

A Cross-cultural Study of Dispositions Towards Learning

Erika Jane Spray

BA (Hons), PGCE, MAppLing, MEdStud, GCPTT

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Statement of Originality

I hereby certify that the work embodied in the thesis is my own work, conducted under normal supervision.

The thesis contains no material which has been accepted, or is being examined, for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. I give consent to the final version of my thesis being made available worldwide when deposited in the University's Digital Repository, subject to the provisions of the Copyright Act 1968 and any approved embargo.

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Abstract

Enrolments at the postgraduate coursework (PGCW) level are expanding both in terms of number and diversity, with Masters programs attracting increasing numbers of students from a widening range of backgrounds. Despite this, however, the individual differences literature largely fails to address learning at this educational level, or the issue of potential cultural variation. This study therefore profiled the epistemic, metacognitive and affective attributes of PGCW students at Australian universities, to profile the cohort's *disposition towards learning*. An online survey measured attributes chosen to represent three dispositional domains: epistemic, metacognitive and affective. Results showed the PGCW cohort to be elite overall, but significant variation existed between both individuals and groups.

Cluster analysis revealed three groups of participants that differed dispositionally, demographically and in terms of academic achievement. The dispositional profiles of the three clusters showed a clear two-part pattern of agentic and epistemic attributes. This was replicated in factor analysis, which identified two dispositional factors: agentic engagement and epistemic engagement. Of these, epistemic engagement best predicted achievement, with agentic engagement a necessary but insufficient condition for academic success. Cross-cultural comparison found that international students tended to hold less adaptive dispositional profiles, and achieved lower grades. This suggests that learners' dispositions develop adaptively within a specific cultural context, and may not translate effectively to new contexts.

This is the first study to describe the dispositional profile of a PGCW population, and the first to propose the two underlying dispositional dimensions of agentic and epistemic engagement. Although dispositional profiles varied significantly between learners from different cultural backgrounds, the two dimensions were cross-culturally consistent, supporting the idea of a culturally universal model of dispositional learning. The greater importance of epistemic engagement in this model suggests that epistemic attributes underpin successful metacognition at this level. Effective teaching should therefore address epistemic expectations explicitly, and this is particularly important for students from different cultural contexts.

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