

Creation of Third Space in a Bridge Class: “Dwelling In and Stretching Out”

Author Details: Erin Jensen
University of Utah

Abstract:

Student demographics at colleges and universities in the United States are changing as the number of international students has increased dramatically over the last fifty years, especially the number of Chinese international students. American universities are increasingly becoming aware of the need for better support systems in place for international students and one solution is to create Bridge Courses. These course usually focus on "bridging" the gaps between the Chinese educational system and the American educational system. One such Bridge Course was created at a large research university and focused on mainly on academic writing. This study focuses on the experience of one Chinese international student in the Bridge Course. Her experiences are examined through the lens of Third Space theory. First Space is often thought of as the students' home life, second space is focused on work and school, and third space in this case study focuses on where the student was able to create to give voice to herself. Through the use of code-switching and using personal examples, the student was able to create Third Space within the classroom.

Keywords: Third Space, Bridge Course, Chinese, code-switching

INTRODUCTION

Student demographics at colleges and universities in the United States are changing as the number of international students has increased dramatically over the last fifty years, growing from 75,000 in 1963-64 to 886,052 in 2013-2014, an almost 12-fold increase (IIE, 2014). A major factor driving this increase has been the dramatic growth in the number of Chinese international students, who made up 31% of the total number of international students studying at U.S. universities and colleges for 2013-14. The number of Chinese international students studying at universities in the U.S was 274,439 in 2013-14, a 16.5% increase from 2012-13, a 37.9% increase from 2011-12, and a 140% increase from 2006-07 (IIE, 2014).

To better meet the needs of incoming Chinese international students, several universities created Bridge Courses. These courses were designed to help bridge the gap between the Chinese educational system and the US educational system and most specifically emphasized academic writing. A large research focused university created a Bridge Course that was designed for incoming Chinese freshman students. The purpose of the course was to provide the Chinese students additional support for the required writing course they were enrolled in. There were four instructors and over 80 students enrolled in this first Bridge Course at the university. For this case study, the experiences of one student, Xin Yi (name has been changed) is focused on.

Third Space is a theory that was first introduced in a graduate class the researcher was in during her PhD program. The researcher's previous experiences in education had been more focused on looking at first space (students' home life) and second space (work, school), and as she completed the readings about Third Space, she became intrigued with how such a space could be developed within the confines of a classroom. The research with Third Space seemed more focused on more fluid educational spaces than the structure of other classes. By thinking about Third Space, the researcher began to ask herself the following questions: Could Third Space be created by the students, even students who were used to a prescriptive educational system? Could Third Space be created in a classroom without the instructor being aware of the theory? These questions then led to the decision to evaluate the experiences of Xin Yi in the Bridge Course in terms of Third Space theory.

BACKGROUND ON STUDENTS

The Bridge Course was comprised of freshman students from China and who had all been recruited through a specific recruiting company. All the students had taken the TOEFL exam and received scores that did not meet the minimum standard for acceptance into universities in the United States. As part of the deal with the recruitment company, the university had agreed to waive the TOEFL requirement and to enroll the students directly into

mainstream (not ESL) courses. The students had taken one class in China before leaving and then had taken another elective class at a different university before arriving at the university where the bridge course was taught. All students in Xin Yi's class, including her, were either from Beijing or a suburb of Beijing. All students had lived in China for their entire lives, and many attended the same schools, giving them similar backgrounds and experiences. All attended schools in the Chinese public educational system, which is standardized for all students across the nation, with the exception of Hong Kong (Han, 2005, p. 43). The Chinese public educational system is focused on tests and rote memorization with the idea of the teacher as the ultimate expert. The teacher is prioritized as the expert and the student is viewed as the receptacle for knowledge. A common way of describing the teacher-student relationships is to see teachers as the “duck-stuffers,” a metaphor that compares the process of stuffing the dead duck with spices prior to cooking it to teachers stuffing students’ heads with knowledge (Han, 2005, p. 51). Chinese students are used to a rigidity and structure in education that is unfamiliar to American students. Students typically sit in rows, surrounded by paper and books, as they spend their time studying and memorizing.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Third Space is a concept that has many different definitions depending on the researcher and the focus of the research. Gutiérrez, Baquedano-Lopez, and Tejeda (1999) define Third Space in a way that included educational literacy areas which was helpful as the researcher examined Sarah's class. These researchers further argue that “the use of multiple, diverse, and even conflicting mediational tools promotes the emergence of *Third Spaces*, or zones of development, thus expanding learning” (abstract, p. 286). They expand on this definition by stating, “Our analysis of third spaces has shown that learning contexts are immanently hybrid, that is, polycontextual, multivoiced, and multiscritped. Thus, conflict, tension, and diversity are intrinsic to learning spaces” (p. 287). Third Space, then involves “a purposeful use of hybridity and diversity” that “stimulates the transformation of

activities into robust contexts of development” (p. 287), a concept that is useful in examining the students and the class design of the Bridge Course. Third Space is focused “in the concrete and material practices of a transformative learning environment” (Gutiérrez, 2008, p. 148). Gutiérrez expands her definition and use of the Third Space when she writes the following:

Our use of the Third Space construct has always been more than a celebration of the local literacies of students from nondominant groups; and certainly more than what students can do with assistance or scaffolding; and also more than ahistorical accounts of individual discrete events, literacy practices, and the social interaction within. Instead, it is transformative space where the potential for an expanded form of learning and the development of new knowledge are heightened. (p. 152)

This idea of “an expanded form of learning” and heightened development of new knowledge is something that most educators are interested in and also supports why the researcher wanted to look at Third Space within a classroom.

Because this study examined Third Space creation by Chinese students in the United States, a Chinese definition and view of Third Space presented by Hong Yu Wang, a Chinese scholar who came to the United States as a graduate student and reflected on her experiences in her book *The Call from the Stranger on a Journey Home: Curriculum in a Third Space* is included. Wang (2004) embraces Third Space and connects it to Chinese tradition and myth: “A third space. Three is a magical number to me. It refers to the multiple in ancient Chinese and can be a symbol of creativity, as in the Taoist myth that three gives birth to the universe” (p. 9). She sees Third Space as a space that transforms, that allows exchange and gives birth to ideas and ways of seeing things, a giving birth to ideas, a space of “dwelling in and stretching out,” and a space of “conflicting hybrid interplay of positioning and displacement” (p. 147). It is a place where she can connect her Chinese and her American identity. She writes about Third Space as being the place where “the silence of the relational and the new words of the singular can

begin to speak, in a new tongue” (p. 131). In this Third Space, students are not silenced, but are allowed to have a voice. Xin Yi reflected on her silence in American educational spaces and wrote about feeling as if she could not interact with English speakers and so was silenced. Third Space, to Wang, is a place where students can feel comfortable dwelling in while also feeling free to stretch out and explore.

INQUIRY METHOD

In this case study, six entries are used to illustrate the creation of Third Space including one in-class writing sample, one submitted essay, two observations of her interactions with other people, one observation of an in-class discussion, one screen shot of her class evaluation, and one “anonymous” suggestions for changes to the class that she wrote her name on even though she had been instructed not to. These six data sets were used to support the argument about how Third Space was created in the class. Xin Yi mentioned several times about how much she liked being able to use both Chinese and English in the class and how using both languages facilitated her learning. She wrote of how the Chinese system of education is so different than the American system and how it was hard for her to change to being a different kind of student in terms of feeling comfortable in asking questions in class and talking to the professor. She wrote of wanting to feel more closely connected to the Chinese community in the surrounding city and to the other students. The information gathered in the case study portfolio provided examples for answering my research questions and for supporting my arguments.

In the Bridge Writing Course, the instructor was positioned as the authority teacher. In the Chinese educational system, a teacher is considered to be the unquestionable expert on the topic. Group work is not encouraged or practiced very often and students rarely, if ever, raise their hands in class. The assumption is that either the student understands the material or the student does not, but that is not the concern of the instructor. This position of power became very clear through a conversation Xin Yi had with another instructor. A white male instructor mentioned that his Chinese was really good even

though his Chinese really wasn't. Another instructor, with some knowledge of Chinese culture, laughed and told him that when a white person tries to speak Chinese, often the Chinese student will tell them that their Chinese is “very good.” Since this discussions occurred at the front of the classroom, the students heard the conversation. Xin Yi stated that her English teacher in China was white and from England. He could only say “你好, Nǐ hǎo [Hello],” in Chinese, and she and her fellow students would always compliment him on his “good Chinese.” She stated that, in fact, his Chinese was so bad that her own parents could not understand this simple greeting. An instructor asked her why she told him he had good Chinese when he clearly did not, and she said she did because he was white and he was her teacher.

PROJECT FINDINGS

Using the data sets helps show the creation of Third Space in Xin Yi's classroom. Xin Yi's instructor was fluent in Chinese and encouraged students to use Chinese as well as English. Allowing students to use both languages, helped create a hybrid culture that facilitated students creation of Third Space within the classroom. Third Space was also created through the use of code-switching and by using personal examples.

Utilizing code-switching in the classroom helped to create Third Space. Similar to Ms. Rivera's students (profiled in Gutiérrez, 1999), Xin Yi often started a discussion in English, switched to Chinese, switched back to English, and concluded in Chinese. Xin Yi, in her course evaluation, mentioned her appreciation of being allowed to code-switch in the classroom. She wrote, “I liked using Chinese. I got so tired of using English. It was good to come at 6:30...to use Chinese sometimes.... Explain in Chinese and English was good. I understand...about it.” Gutiérrez et. al. (1999) discuss the code switching that the teacher engages in within the classroom. They write that at the moment of code switching, “the teacher and the student are in a new hybrid space, indeed in the third space, where student knowledge, including the use of alternative representations of meaning, become new tools for learning” (p. 295).

The idea of code-switching influences the creations of Third Space. Bhatt (2008) makes the argument that “code-switching creates a discursive space—a third space” (p. 177). He was specifically interested in looking at code-switching in written mediums and how that created Third Space. While the Bridge Course was more involved in code-switching in spoken aspects, there was some code-switching in written mediums as well. One example of code-switching happening in class was how class notes were written. Xin Yi took notes in English and Chinese, often going back and forth between the two repeatedly, obviously finding it easier to use English in some places and Chinese in others. As Bhatt argues, code-switching “is a third space where social actors (re-) position themselves with regard to new community-practices of speaking, reading, and writing” (p. 196). Code-switching was also apparent in conversations with students where the students might start speaking in English, switch to Chinese, and end in English or vice versa. At times, there were conversations that were completely in Chinese other than a few words said in English. Xin Yi related an example of a text conversation she had with a friend in China where she included the word “Hola” because she did not know how to translate it. A friend explained to her that “Hola” was not English and was actually a Spanish word that is often used in the English language. Xin Yi laughed because she thought it was just an uncommon English word. Xin Yi, in the Bridge Course, was definitely repositioning herself in relation to her US-based classes and her life in the US.

Another way students created Third Space was to use personal examples. Gutiérrez et al. (1999) emphasized that Third Space could be created by using personal examples and having those valued in the classroom. Xin Yi wrote an in-class essay on the topic of the educational differences between China and the US. She wrote about her experiences of being a student in China and used specific examples of her life and wrote about the way that she was used to doing something in China was not how it is done in the US. She shared the example of a Chinese teacher writing a math problem on the blackboard and then being told to finish the exercise independently, while in the US, if the teacher has students finish a problem, it is usually by discussing it in groups. Xin Yi use of her personal experience

then led to a conversation in both Chinese and English about how Chinese teachers and students typically behave compared to American teachers and students, noting differences between ways of teaching and learning. It provided a fruitful Third Space where students shared ideas and impressions based on Xin Yi’s personal experience.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Creating Third Space is important for students and was an important component within the Bridge Course. In thinking about how the creation of Third Space can be influenced by both students and instructors, the researcher has chosen to include some thoughts on how Third Space creation can be better created within courses. Teachers need to emphasize more of a sense of community. Wang (2004) writes of how curriculum planning for “third space can hardly be achieved by an individual teacher alone. It becomes important that a loving and critical community be built” (p. 179). She also emphasizes that there needs to be access to communities that understand and share a persons historical culture (p. 149). Gutiérrez et al. (1999) believes that the “potential power of hybrid language practices in the third space lies in the broader range of linguistic and sociocultural resources and experiences available to both individuals and the larger interpretive community” (301). This sense of community needs to be added to the Bridge Course. Xin Yi also wrote in a class assignment that she wished that she knew more about the Chinese community and what resources were available to her. There is a strong Chinese community at the university and there was a popular listserv that few of the Bridge Course students were aware of. Too often instructors prioritize academic instruction over getting students involved in a supportive community.

A second approach to encourage Third Space creation is through using more Chinese within the class. Gutiérrez et. al. (1999) and Wang (2004) both implicitly write about the need for opportunities in the class for students to speak their mother tongue as they engage in critical thinking. In the examples Gutiérrez et al. shares, the students ask questions and work towards understanding by using Spanish. Wang shares stories of giving a series of lectures

with an English speaking professor in China. The English speaking professor would present first and then encourage the discussion of what he had to say to be in Chinese because he recognized that it was easier to have critical thinking in the first language of the participants (Wang, 2004, p. 154). Xin Yi, in her interview, talked about how insightful the class conversations were that occurred in Chinese versus some of the more basic conversations that occurred in English.

Another method of creating Third Space that could have been used within the course was through valuing Chinese ways of writing instead of focusing almost exclusively on how college-level writing in the United States is so different from that in China. In discussing Third Space creation, Gutiérrez et al. (1999) argues that Third Space creation benefits from “drawing parallels between home and academic lexicon” (p. 301), and one way to connect home and academic lexicon is to use story telling. While storytelling may be part of the cultural model Gutiérrez et al. studied, it is not a part of Chinese culture. However, Chinese culture highly values poetic language and stylistics, and valuing those characteristics could be used to make a connection between home and academic lexicon with Chinese students. Making those connections between how writing is valued and taught in China to how writing is valued in America is important. Studies done on what “good writing” is in China have found that such writing uses metaphors, allegories, analogies, and allusions and draws from the wealth of information available through Chinese culture, history, and tradition, but does not use first person point of view or personal stories (Han, 2005). Western-influenced composition teachers often view students’ use of proverbs to be trite and clichéd and typically do not value students’ use of allusion and analogy in an academic essay that value being straightforward and direct. Valuing the ways Chinese students know how to write would have been helpful. Having conversations with Chinese students about how they structure essays in Chinese and then adding in patterns of US academic writing would be useful. Xin Yi seemed frustrated that her way of writing was not valued in the class.

CONCLUSION

Wang (2004) believes that Third Space is a place where people can “dwell in” and “stretch out,” where they can feel at home and stretch themselves. Xin Yi and her fellow Chinese students were able to create Third Space in the Bridge Course and they were able to discuss, explore, engage, while feeling at home and being pushed at the same time. Xin Yi was allowed to use Chinese, code-switch, and share personal examples. However, there were other wasted opportunities to create Third Space in the classroom. There could have been more community engagement, along with increased use of the mother tongue and greater valuing of Chinese writing to increase the Third Space within the class. Such changes would have helped Xin Yi to feel at home, where she could dwell, while also feeling stretched to explore that Third Space more fully.

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