

# PLACE, SPACE, FACE: FACTORS AFFECTING STUDENT PARTICIPATORY RETICENCE AND AN INTERVENTION

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## **ABSTRACT**

Based on case studies in live learning situations and on-going doctoral research, this paper discusses the issue of observed student participatory reticence among international postgraduate industrial product design students and provides examples of interventions designed to overcome it. Within the secondary literature, participatory reticence among international students – most especially Chinese students – is often held to be an inevitable manifestation of national cultural characteristics that sit in behavioural contrast to that exhibited by students of other nationalities. The paper establishes the background context for situated student learning behaviours and how they are manifested, and leads to a discussion of a pedagogical intervention that the author has designed specifically to help overcome participatory reticence among design students. The intervention has been tested within several postgraduate design courses, both at Coventry University and at Tongji University in Shanghai, China. The intervention is conducted within an informal classroom topology that encourages active student participation within a modified learning space. The outcomes powerfully demonstrate how the situational characteristics of a teaching space, the power-distance dynamic between tutor and student, and the particularities of the learning challenge itself can be successfully reframed to demonstrably reduce student inhibition and participatory reticence. The paper contains links to short video clips that capture the intervention in action, showing how introversion and reluctance give way to near-universal extroverted participation. An unanticipated beneficial outcome of the intervention is that participating students of all nationalities – including UK students – were extremely positive in their feedback in terms relating to how it helped to reduce wider introverted classroom behaviour and diminish cross-cultural boundaries. Perhaps controversially, students declared these interventions to be fun.

*Keywords: Student participation, situated behaviour, classroom topology, liminal space, pedagogy, Chinese learner*

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The author has been teaching international postgraduate students of industrial product design at Coventry University for more than six years. Working with international cohorts presents interesting pedagogical challenges, including issues pertaining to cultural and institutional assimilation and classroom participation, all of which contribute to the presence of an ongoing, learning friction that can impede the absorption and communication of ideas. One factor has emerged from direct observation, in discussions with the students themselves and from the author's research data that surpasses all others in its potential to deleteriously affect students' learning progression; English language deficit. Tutorials, assignment feedback and survey and interview data gathered by the author, unequivocally reveal the issue of language deficit as the overwhelmingly dominant factor that negatively impacts affected visiting students' learning journey. Thematic analysis of the data reveals it to affect almost every aspect of student life, including academic progression and cultural assimilation.

### **1.1 Pedagogic Relevance**

For pedagogues, student language deficit touches upon a wide range of issues:

- The uncertainties about how much the students are absorbing and understanding
- Increased assignment failure rate, concomitant additional workload (resubmission tutorial

- support, assessment re-marking...)
- Concerns that vocabulary simplification can lead to diminution of academic standards
- Formation of culturally-aligned cliques - impact on transnational collaborative working
- Students with a strong command of English can feel frustrated:  
*'Group work is difficult with students who don't understand English'*  
 (Student survey response, anon.)

## 1.2 Learner Relevance

For those students whose grasp of English is inadequate to the task the consequences can be manifold and profound:

- A deleterious impact upon academic performance
- Difficulties in understanding and interpreting design briefs (Identified by Osmond as a conceptual learning threshold [1])
- The deterrent effect upon efforts to socially, institutionally and culturally assimilate
- A constriction to the communication of ideas, concepts and design narratives
- A potentially alienating factor in student-teacher power-distance relationship:  
*'The communication between teachers and students in UK was not ideal for me, but that was more likely to be the result of language differ, Chinese students like to communicate between each other, and only contact with the teachers when they have to.'* (Chinese student survey response, anon.)
- A root cause in classroom passivity, introversion, and a reluctance to question and engage in discussion – participatory reticence.

## 2 PARTICIPATORY RETICENCE

The phenomenon of the reticent Chinese student is such an orthodoxical trope that even Chinese academics have felt a need to proffer a position on the matter: 'This observation is even undeniable to those scholars who criticised the stereotyped views of Chinese learners.' [2]. Certainly, some Western academics attribute this to their pre-tertiary educational experiences and to a cultural conditioning [3] [4] [5] [6] but some Chinese students themselves do too: 'In China students are taught from early age not to question teacher but be quiet and listen. Teacher tell us what to do. Some friendly teacher we can ask questions but mostly not question teacher.' (Student survey response, anon.) Yet the majority of Chinese student responses relating to participatory reluctance explicitly cite poor English language skills as the main disincentive to participation:

- 'When we hear word we don't understand is difficult. We don't like to ask question if we don't understand so is why we don't speak in class.'*
- 'Sometimes I can't totally express my thinking in English.'*
- 'I think aspect of the most difficult to understand is the problems discussed in the classroom, I need time to understand the different thinking from the different country.'*

(Chinese student survey - all responses are anonymous and cited verbatim)

This author is not the first to attribute Chinese student participatory reticence to language deficit. Others have looked beyond expedient, culturally-orientated explanations to offer alternatives that also recognise some pragmatic realities: 'Differences in responses to the programme could be attributed to differences in language abilities and learning needs.' [7] In addition to factors of cultural conditioning and language deficit, there is another key factor that inhibits students' willingness to participate in learning sessions and which has been observed in students regardless of nationality and culture; normal situated behavioural introversion. In an AD&CHE journal article, Hilton discusses a case study in which UK students participated in a 10-week study programme at Zhejiang University of Media and Communication during which they were observed to be extremely reluctant to engage in discussion within classroom learning sessions. [8] A key postulate of the article is that since UK students were essentially exhibiting the same inhibited classroom behaviour that is often observed among Chinese students in the UK, then any purely culturally-aligned explanation for this must be inherently faulty:

- '... these observed responses cannot be explained in terms of cultural difference alone... It seems clear that what the students were expressing in their temporary*

*introversion was actually a perfectly normal situated human response to uncertainty rather than a definitive manifestation of cultural difference per se.* [8]

As one Chinese student put it, 'Sometimes I want to ask question and I think I will try but then I don't have courage.' The risk of loss of face is certainly something Chinese students are deeply attuned to culturally, and while Western students may not couch their anxieties in terms of loss of face, they certainly know what social embarrassment feels like and are just as keen to avoid it. Loss of face/social embarrassment – whatever name it goes by – can exert a powerful self-censoring effect within learning space dynamics. Analyses of the data reveal several substantive, internal factors that combine to affect students' willingness to actively participate and engage within learning situations:

- English language limitations
- Differences of cultural conditioning and national dimensions
- Ephemeral, situated, behavioural responses (characteristic of most people, regardless of nationality, who find themselves exposed to socially intimidating situations)

And to these, one should also add - individual personality type. One should be wary of assuming that there is an unyielding homogeneity in Chinese student behaviour: 'Even in China people say I am quiet and don't speak much' (Chinese student interview response, anon.)

What should be stressed is that there is no single explicatory mechanism. Participatory reticence is a symptom of compound, contributory factors at work. It is not the disease itself. That said, this paper argues that situated behaviour *can* be modified by changing learning environment dynamics

### 3 PARTICIPATORY RETICENCE – LEARNING SPACE DYNAMICS

Years of working with Chinese students have revealed them to be just as – variously - extroverted, introverted, confident, fun-loving, opinionated and animated outside of classroom as any other cohort of students. Not uncommonly, the very students who, during an entire teaching session had remained conspicuously silent, would suddenly become boisterous, questioning and animated the moment the session formally ended. When it happens, the Pavlovian transition from introversion to extroversion is so immediate and dramatic that it is as though a behavioural switch has been thrown. Some situational change had triggered an evident change of mindset and behaviour. With the end of the lesson, students felt that they were now free to 'stand-down' from their role of 'classroom student' and with that they no longer had to act and behave according to deeply-conditioned role expectations.

In simple terms, once the classroom ceases to be a formal learning environment, then role-based behavioural expectations no longer apply. Similarly, for those students whose reticence is founded more on personal, social anxiety rather than cultural conditioning (especially where a self-aware consciousness of language limitation is a concern), then the informality of those minutes at the end of the session relieves the intimidating anxieties they might have been feeling previously.

To test the postulate that learning space dynamics can militate against the willingness of students to participate fully and unselfconsciously it was first necessary to clearly identify precisely the specific factors that were fostering participatory reticence. Analysis focused on the topological characteristics of the learning space – i.e., its setup, accommodation and spatial arrangement as well as a consideration of how the power-distance relationship between teacher and student is represented and psychologically reinforced within the learning space: 'In China students are taught from early age not to question teacher but be quiet and listen. Teacher tell us what to do. Some friendly teacher we can ask questions but mostly not question teacher.' This led to an identification of the following learning space characteristics that, it is argued, tend to powerfully militate against efforts to encourage relaxed and free-flowing student participation.

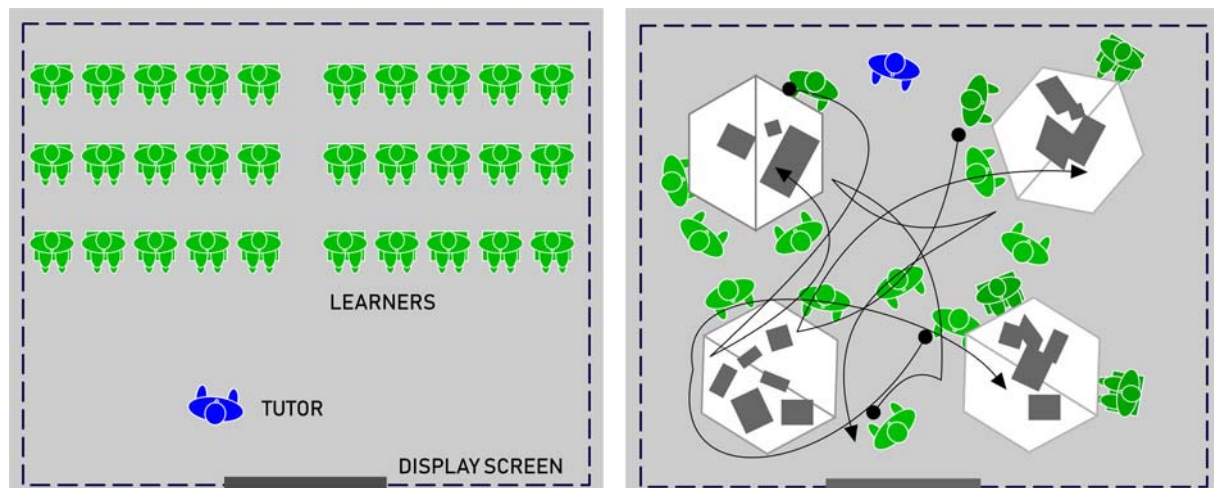
#### 3.1 Characteristics of intimidating (anti-participatory) learning space topology (Figure 1, left image)

- Students seated in serried ranks, forward facing
- High power-distance relationship; separation, us and them
- Screen-centred delivery (controlled by teacher) can foster student passivity
- The teacher controls the environment
- The flow of information is largely one-way; from teacher to students
- The teacher is free to move into students' personal space; students are forcibly immobile
- Students can feel disconnected, leading to disengagement

- Students cannot easily communicate among each other, limiting scope for spontaneous discussion

### 3.2 Characteristics of non-threatening (participatory) learning space topology (Figure 1, right image)

- Students free to use furniture and space in any way they wish, seated or standing
- Maximum scope for movement and interaction between students, within and across groups; high potential for cross-fertilisation of ideas
- Teacher is primarily observer, occasional guide, facilitator
- Very low power/distance relationship; students self-direct learning and problem-solving processes towards task completion
- Highly collaborative, active engagement with learning task
- No use of screen, almost nil instances of observed passivity



*Figure 1. Contrasting classroom topologies. Serried topology on left militates against student participation. Amorphous topology on right – as used in the Fighting Robots intervention – encourages democratic use of space, movement, spontaneous interaction and participation. A variation on the amorphous layout has also successfully been used for a text analysis activity*

## 4 A PLACE FOR FIGHTING ROBOTS

The premise that emerged from these postulates was that any intervention that aimed to neutralise or directly counter them ought to result in increased student participation. To this end a pedagogical intervention was designed to test the premise. A week in advance of the planned intervention, students were requested to collect several cardboard boxes over the course of the week and to bring them, along with other materials, to the following session. They were given no further instructions. When the students arrived at the scheduled session they were asked to pile all the boxes into the middle of the room. Arbitrarily, they were divided into three groups. Prior to the start of the session, the tables had been arranged into three island clusters within the room, enabling the students to work at them in any way they saw fit (see Figure 1, right-hand classroom layout). They were then issued with a single-sentence brief: **Each group has an hour to design a fighting robot using the collected materials.** From that moment on, beyond answering a few clarification questions, the author's role was essentially that of an observer and facilitator. The author would not contribute to the design process nor make specific suggestions. For a few moments there was only silence and a clear sense of bemusement among the students. Soon, they began chatting to each other, asking questions – of each other and of the author – and suddenly, spontaneously, everyone became extremely animated and turned to the pile of boxes and started grabbing and investigating the creative potential of the materials on offer. What was remarkable was that, literally, within a few minutes the noise level was incredibly intense, the activity levels were extremely high, and the peer-peer interaction was completely spontaneous. Students were shouting, laughing, gesticulating, and creatively engaging with materials. Some were putting boxes on their heads, while others were being measured for 'armour', and yet others were shouting suggestions on weaponry. With no further input from the author, over the course

of an hour, three cardboard fighting robots emerged. In terms of design process, in no case did there appear to be an initial concept generation phase or adherence to some centrally orchestrated vision. Rather, the fighting robots appeared to evolve organically in a tightly collaborative operation that relied on direct interaction with the materials and ongoing reassurance and suggestion. Tasks were delegated or volunteered. All of the groups had decided that the strategy was to dress a student as robot and equip her [all three robots were female] with some fairly savage hand-held weaponry (Figure 2, left). Fascinatingly, two of the three students who volunteered to be the robots were Chinese and both of them were among those who had hitherto been among the most introverted of the cohort. Yet here they were, laughing, shouting and when the presentation time came, enthusiastically 'fighting' other robots in front of their peers and the author. It was as though these were completely different students from their normally quiet counterparts. And to the delight of everyone, at the end of the process, three highly successful fighting robots amiably paraded their fighting capability.



*Figure 2. Left - fighting robots under construction at Coventry University. This particular 'robot' had been, until now, one of the cohort's quieter students (<https://youtu.be/AHhUMilBg14>). Right – Designing a device for converting smells to colour at Tongji University (<https://youtu.be/LbT67YKkEHI>)*

Since then, variations on this activity have been repeated with different cohorts with similarly striking participatory outcomes. The intervention was also tested with entirely-Chinese postgraduate product design and PhD design students at Tongji University in Shanghai, with perhaps even-more dramatically-engaged results (Figure 2, right). In terms of the manner in which the task was conducted and the behaviour of the participating students, there was remarkably similarity between the two instances of the activity. At the end of the process, three completely different concepts were proudly and exuberantly demonstrated by the students who were completely at ease in giving extrovert performances in front of their peers and the observer. There was no evident reticence, shyness or introversion. It would appear that the unorthodox nature of the activity combined with the absence of any extant behavioural schema, meant that the students simply decided that they might as well engage and just get on with it. As one Tongji student later explained, 'At first we thought it was strange, even impossible, because we have never done this kind of thing before. Then we thought, let's just do it.' Short videos can be viewed of both activities by scanning the QR code or using the links, above (Figure 2).

## 5 CONCLUSION

There is still more analysis of the data to be done before a position can be determined regarding any potentially-beneficial impact of these interventions on academic performance. That aside, in terms of the student's personal development, cultural assimilation and social maturation, student participatory reticence is not an insignificant matter. This paper argues that the underlying causes are manifold and complex, though three consistent tropes emerge from the data, from direct observational experience and from pedagogical engagement with design students: language limitation; cultural conditioning; and innate normal human aversion to situations of potential social anxiety. These combine to stifle uninhibited student participation. This is compounded by intimidating learning space topology and student-teacher dynamics that further militate against spontaneous and anxiety-free engagement. The Fighting Robot intervention (and its variations) has demonstrated that where teaching space topologies, learning tasks and student-teacher dynamics are modified to permit students to

democratically move, discuss, engage and interact within the space and with each other, then the likelihood is that students will feel less intimidated and more likely to actively participate. With diminished power-distance hierarchies, the teacher's role becomes more of a guide and facilitator than the embodiment of pedagogic authority. Language limitations become less relevant, because students are communicating under their own terms, accommodating them without criticism and adapting to any linguistic short-comings. And for the naturally shy, the non-threatening situation gives them the space to operate at a level that they feel comfortable without the feeling that they are under direct scrutiny from peers and teachers. In short, the less it feels like a typical serried classroom, the more likely it is that students will participate. Subsequent pedagogical observations and interviews conducted with Chinese students at the end of the course (some months *after* the intervention) appear to support the premise that these interventions had a tangible and lasting benefit for many students in reducing student/teacher power distance anxieties while reducing situational and participatory reticence:

*'the tutors in UK, they are more like the character of friends, and the communication with my tutor is quite relax and comfortable.'*

*'The freedom is great, you don't feel trapped and in a "school" environment.'*

In terms of threshold concept theory, in overcoming a participatory reticence exacerbated by orthodox classroom topologies, these students had been able escape from their liminal space to transcend barriers towards progression. There is an interesting postscript to this narrative. Readers who follow the links and view the Tongji University video of this activity will be struck by the level of extroverted and unselfconscious behaviour on display. There is a tangible buzz of excitement in the air, with lots of noise, laughter, cheering and jocular behaviour. When the presentations had finished, still within an atmosphere of high spirits, the author stood in front of the students and requested that before leaving it would be great to sum-up and hear their thoughts and opinions on what they'd just been involved with. As one, the students all sat down, faced the author...and remained silent. With a perceived reassertion of the student-teacher power distance relationship and – what felt like to them – a resumption of the orthodox, hierarchical classroom dynamic (Figure 1), the participatory spell had been instantly broken.

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