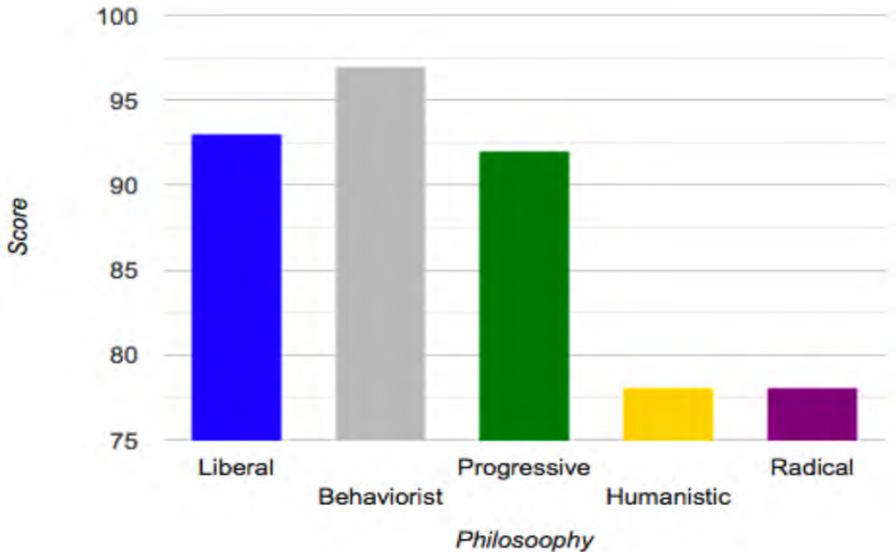
Education philosophy is the belief system that drives one’s action of teaching and learning (Conti, 2007). My education philosophy influenced my teaching practice. To identify the “elements” of my education philosophy, in 2015, I used LabR Learning Resources (<http://www.labr.net/paei/paei.html>) to assess my Philosophy of Adult Education. The following lists my philosophy score:

**Table 1:**  
*Respondent Comparison*

Philosophy	Your Score	Number of Scores Lower than Yours	Number of Scores Equal to Yours	Number of Scores Greater than Yours
Liberal	93	28662 (95.15%)	300 (1.0%)	1161 (3.85%)
Behaviorist	97	28089 (93.25%)	421 (1.4%)	1613 (5.35%)
Progressive	92	22967 (76.24%)	962 (3.19%)	6194 (20.56%)
Humanistic	78	16506 (54.8%)	1013 (3.36%)	12604 (41.84%)
Radical	78	19753 (65.57%)	895 (2.97%)	9475 (31.45%)

This list reflects the influence of my original culture and that of American culture on my teaching philosophy. I aim to develop learners’ intellectual powers and liberate them in the broadest sense. In practice, I follow the structured standard in designing course activities and evaluation criteria. I expect students to follow the instructions of the course activities to do their assignments, and improve their learning based on the feedback from me. Every activity is designed to have its own educational purpose and learning objectives to achieve. I expect students to be able to follow these structures to complete the activities, which in turn guarantee that the desired knowledge and skills are achieved. The criteria are referenced in the rubrics and are given points to reinforce the instructions of the assignments.

**Figure 2:**  
*Philosophy Scoring*



Even though I was influenced by authoritative education philosophies and emphasized the importance of the expert knowledge, I was also trained in an American higher education environment. I strongly believe in students' pragmatic knowledge, experience-based knowledge, and project-based learning activities. Influenced by the Western perspective on learning, I introduced dialogue and reflections in teaching activities and train students' critical thinking skills. I started to value students' autonomy and their individual freedom in pursuing knowledge.

I am not a strong social, emotional, or radically driven person. I try to be objective and I usually do not overly praise students, but I do provide them adequate comments, both positive and negative, in order to reflect what I think about their performances. I believe that the highest reward for students is to train them to become experts in their areas of interest. When students are confident in their academic work and are able to build a solid foundation of knowledge, then they can easily expand their perspectives from various angles.

### **Courses Design and Application**

Influenced by the Eastern and Western perspectives of learning, I designed my online course activities according to the following principles: highly structured course design with the pre-sequenced materials and the flexible options for students, valuing group collaboration and individual autonomy, and promoting diverse ideas and critical thinking.

## ***Providing Pre-Sequenced Materials with High Structure and Flexible Options***

Students in my online courses were adult learners with multiple roles in their lives. When instructors design the course activities, they need to consider the needs of adult learners and make schedules and course management flexible. For example, adult learners need to be able to access all the online course activities and materials in advance so that they can work on their assignments at any time when they have time. To help adult learners easily manage their online learning, courses need to be highly structured. Adult learners are self-directed, practical, and they need to see the immediate application of their learning in practice. They also need guided examples and materials to help them learn independently and in a self-directed manner (Knowles, 1984).

I designed my courses for adult learners making sure to carefully integrate the above needs. All course materials are pre-sequenced into weekly units before the semester starts. In each unit, there is a package with materials including:

- Readings (including the summary of the readings and external resources about how theories are embedded in practice)
- Videos (introducing both theories and practical application)
- Recorded PowerPoint
- Online discussion questions (structured questions and options, some good responses from previous students)
- Assignments (project-based assignments, including instructions, examples, templates, and summary tables)

I summarized the main points of the required readings and elaborated on some ideas which were difficult for students to comprehend so that students could focus more of their energy on deeper knowledge exploration. In online discussions, students were required to answer the questions based on the following structure: students first introduce the main theoretical ideas they have learned from the readings, then provide practical examples, and interpret the practical examples with the theoretical ideas (*Eastern perspective: highly structured design with deductive instruction approach from general principles to examples*). Such structured format is to make sure that students learn the theories and are able to apply theories in practice.

The assignments were project based and were sequenced—the results of one assignment tie to the next, and the final project is the demonstration of all the small projects that have been accomplished during the semester. To help learners understand the expectations of the assignments, I provided step-by-step instructions of how to complete each assignment. I shared with students some good examples. I also laid out the main structure of certain assignments and wrote the beginning sentences of required paragraphs as a model for students. To help students see the structure of their assignments, I

required them to fill out a summary table of what they had completed in each assignment (*Eastern perspective: Using examples, templates and tables to show students general structure of how knowledge is produced*).

Based on my observation, students' online learning was less influenced by their age or whether or not they were enrolled in online courses before since we used Canvas, which has a very simple interface. Students were more influenced by their ability to manage their time, and how much they were able to learn new skills. Therefore, in addition to the above weekly units, in an independent unit, I provided students a large number of previous students' examples and instructions about how to use the different tools, manage their time, manage their projects in blogs, and how to do their assignments. Usually if students followed the instructions and flow of the course, they were able to gain a good grade, regardless of age or online experience (*Western perspective on low context explicit knowledge: Providing extensive information to clearly elaborate the background information so that students in an online environment can understand explicit knowledge without interacting with the physical context*).

Even though the online discussion board is structurally designed, students have the option of selecting the questions they would like to respond to or of creating their own questions. They also have the options of choosing the materials that they would like to read if they do not like the reading materials I provided. They do not need to read everything, only the ones which meet their needs (*Western perspective: Valuing individual freedom and autonomy*).

### ***Valuing Group Collaboration and Individual Autonomy***

Group collaboration is important; however, it was very difficult to successfully collaborate online as a group due to various reasons, such as lack of motivation to work with other students who could not make commitment on group work, lack of individual autonomy and flexibility to pursue individual interests, and difficulty in managing group work with multiple group members who had different preferences.

I value group collaboration, but at the same time respect individual autonomy. In these online courses, group projects were highly emphasized. To address the above problems, in each group assignment, I provided the guidelines about how to divide the assignment into small components (*Eastern perspective: dividing tasks into small unit structure*) to allow individual group members to break up the tasks and complete one portion of the assignments independently (*Western perspective: Individual autonomy*) while they collaborated on the overall group project design and implementation (*Eastern perspective: Group collaboration*). Both group collaboration effort and individual contributions were integrated into the grading rubrics and were evaluated in self-evaluation and peer evaluation. To encourage collaborative knowledge sharing, all students' assignments were

posted in their blogs and open to the whole class. To motivate the individual efforts, each individual student was required to read and comment on others' assignments (*Western perspective: Open learning environment and individual effort*).

### ***Promoting Diverse Ideas and Critical Thinking***

Due to lack of physical contact, in online discussions, students were afraid of confronting other students' opinions since they were not sure how other students would react to their challenges. When students commented on their peers' posts, they usually agreed with their opinions, or provided them further information without providing critical dialogue and diverse perspectives.

I promoted diverse ideas and encouraged students' critical thinking. To address the above problems, I acted as a facilitator and encouraged students to have three types of dialogues in online discussions: (1) grounding dialogue in which students provide factual or procedural related knowledge. For example, students agreed on their classmates' opinions or provided additional information relevant to the topics; (2) critical dialogue in which students break the taken-for-granted knowledge and are aware of the complex and divergent viewpoints of the topic. For example, students were encouraged to provide their divergent opinions about the practical cases and controversial topics in weekly discussions and in blogs. Students disagreed with or challenged their classmates' opinions and critically pointed out different ideas; and (3) reflective dialogue in which students integrate and generalize accepted arguments and draw lessons from experiences (Schwarz et al., 2004). For example, students would reflect on the process of how they completed their projects, and what they had learned in the course, etc. (*Western perspective: Valuing open dialogues, diverse and critical knowledge, and background, process and procedural knowledge*). These different types of the dialogues are used to promote diverse ideas and critical thinking.

## **STUDENTS' RESPONSES TO THE COURSE DESIGN**

Thirty-eight students participated in the open-ended, anonymous text-based survey about their opinions on their graduate level online courses designed with Western and Eastern learning perspectives.

### **Responses to the Pre-Sequenced Materials**

Most of the participants liked the quantity and quality of the large amount of pre-sequenced course content added to the courses. For example, the participants shared the following information:

I liked the amount of content and supporting resources to support the content. I was worried about there being a lack of depth in an online course, but this was not the case.

I liked the amount of work. I felt it was manageable and appropriate with the group work.

I liked the amount of resources and the questions were thought-provoking and engaging.

I really liked the additional resources for us to answer questions. They were very interesting and added to my knowledge base.

I liked the flexibility of the course as well as the expansiveness. The course offered a lot and covered so much ground, as a proper introduction course should. The amount of articles and readings offered was a bit overwhelming, but I appreciated that they were offered and that Dr. Chang was flexible in her requirements for the readings.

These data show that the participants were satisfied with the scope and depth of the course materials provided in these courses. Even though the amount of the resources is large, it was manageable. However, some felt overwhelmed by the amount of the course content provided and the complexity of the course. For example, some participants said:

I appreciate the amount of information shared, but it was sometimes hard to narrow down and explore the topics. I feel as if we were just skimming the top.

I understand that adults love options, but too many topics and too many options also do not help.

I think there were too many writing prompts and resources. The topics were vague. What was likely meant to be helpful, but providing many options, seemed to be too much.

For some students, it is not so easy to even choose which materials to read. It might be necessary to simplify the course contents based on students' needs.

### **Responses to Highly Structured Course Activities with Flexible Options**

Some students appreciated the pre-sequenced course materials which provided flexibility to adult students who have many duties in their daily lives:

I liked that everything was released at the beginning of the semester so I could work ahead.

The biggest perk of this format was the flexibility to schedule the readings and assignments at times that worked for me throughout the week and the ability to work ahead. Planning ahead and scheduling time throughout the week are strategies that worked well for me.

Dr. Chang posts all of the online discussions and assignments in Canvas at the start of the semester. This allowed me to plan ahead and schedule time throughout the week for schoolwork and also to dig deeper on the topics that really interested me.

I learned so much from this class, thanks in large part to the structure of the assignments which pushed me to interact in ways I had not previously done.

Even though the course is highly structured, I also gave students the option to select the interesting topics within the structure. Students really like such options which allow for individual autonomy. For example, some participants said:

I enjoyed the idea that even though each discussion had several pre-designed questions, we could still opt to make our own questions and answer them or discuss some subject closely related to the provided questions.

I also appreciated the flexibility to choose our discussion questions or pose our own. It led to more authentic discussion posts.

Structured course design with flexibility helped students build a solid foundation of the topics they are studying, and it also enriched students' personal interests. For example, one participant said:

I have learned that examinations are not the best way to assess knowledge. Examinations can be written so that true knowledge can be assessed; however, this is often not done... This course heavily relies upon formulating opinions and ideas about related topics through discussion posts and large assignments. I have been able to learn concepts while putting a spin on the assignments with my own thoughts. This type of format produces educated and unique facilitators.

The structured course design is also reflected in projects which were designed using the progressive approach. The participants really loved such design. For example, some participants shared:

The projects all worked together very cohesively. Each project lead into the next project well and allowed us to build to our final demonstration.

I liked the way every assignment was well crafted and lead to the culminating project.

## **Promoting Diverse Ideas and Critical Thinking**

The courses are structured to promote diverse ideas and critical thinking. Overall, the participants enjoyed the different ideas and open conversations found in the online discussions. For example, some participants shared their thoughts:

There were good conversations, and many different ideas presented in the discussions, and they helped me gain a broader understanding of the content.

This class has allowed us to put a spin on our opinions and respond to other's opinions.

I enjoyed the lack of memorization. I am very good at memorization, which reflects well on a transcript. However, this does not promote true learning. This class has pushed me to create my own opinions on the topics discussed.

I enjoyed that they [online discussions] were more open-ended.

I really enjoyed the question posed and the additional resources that were included each week. They went beyond the normal questions.

However, some participants stated that there was a lack of critical thinking in online courses. One participant stated that the majority of the posts were reflective. For example:

Because we all have different learning styles, I liked that Dr. Chang encouraged us to use different types of dialogues in our weekly discussions. The majority of my weekly posts were reflective.

In online discussions, some students mainly provided facts related information without in-depth critical thinking, even though it was necessary. For example, one participant stated:

I did feel that there were a lot of repetitive answers; however, it was nice reading answers from different perspectives. I really enjoyed when classmates would share other materials to reference. This helped me dive deeper into the lesson that was being taught that week.

## **Responding to Flexibility and Individual Autonomy**

Individual autonomy is valued by allowing students to choose topics that interest them for discussions and for completing their projects. Most of the participants like such flexibility which promotes individual autonomy. For example, some participants stated:

She (the instructor) allowed us to choose the areas that interested us most to engage in...I really enjoyed the ability to select which articles/readings/audio I wanted to engage with and respond to.

I like the flexibility of choosing which readings and discussion questions to focus on. This allowed me to go deep with a few topics each week rather than scramble to fit everything in.

I really liked the online discussions...I liked the options to answer a question proposed by the professor or to write on our own.

I liked that we could define roles and work on our own.

I liked the flexibility of choosing to either engage with other posts, or to simply write four of my own posts. I felt that this catered well to different styles of learning and didn't make discussion feel as forced as it might have been without the option to post more on my own thoughts.

I liked the variety of topics we could discuss. There was always an option for a topic of choice in case we did not like the 4 previous options. The flexibility was great.

These data show that students like that they can have options to choose the topics for discussions, the readings, the roles they will play in their projects, and whether or not they can replace comments with posts.

### **Responding to the Collaborative Work**

The participants had mixed feelings on collaboration in the form of group work. Even though some participants learned a lot from working in a group, other group members did not like the group work. Their dislike was mainly due to the difficulties presented by working with other students. They stated that:

More individual projects and writings, rather than group projects. While group projects can be very beneficial, an online format is very difficult.

I enjoyed the opportunity to share work on a project and rely on different individual's strengths. I did not like having to navigate different schedules with students from varied time-zones and with vastly different schedules. It is an added layer of complexity to simply working with others on a project.

I felt like we spent more time coordinating the logistics of the group project due to vastly different schedules availability and that it would have been nice to have had more time devoted to the actual group project itself. Group projects are rather challenging for those students who elect to take courses online. Most students who elect to take courses online have made that decision based upon the flexibility that

is offered. Group projects eliminate the flexibility and elevates challenges and frustration.

These data show that students like the flexibility of working alone instead of coordinating others' schedules. There are also a variety of other reasons which made the collaborative work not enjoyable. For example, one participant stated that:

I did not like the group work. First, it was really hard to work with a group that could never physically meet, and we did not all mesh well as a group. We learned differently, we interpreted assignment differently, and the way we put together our work was different. I also didn't like how the groups were assigned. It just seemed like they could have been more evenly set up. Also, we all have our own interests and that makes it hard too. I think we have to remember that adult education is much more individualized, and we need to be able to do things on our own. I do also see the benefit of working within a group, even a difficult one. I just really didn't like it in this particular class. I was also not a fan of being required to use a blog to post assignments. One, I have no desire to learn the technical side of learning to blog or to use the blog and I don't care to have my work on display in the future. The blog was a hassle more than anything else and I don't think it's an attractive way of displaying my work or my groups work.

This participant listed multiple reasons which made the group collaboration difficult, such as lack of physical contact, different ways of working, different ways of interpreting the assignment, different interests, technical issue, and favoring the individualized work and the freedom of working alone.

Even though the participants liked the freedom of doing their project alone to avoid the constraints from the group members, some suggested a more structured environment in order to make the group collaboration more efficient. For example, two participants provided the following suggestions about how to make the collaboration more structured and manageable:

I would suggest detailed instructions on how to set up and post things to your blog. It was very nice to be able to look through previous years blogs to see how to set things up. I would also suggest a naming system for the blogs to follow. For example, it could be 0635Group#TermYear (0645Group1Spring2020.blogspot.com) I think that would help out organization greatly so students could easily view previous blogs.

To better support learning in this class I would have liked more consistency with meeting times so I think in the future it should be a

component of the first group assignment for each group to decide on a regular weekly or bi-weekly meeting time and stick with it for the rest of the semester, and the ability for students to adhere to that schedule should be a component of their grade. This gives an online class some of the useful temporal structure of a physical class.

Having some structure, both in scheduling and in managing the group projects, might make the group collaboration easy and accountable.

## CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

The participants like the pre-sequenced materials and the step-by-step, progressive way of developing their projects, and the application of the theories in practice. Such design combines Western and Eastern perspectives of learning. Pre-sequenced, well-structured learning activities/materials is not just the main feature of Eastern learning perspective, as some scholars stated (Chen & Bennett, 2012; Liu et al., 2010). It actually was highly accepted by the American students in this study too. Even though the scope and depth of the course contents are large, it is manageable for most students since it is highly structured. Providing background information and procedural steps can help students learn in-depth knowledge (Song & Trybus, 2018). Procedural knowledge, knowledge created through step-by-step and progressive way, is operational. It uses tools and practical modeling to help students understand the process of how knowledge is created (Hiebert & Lefevre, 1986; Österman & Bråting, 2019; Sudarmani et al., 2018). The deductive discussion design (*from theories to application*) enables students to understand theories and easily learn the application of theory in practice. Conceptual knowledge, which was highly emphasized in these courses, is a web of knowledge that is interconnected, abstract, and free of context. Such conceptual knowledge can be used as a rationale to explain the relationship between facts and results (Hiebert & Lefevre, 1986; Österman & Bråting, 2019; Sudarmani et al., 2018). To help students understand how theories interconnect to practice and how theories were used as rationales to guide practical activities, templates, examples, and summary tables were provided so that students could see how conceptual knowledge is structured and formed.

Most of the participants liked the flexible course design. Such a structured design with flexible options promoted open conversations and individual personal interests and autonomy; it helped students build a solid knowledge foundation. Adult learners especially have the desire to self-direct their learning and manage their learning based on their personal interests and needs (Knowles, 1984). By valuing autonomy-support and intrinsic goals, students' learning and performance can be improved (Vansteenkiste et al., 2004).

Collaboration in the form of group work was not well received due to various reasons, such as difficulty of working online and difficulty in collaborating with others due to differences in working and learning styles, and a greater interest in individualization and in the freedom of working alone. The courses were designed to promote diverse ideas and critical thinking. Different ideas and open conversations were produced in these courses. Students enjoyed diverse ideas and open conversations since they broadened their perspectives and helped students form their own ideas without memorizing the concepts. However, knowledge shared in these courses was mainly fact related and reflection based. There was a lack of the critical thinking in students' discussions. Students sometimes provided repetitive points and fact-related information without in-depth critical thinking.

This study supports the Western perspective learning which favors exploration and reflection (Bybee, 2002). It supports the Western learning perspective which values individual work, dialogue, interaction, problem-solving skills, self-directed learning, and diverse perspectives and resources (Kang & Chang, 2016). However, the data in this project also indicates that there is a lack of critical thinking and a challenge to the authority's knowledge, which is similar to non-Western perspectives of learning (Corcoran, 2014; Elashmawi, 2001; Marquardt et al., 2004). It is unclear whether or not this is because of the online learning environment which lacks the body language and physical cues that are often helpful in identifying hidden information. This study also supports the Western perspective which favors individual learning, not collaborative learning (Merriam et al., 2007). However, this scenario may change if certain conditions are satisfied, such as using technology to support virtual communication and decrease the logistic issues involved in group projects and streamlining the format of the group projects to make them easier to manage.

Foreign-born faculty members might be challenged due to their culture and language differences (Munene, 2014). However, this study indicates that foreign-born faculty members can also integrate their cultural heritage into a Western learning environment to benefit students and expand learning perspectives. It is necessary for foreign-born faculty members to adjust to the American educational environment by valuing interactions, open dialogues, and learner-centered learning environment. However, the foreign-born faculty members do not need to lower their education standards (Alberts, 2008) to please American students. They have their different perspectives and cultural diversity (Bista, 2016), and such diversity can serve as a teaching asset that can contribute to the American education system.

## **IMPLICATIONS**

With more and more foreign-born faculty members joining Western higher education institutions, it is necessary to mentor them to adjust to the

new working environment. It is also valuable to integrate their values, cultural heritage, and teaching practices into the Western learning environment. This study contributes to the practice and literature by combining the Eastern and Western teaching philosophies, learning perspectives, and their relevant strategies into practice, specifically in an online learning environment. With coronavirus continuously spreading throughout the world and online learning becoming the new norm, this study is timely since it provides a concrete case of how to integrate Eastern and Western learning perspectives into an online learning environment with a design-based approach.

This study shows that students from the Western learning environment favor independent and individual work. However, in an online environment, a certain degree of collaborative work is necessary to create interactive dynamics and a sense of presence. Due to a lack of physical interactions, instructors can create a well-structured learning environment with clear learning objectives, schedules, and management techniques to foster the group collaboration and a close relationship (Paralejas, 2013). For example, instructors may provide some instructions about how to structure the group projects and how to streamline the group members' schedules.

This study shows that critical thinking in an online environment is not always adequately executed, which does not support the Western learning perspective of favoring critical thinking. Giving students more options on various tasks and decision making can promote students' freedom and autonomy. Concrete guided structure is needed to support critical thinking. Critical thinking can be supported through design and organization, facilitating discourse, and direct instruction. For example, structured and scaffolded discussions can effectively support critical discussions (DiPasquale & Hunter, 2018). Using debates can push students to confront the conflicts in discussions and promote critical thinking (Kanuka et al., 2007).

To create a high-quality online learning environment, it is necessary for foreign-born professors to be exposed to the Western curriculum and design development by attending cultural activities, observing their American colleagues' teaching practices, and asking them for examples of their syllabi and the expectations of their institutions. They can attend seminars on teaching and learning in higher education and exchange practice with their academic mentors (Song & Trybus, 2018). They can have dialogues with their Western colleagues and examine their cultural scripts and how to bring them into Western teaching practice (Wu, 2017). Foreign-born professors should also use their foreignness as a teaching resource. They can provide students with their views on education and how such reviews are reflected in the course design. They can provide scaffolding to the students and show them the structure of the assignments and how to implement the projects in practice. For example, they can provide summary tables, examples, and templates for assignments to help students recognize the structure of the knowledge they

have learned. They can elaborate the readings and external materials to help students focus more time and energy on in-depth knowledge acquisition.

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## Appendix A

Design	Issues/problems that need to be addressed	Activities	Summary of the positive comments	Summary of the negative comments/suggestions for practice
Pre-sequenced materials; highly structured course activities with flexible options	<p>Online environment needs structure to help learners learn independently and self-directedly.</p> <p>Adult learners are practical and pragmatic driven, they like immediate application of learning.</p>	<p>Provided pre-sequenced course materials accessible for learners in advance.</p> <p>Provided sequenced projects, summary of the readings, summary table, examples and templates of the assignments to help students see the structure of the assignments, interconnection of the concepts, and process of how to complete the assignments.</p>	<p>A large amount of content and supporting resources were provided in a manageable and flexible way, which adds depth to the courses and makes courses thought provoking and engaging.</p>	<p>Some students felt overwhelmed by the complexity and quantity of the course contents.</p> <p>Suggestions:</p> <p>Allow students to access pre-sequenced course materials in advance</p> <p>Provide examples and templates for assignments</p> <p>Provide the summary table of the assignments to show students the structure of the assignments.</p>
Promoting diverse ideas and critical thinking	<p>Due to lack of physical contact in online learning environment, students preferred more agreed opinions without providing critical dialogues and diverse perspectives to avoid possible conflicts.</p>	<p>Instructor was a facilitator and knowledge provider. Students were required to share their different ideas and their applications in practice based on structured guidelines.</p> <p>Critical thinking was encouraged.</p>	<p>Students enjoyed different ideas and open conversations since they broadened students' perspectives and helped students form their own ideas without memorizing the concepts.</p>	<p>Students sometimes provided repetitive points and facts related information without in-depth critical thinking.</p> <p>Suggestion:</p> <p>The courses need concrete guided structure to help students form critical ideas.</p>
Flexibility and individual autonomy	<p>Adult learners have multiple roles and complex schedules. They prefer flexible options and autonomy. They also prefer internal motivation and self-directed learning.</p>	<p>Students have options to choose the discussions topics, the readings, the roles they can play in their projects, or whether or not they can replace comments with posts.</p>	<p>Students enjoyed the ability to select what they wanted to engage.</p> <p>The flexible design allowed students to go deep with a few topics each week. It catered well to different styles of learning</p>	<p>Give students options to select their group members, readings, and the topics to work on.</p>
Collaborative Work	<p>Online group collaboration is not easy due to difficulty in managing group work, students' lack of commitment on group work, and their desire to pursue individual autonomy and flexibility.</p>	<p>Provided guidelines of how to divide group assignments among individual members; Integrated roles of group collaboration and individual contributions into grading rubrics and self/peer evaluations.</p>	<p>Students learned a lot by working with the group members.</p>	<p>Some students had no interest in group work due to lack of physical contact, difficulty to navigate different schedules with group members, different ways of working, different ways of interpreting the assignment, different interests, technical issues, and favoring the individualized work. Group work is an added layer of complexity; Students spent more time coordinating the logistics of the group project</p> <p>Suggestions:</p> <p>Students needed guidelines on how to create and manage blogs and guideline of how to unify the links of the group blogs.</p>

## **Appendix B**

### **Survey: Course Reflection**

1. What is the name of the course?
2. What did you learn from this course? Share with us some good learning strategies/methods which are very helpful for your learning.
3. What did you like or dislike about this course in general? Why? What are your suggestions?
4. What did you like or dislike about the online discussions? Why? What are your suggestions?
5. What did you like or dislike about your group project? Why? What are your suggestions?
6. What do you suggest to better support your learning?

This is the end of the survey. Please click ">>" to submit.

Thank you!