Professionalism and Work Ethic among U. S. and Asian University Students in a Global Classroom: A Multi-Cultural Comparison

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ABSTRACT

Professionalism and work ethic, as reflected by self-regulation, has been and continues to be an important attribute of a competitive work force. This paper compared the academic self-regulation of U.S. vs. Asian students enrolled in a Global Classroom course at a large southeastern university. Students were asked to respond to 10 specific pro-academic behaviors in regard to what they were actually doing (actual engagement) and what they felt they should be doing (intended engagement) specific to achieving academic success. The results indicated that students from both the U.S. and Asia exhibited limited self-regulation in the pursuit of behaviors leading to academic success in comparison to what they reported they should be doing. There was not a significant difference between U.S. and Asian students in self-reported actual engagement in pro-academic behaviors. However, Asian students presented less of a discrepancy between actual and intended engagement in pro-academic behaviors in comparison to their U.S. counterparts. This was based on Asian students' rating of intended behaviors lower than U.S. students. A notable difference was also found in that the Asian students self-regulated better than their U.S. counterparts in terms of pro-academic behaviors that were not directly observable. For Asian students there was not a discrepancy in self-reported engagement of observable vs. non-observable behaviors The U.S. students, however, appeared to be more amenable to external motivation (e.g. having the instructor be able to observe their behavior) and less likely to engage in non-observable behaviors leading to academic success.

Keywords: **S**elf-Regulation, Work Ethic, Professionalism, Student, Learning Behaviors, Global Classroom, Distance Learning

INTRODUCTION

Professionalism/work ethic has been rated as one of the three "most important" applied skills needed by entrants in today's work force according to a recent Conference Board report (Casner-Lotto & Barrington, 2006). Examples of specific lapses of professionalism and work ethic in the workforce are cited in studies by Swart and Duncan [10] and Swart, Kaufman., Lacontora, and Tricamo [9]. These studies point to instances where trained workers who knew what to do chose not to perform as trained. In both studies, workers had gone through training and were able to demonstrate proficiency in the skills needed to perform tasks to required standards. However when placed in the work environment, these same individuals failed to self-regulate their behaviors in order to maintain performance standards unless under direct supervision.

According to Hoyle [6], self-regulation involves a complex process with many interrelating factors. Karoly [7] defines self-regulation as processes, both internal and transactional, that serve to guide goal activities. He also notes that these activities are seen as occurring over time and across changing conditions and involve "…thought, affect, behavior, or attention via deliberate or automated use of specific mechanisms and supportive meta-skills" (p. 25). Karoly goes on to note that parts of this process of self-regulation include discrepancy detection and implementation, self-evaluation, self-efficacy, meta-skills, boundary conditions, and self-regulation failure.

The importance of self-regulation in a competitive work force is readily apparent, but it is equally important to consider this factor in higher education. To determine if university students know about and then engage in behaviors that would lead to academic success (i.e. GPA) during the course of their studies, Duncan, Swart, Hall, and Eribo [2] surveyed 167 upper level undergraduate students (juniors and seniors) at a southeastern university in the United States. Their results indicate that students are aware of and agree that they should engage in specific pro-academic behaviors. However, even though students are aware of the behaviors that would lead to academic success, they report engaging in significantly fewer behaviors than they feel they should in order to achieve this academic success. Those strategies that have the highest level of engagement are those which are directly observable by the instructor. Interestingly, in spite of not doing what they know they should, students still expect to achieve academic success and engage in negotiations with their instructors to have the standards of the course modified (e.g. extra credit assignments to substitute for missed or poor results on exams, etc). The question that emerges is "do these same student behaviors occur in other countries/cultures beyond the U.S.?"

THE GLOBAL CLASSROOM

The U. S. university where this study was conducted developed and piloted an introductory Global Understanding course suitable for a wide range of students. The university has international partners from other universities worldwide. The course in the U.S. is taught as a 3 credit hour Anthropology/ International Studies course and is a standard course offering. At partner institutions this course may be taught as a course in English, Journalism, Communications, etc. The current program includes 20 partners in 17 countries across 5 continents. All partners are independent with each university handling fees, grades, and credit for their own students. Each course offering is co-taught with three international universities, and involves a combination of lecture, group and individual discussions and guided partner work between the students in the different universities. The course meets two/three times per week for a total of 150 minutes a week.

Through the course, and especially through the e-mail and real time discussions and chats on specified subjects, students have an opportunity to see presentations and then discuss with their individual foreign partner, information on that country's cultural background and traditions, family, cultural traditions, typical college life, meaning of life, prejudice and stereotypes, etc. The course is structured so that two universities are paired for 4-5 weeks, during which time each student has a partner at the other university, and is supposed to e-mail daily and work on a joint paper. During class time students are required to read the front page of the local newspaper in English (website provided by faculty). Students are also required to keep a journal and jot down their impressions and reactions to the class after every class, and a summary of each culture at the end of the link with that culture.

The pairings change after 4-5 weeks so that each university gets a new foreign university partner, and each student also gets a new partner at the new school. As the American students work with their foreign partner, bonds of trust and friendship are formed and are often continued well after the course ends. Faculty members at each school take turns making the presentations that guide the discussions, so it really is a multifaceted course. All course work is done in English. Periodic debriefing discussions are led by faculty off-line to help students process the information they get, and suggest follow-up clarification and/or further discussion opportunities.

Since most students around the world will never have an opportunity to travel extensively, especially to destinations in the developing world, this course gives them a valuable vehicle for meeting and spending time with students at other universities. For students who do travel later, or work in foreign places or with international audiences, the course will help them develop listening and sharing skills that will aid those later experiences.

The simplicity of the course is that it uses regular internet and readily available hardware that most universities already have. Specific requirements include a laptop or other computer with internet connection at 256K bandwidth, a multi-media projector, and a $500 videoconferencing unit. In addition, 8 other computers are required in the same room for students to do individual and small group chats. The U. S. university provides a chat application to facilitate the chats between partner students as well as the technological backup for real-time coordination of activities. Students need access to computers for assigned daily chats, but that can be personal, lab or library or classroom computers.

Students report that the Global Understanding course is valuable, meaningful, and useful, and they like the personal interaction with foreign students. The course is cost-effective to the administration and to students in both time and monetary cost. It enhances cultural understanding among peers from different cultures, and provides the opportunity for them to develop a sense of trust and friendship. It also opens their minds to the rest of the world and arouses a desire to go and see the world. Several have gone abroad as a result of having taken this course.

The purpose of this study is to gain insight into the role that foreign universities play in developing professionalism and work ethic in their students as compared to U.S. universities. Would the academic engagement behaviors in the Duncan et al. [2] study be perceived as important for academic success by students from other countries/cultures? If the behaviors are perceived as being important for academic success, would the same pattern of disconnect be seen between rating them high and then failing to actively engage in the behaviors in a consistently manner (actual vs. intent disconnect)? In addition, would the pattern of being more likely to engage in behaviors that are observable by an instructor as opposed to the behaviors that are not observable extend to students from other countries and cultures?

METHOD

A survey, shown in Table 1, was developed. It followed the format of a Needs Assessment [8] and consisted of 10 standard questions across all courses. The questions were chosen based on their ability to predict college students' cumulative GPA at time of graduation (Hall, Smith, & Chia [4 and 5]). The questions included in the survey address tasks that a student may choose to engage in to help ensure academic success. The survey included behaviors that were directly observable by the instructor (i.e., attending class) as well as those

that were not directly observable (i.e., reading material prior to class). For the purposes of this study the survey was referred to as Actual vs. Intent Survey (AIS). Students responded to the 10 questions on the AIS survey under two conditions: 1) actual engagement (to what extent they actually engaged in each of the 10 pro-academic behaviors); and 2) intended engagement (to what they perceived they should be engaging in the pro-academic behaviors to be academically successful).

Seventy-five college students participated in the study. Twenty-six students were from Asia (22 China, 2 South Korea, and 2 Taiwan) and 49 students from the U. S. It should be noted that ten additional surveys were completed but not utilized in the study due to too few subjects from any one country or region. These surveys included students from Germany, Turkey, Latvia and India.

WHAT YOU ARE DOING AND WHAT SHOULD YOU BE DOING FOR CLASS

Please rate what you are doing for this course in the first response column and then indicate what you think you should be doing to succeed in this class in the second column. Use the following rating scale:

5	4	3	2	1
always true	almost always true	somewhat true	somewhat not true	not true

	What I am doing	What I should do
1. I attend class regularly.		
2. I meet class deadlines.		
3. I talk to my professor if I experience difficulties in class.		
4. I read assignments before class.		
5. I review lecture materials after class.		
6. I complete assignments before exams.		
7. I set up specific study times and stick to them.		
8. I study in advance for exams (not cramming shortly before).		
9. I restate reading/lecture materials in my own words to help insure understanding of material.		
10. I look for how material in my class applies to my major.		

Table 1
Actual vs. Intent Survey (AIS)

Of the 49 participants from the U. S., 17 were men and 32 were women with a mean age of 19.82 years and a range of 18-32. Of the 26 participants from Asia, 10 were men and 16 were women with a mean age of 21.46 years and a range of 18-26.

The surveys were presented to students in the global classroom, and they were asked to respond to the AIS forms by completing them on the web. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, and the decision to participate or not participate in no way impacted students' class standing.

RESULTS

A mixed model ANOVA was performed with country (United States and Asia) as the between-subject factor and pro-academic behaviors (actual vs. intented) as the within-subject factor. There was a significant interaction effect for US vs. Asia and the AIS scores. Both groups indicated a significant disconnect between self-report of pro-academic behaviors regarding what they were actually doing versus what they felt they should be doing. While this was seen in both groups, the disconnect was more pronounced for the U.S. students.

Follow-up analyses did not indicate a significant effect between the US and Asian students on the ratings for actual engagement in pro-academic behavior but there was a significant difference for the intended engagement in pro-academic behaviors, $F(1,82) = 0.63$, $p = .43$ and $F(1,82) = 5.79$, $p = .02$, respectively.

	df	MS	F	p	η^2
Between					
US vs. Asia	1	12.17	0..30	.59	.08
Error	73	40.63			
Within					
Actual-Intent	1	3566.71	205.74	<.01*	.71
Actual-Intent by US vs Asia	1	113.06	6.52	<.01*	.08
Error	73	16.36			

* significant at .01 or greater

Table 2
ANOVA for U. S. and Asian Actual-Intent

While students in both groups reported lower levels of actual engagement in pro-academic behaviors in comparison to intended engagement in pro-academic behaviors, the students from Asia rated the intended behaviors at a lower level than their US counterparts. Means and standard deviations are presented in Table 3.

In order to determine if statistically significant differences existed between student engagement in behaviors that were either observable or non-observable by instructors, the responses to questions 1 and 2 were averaged together to yield a measure of observable academic behaviors. The responses to questions 4, 5, 7, 8 and 9 were then averaged together to yield a measure of unobservable academic behaviors. A mixed model ANOVA was conducted with US vs. Asia as the between subject factor and mean scores on observable vs. unobservable factors as the within-subject factor. Results yielded a

	Actual	Intent	Observable	Unobservable
US (n = 49)				
Mean	34.47	47.20	4.42	2.97
Standard Deviation	5.95	2.87	0.62	0.82
Asia (n = 26)				
Mean	36.69	44.88	3.94	3.43
Standard Deviation	6.24	5.41	0.86	0.72

Table 3
Descriptive Statistic of Survey Results

significant interaction for country and students' self-reported observable vs. unobservable behaviors was found, as shown in Table 4.

	df	MS	F	p	η^2
Between					
US vs. Asia	1	0.05	0.01	.94	<.01
Error	73	0.79			
Within					
Observe vs. non-observe	1	32.31	93.43	<.01*	.56
Observe vs. non- observe by US vs. Asia	1	7.30	21.12	<.01*	.22
Error	73	0.35			

* significant at .01 or greater

Table 4
ANOVA of U. S. and Asian behaviors Observable vs. Non-Observable

Follow-up analyses found the difference was specific to students from the U.S. where a significant decline was reported for those pro-academic behaviors that were not observable by their instructors. Students from Asia also showed a decline from observable to non-observable pro-academic behaviors, but this difference did not reach significance. Results indicated that both groups reported higher engagement in academic behaviors that were observable by the instructor, but only with the students from the US did this disconnect reach significance.

DISCUSSION

Results indicated that students from the U.S. and Asia are aware of pro-academic behaviors that lead to academic success. They were also very much aware that their actual behaviors did not conform to standards they felt were appropriate for academic success. They displayed discrepancy recognition and acknowledged that they did not perform to standard. This led to a breakdown in the process of self-regulation as noted by Karoly [7]. Interestingly, students from Asia did not rate intended pro-academic behaviors as high as their counterparts from the U.S. Because of this lower rating on should behaviors, Asian students displayed a lower level of disconnect between actual vs. intended engagement in behaviors leading to academic success. It may well be that Asian students were somewhat more realistic in behaviors they should be engaging in as students. This was supported in that U.S. students rated the should behaviors at maximum level for all areas but the Asian students, while rating all behaviors high under should category, were more discriminating in their responses..

One of the most interesting finding from the study was the difference between US and Asian students with respect to observable vs. non-observable behaviors. When responses were analyzed based on actual engagement in observable vs. non-observable pro-academic behaviors, significant differences between U.S. and Asian students were found. The U.S. students were significantly more likely to engage in those behaviors that could be directly scrutinized than those behaviors that were not possible to observe. There were no significant differences in reported engagement between observable vs. non-observable pro-academic behaviors for students from Asia. Students from Asia were equally as likely to engage in both observable and unobservable behaviors. Duncan et al. [2] found students from the U.S. accomplished the work for those professors who held them accountable and avoided work if they felt professors would not check to ensure the work was done. Behaviors that can be directly observed by the instructor may provide the extrinsic motivation necessary for many U.S. students to meet standards of performance (Guay, Valleran, & Blanchard [3]).

While there may be many reasons for these interesting country differences, two come to mind. Since most of our Asian students are from Chinese origin, one explanation is related to the deep rooted Chinese value in education. Chinese are taught to treat academics more seriously since for the longest time education is the only route out of poverty and the only means for upward mobility. This same attitude is also reflected in Korean and Taiwanese culture. A second explanation has to do with the current system of a national examination at every stage in the Chinese educational ladder, from junior high to senior high to college. While a student can potentially get away with successfully "negotiating" with a teacher all the way through college in the U.S., Chinese students cannot profit from negotiations with their teachers because they have to depend totally on their own knowledge and skills to do well on national examinations. This may be in part why Asian student present more balance between observable and non-observable pro-academic behaviors. The course grade in-and-of itself in China has no value to passing a national exam; the knowledge base of the student is what holds value.

Certain limitations of the current study need to be noted. Students participating in the study were all taking a class via the global classroom and generalizations beyond this group need to be made with caution. This study may have reflected a select group of students in that the students were motivated to take a course based on opportunities to interact with students from other countries, and also the Asian students were proficient in English suggesting highly motivated students. Also due to low number of responses from non-Asian regions/countries, it was only possible to compare students in the U.S, and Asia. Future research needs to focus on obtaining adequate numbers of students from multiple countries/regions. While it can be argued that students from China, Taiwan and South Korea do represent Asian students and there are similarities among these countries, there are cultural and political differences as well.

Recognizing the above limitations, it is important to stress that both U.S. and Asian students understood and acknowledged those behaviors that lead to academic success even though they did not always engage in those same behaviors at a level they felt

they should. The ramifications of this finding is important in that higher education institutions, like their business and industry counterparts, often adopt a training model to teach the behaviors necessary to meet performance standards. What we are finding is supportive of the research by Swart and Duncan [10] and Swart et al. [9]. It is not a matter of students being unaware of performance standards, it is a matter of students actually conforming their behaviors to meet performance standards.

Further research is warranted with students from other countries in addition to the U.S. and Asia. It would also be interesting to look at students who chose to take courses through distance education (DE) options. Since the behaviors are non-observable to very large degree within this framework, would there continue to be a wide discrepancy between actual vs. intented behaviors, or are these students more self-regulated in their pro-academic behaviors?

There are numerous implications from this study and the role higher education plays in preparing the future workforce. As noted by Casner-Lotto and Barrington [1] the incoming workforce is not perceived as being prepared by business and industry, and they cite numerous examples. They also noted that many businesses are choosing to reduce their hires due to the lack of skills in numerous areas, and many of the deficiencies are also finding their way into higher education. We have chosen not to focus on various reasons why students may choose not engage in pro-academic behaviors (i.e., students working a job, social issues), but instead we have chosen to focus on the specific behaviors themselves. This brings up interesting possibilities as to how higher education may be encouraging this lack of self-regulation. Perhaps in our attempts to meet the demands of the student-consumer, we are failing at meeting the demands of business and industry who are consumers of our student-product. As noted by Casner-Lotto and Barrington [1] there is little doubt that improvements are needed if we expect to continue to be competitive in the global workforce.

As indicated earlier, certain cultural factors and cultural expectations may also play a role in academic self-regulation. The U.S. students appear to be influenced more by external factors (e.g. complying with those behaviors that were directly observable by their instructor) than their Asian counterparts. If students continue such behavior after they graduate and join the workforce, then intriguing questions arise regarding the appropriate management style(s) to be implemented when the workforce is dominated by U. S. workers versus Asian workers.

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