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Planning a Sino-British Collaborative Workshop: Negotiating Preferences and Achieving Synergy

Helen Spencer-Oatey

1 Introduction

Project teams are frequently globally dispersed, but as Maznevski and Chudoba (2000) report, effective teams develop a rhythm of regular face-to-face sessions. During those face-to-face sessions, time is at a premium and it is vital for project members to maximize the benefits of being together. However, different members may have different priorities for such events, and some elements may even be out of their control. Stakeholders may have certain expectations or demands, and there can be practical constraints such as budget limitations. All of these factors require effective management if the face-to-face event is to achieve everyone's goals and aspirations. This authentic case study examines the experiences of British and Chinese collaborators as they attempted to plan a workshop at a distance.

2 Case description

Oh dear me", "nightmare", "hijacked"! These are some of the reactions from British staff when trying to negotiate the agenda for a three-day workshop in Beijing, China. What were the problems they were experiencing and why was such a "simple event" so difficult to agree on and arrange? This case study explores these issues.

Background to the joint workshop The joint workshop in this case study was a component of the Sino-UK e-Learning (eChina-UK) Programme, which was a national-level collaborative e-learning initiative, established in the UK by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and in China by the Chinese Ministry of Education (MoE). It ran from 2002 to 2009 and comprised a number of teacher training projects in which staff from British and Chinese universities worked together to develop e-learning courseware. HEFCE and the MoE hoped that, as the academics worked together on various specific tasks, the partnerships would yield a range of insights of benefit to both countries, including insights into collaborating across cultures. In fact, the project members faced a complex, interacting set of challenges and the difficulties they experienced in arranging this workshop illustrate just one of them.

The projects associated with this case study workshop are shown in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1 The projects and partnerships of the initial phase of the *eChina–UK Programme*

Topic Area		Project Name	Partner Universities	
			Chinese	British
Generic approaches and methods: teaching methodology, educational psychology and educational technology		DEfT (Developing e-Learning for Teachers) Project	Beijing Normal University (BNU)	World Universities Network. Lead = University of Manchester. Supporting = Universities of Sheffield, Southampton and Bristol
Teaching English as a Foreign Language	Secondary level	Secondary eELT (e-English Language Teaching)	Beijing Normal University (BNU)	University of Nottingham
	Tertiary level	Tertiary eELT (e-English Language Teaching)	Beijing Foreign Studies University (BFSU)	University of Nottingham
English language for Chinese university lecturers		CUTE (Chinese University Teachers of English)	Tsinghua University	Lead = University of Cambridge Supporting = Open University.

HEFCE appointed a programme manager, Marie,¹ to manage all of the projects on behalf of the UK. There was no exact counterpart programme manager in China; instead there were two programme officers in two different sections of the MoE who handled strategic matters, and a programme administrative officer in one of the Chinese partner universities (Beijing Normal University). Each project within the eChina–UK Programme had a British project manager and a Chinese project manager, and three out of the four projects also had project directors in both the UK and China. The number of project members within each British and Chinese partner university ranged from about 10 to 35, and there were also a number of associates. The total number of people working on the eChina–UK projects came to over 100, not counting the stakeholders (HEFCE and MoE staff) and steering committee members.

At the beginning of phase one of the eChina-UK Programme, a workshop was held in the UK so that the staff from the various projects could meet together to share ideas and discuss progress, both within the projects and over the programme as a whole. The workshop went very smoothly and it was agreed that it

¹ All personal names have been changed and department/section names in organizations anonymized.

would be good to hold a second one and that it should be located in Beijing.² This second workshop was to take place near the end of the first phase of the programme, when both British and Chinese project members had become familiar with working together and had travelled frequently to each other's locations. However, since there was to be a second phase to the collaboration, one of the main aims of the workshop was for the different project teams to learn from each other so that learning from phase one could be of benefit to phase two.

Planning the joint workshop In September 2004, one of the Chinese project directors who had good relations with the Chinese MoE proposed that the workshop take place at his university in March 2005. This was provisionally agreed upon and all the project teams started thinking about what they wanted to achieve through it. In early December 2004, HEFCE informed Marie, the British programme manager, that they and MoE representatives would like to attend Day One of the workshop and that the content and focus of that day should be oriented towards senior policy people. This was a surprise to Marie, and she commented as follows to one of the Chinese project managers:

This will require a bit of rethinking as to how to organize the workshop. I'll discuss with the UK side next Wednesday, but we will then need quite a lot of liaison with you.

Email from Marie to one of the Chinese project managers, 10 December 2004

Marie received no further news during December, and so in early January she arranged a meeting with the British project managers to draft a provisional agenda. She then sent it to the MoE, commenting as follows: "These are the thoughts of the UK team members, but we would be pleased to have your feedback and suggestions for improvement" (Email, dated 12 January 2005). The draft agenda is shown in Table 3.2.

Table 3.2 Initial draft agenda proposed by British staff

Day One: ICT Policy and Practice		
(Day One to be attended by British and Chinese Policy Makers)		
09.45	Welcome	Chinese representative
09.50	Introduction	[Name], Senior member of Dept B, HEFCE
10.00	Project Reports	
	Introduction	Marie, British Programme Manager
	Tertiary eELT Project: BFSU and U of Nottingham	Chinese representative
	Secondary eELT Project: BNU and U of Nottingham	UK representative
11.00	Break	
11.15	DEft Project: BNU and WUN	Chinese representative
	CUTE Project: Tsinghua U and U of Cambridge	UK representative
12.15	Lunch	
14:00	Disseminating Good Practice	
	Plans for dissemination	Marie, British Programme Manager
	Dissemination website	[Name], British project member responsible for dissemination plans in UK
14.45	International ICT Issues	
	Integrated & scalable eLanguage learning	[Name], CUTE project, British project director
	Managing learners' cognitive & affective needs	[Name], Tertiary eELT project, British project

² As can be seen from Table 3.1, all the Chinese universities were located in Beijing.

	in eLearning	director
15.25	Break	
15.40	International ICT Issues (contd.)	
	Quality assurance & eEducator training	[Name], DEFT Project, British project member
	IPR in international eLearning programmes	[Name], British project member responsible for IP issues
16.20	Response from the Stakeholders	[Name], Head of Dept A, HEFCE [Name], Head of Dept X, MoE
Day Two: Demonstration & Discussion of Project Courseware		
Demonstrations by each of the projects of extended samples of their eLearning courseware, followed by questions and discussion.		
Day Three: Research and Dissemination		
9:30	Comparing perceptions of effective environments for learning	[Name], British associate project member
10.30	International teamworking	Marie, British Programme Manager
11.00	Break	
11.15	Team discussion of dissemination themes and narratives (within projects): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • eLearning pedagogy • eLearning production processes • technical design and integration 	
12.45	Lunch	
14.00	Cross-team group discussions of dissemination themes & narratives	
15.00	Plenary discussion of dissemination themes & narratives	
16.00	Close of workshop	

In mid-January, even though the workshop was only about two months away, none of the Chinese project staff members had been told anything about it by the MoE. British project members were pressing Marie for confirmation that the workshop was going ahead, as they wanted to book their plane tickets. Marie, meanwhile, had many practical questions for the Chinese side, such as what the policy people attending on Day One would most likely be interested in; how long they would probably stay; whether the talks would need interpreting; who would be attending from the Chinese project teams, and so on. However, she could not get an answer from them on any of these points. The Chinese project partners were equally concerned. One emailed Marie in early January saying “We are still waiting for detailed information from the MoE about the March workshop (the organizer, the funding, etc.). I hope that they don't come at the last minute.” So, on 14 January, Marie commented in an email to two HEFCE staff that she had a “very deep unease about the whole situation”.

On 21 January there was a slight breakthrough: the Chinese project partners emailed to say that they had been officially informed about the workshop and that a meeting had been planned for the following week, when they would discuss and agree an agenda. Marie then emailed the MoE to explain the British project members’ aspirations:

It's very important that we have a major “working workshop” for the “team workers” (Days 2 & 3), so that we can draw out the important insights and lessons from the collaborative programme. We therefore need to make sure that appropriate people from the Chinese projects are present on Days 2 & 3. I have asked the UK teams to liaise with their partners on this, and I will send you further information when I receive it.

Email from Marie to MoE, 25 January 2005

For budget reasons, only about 20 British project members could fly to Beijing for the workshop, and Marie was concerned that the Chinese partners would (be obliged to) send figureheads to the workshop, rather than the grassroots people who had been working with the British staff on their collaborative projects. So, on 27 January, she reiterated this in an email to a Chinese colleague on one of the projects saying, “One of the main purposes of the workshop (from the UK team’s perspective) is to discuss and share things together, so it’s very important that a sufficient number of Chinese team members attend.”

Meanwhile, Marie had not yet had any feedback on the draft programme and she was becoming increasingly concerned that time was getting very tight. People needed to prepare their talks, and since the slides needed to have some Chinese translation included this could not be left to the last minute. On 31 January she received an email from the MoE as follows:

We from our side are dedicated to make this workshop a very successful and interactive one. As you have already noticed, we have entrusted [Chinese name] from [name of Chinese university] to liaise on behalf of us. You may contact her for details of the workshop arrangements.

Email from MoE to Marie, 31 January 2005

At the end of that same week, 4 February, Marie received the “tentative program/agenda” prepared by the Chinese side – see Table 3.3.

Table 3.3 Revised draft agenda prepared by the Chinese side

Day One: ICT Policy and Practice (Day One to be attended by British and Chinese Policy Makers)		
09.00	Opening Ceremony Host introduces honoured participants and guests	Host – to be decided
09.10	Address	Manager, Dept. X, MoE
09.20	Address	HEFCE Senior representative
09.30	Address	[Name], MoE Dept Y, Assistant Director
09.40	Sino–UK Project summary by the person in charge of the China side of the project	[Name], Head of Dept X, MoE
10.10	Tea break	
10.30	Sino–UK Project summary by the person in charge of the UK side of the project	Marie, British programme manager
11.00	Reports on various projects (Key contents of the reports: progress and summary of the projects; Innovation of the projects)	Host – to be decided
11.00	A Few Thoughts regarding the Cooperation between Beijing Normal University and the University of Manchester for the development of ELT Online Resources	[Name], Chinese sub-project leader, DEfT project
12.00	Lunch	
14.00	The Beijing Foreign Studies University – University of Nottingham Cooperation	[Name], Chinese project member, Tertiary eELT project
14.30	The Tsinghua University – University of Cambridge Cooperation. The Mode, Research, Development and Application of Online Learning – Cambridge-Tsinghua Collaboration on Chinese University Teacher Training in English-CUTE	

15.00	Tea break	
15.20	The Beijing Normal University – University of Nottingham Cooperation	[Name], Chinese project director, Secondary eELT project
15.50	Open discussion: communication of achievements and experiences between project groups	
16.50	Response from the Stakeholders: Chinese representation	[Name], Head of Dept X, MoE
17.00	Response from the Stakeholders: UK representation	[Name], Head of Dept A, HEFCE
17.15	Dinner	
19.00	Entertainment/party	
Day Two: Discussion of Academic Issues		
09.00	Relevant Policies for the Development of Distance Education in China	[Name], Head of Dept X, MoE
09.20	Discussion theme 1: Resource Development	
09.20	UK Representation: Applying Social Constructionist Principles to the Design of eLearning Materials	[Name], British sub-project leader, DEFT project
10.00	Chinese Representation: Instructional Design for Blended Mode of Learning	[Name], Chinese project director, DEFT project
10.40	Tea break	
11.00	Chinese Representation: Anatomizing VLE Learning	[Name], Chinese project director, Tertiary eELT project
11.40	Lunch	
13.00	Visit to the Summer Palace	
19.00	Dinner	
Day Three: Discussion of Academic Issues, Publication of Results		
09.00	Discussion Theme 2: Intellectual Property in ICT	
09.00	UK representation	[Name], British associate project member responsible for IP issues
09.40	Chinese representation	Representative from the State Intellectual Property Office of China
10.20	Tea break	
10:40	Discussion Theme 3: Reports on 'Research' Issues	
10.40	UK Representation	
	Comparing Perceptions of Effective Environments for Learning	[Name], British associate project member
	Integrated and scalable eLanguage learning	[Name], British project director, CUTE project
	Managing Learners' Cognitive & Affective Needs in eLearning	[Name], British project director, Tertiary eELT project
11.40	Lunch	
13.30	Chinese Representation	
	A Comparison of Decision Making in Educational Innovation in China and the UK— A Case Study of SCORM Application	[Name], Chinese project member
	Presentation by BFSU	
	Frame of Research Development in the Sino-UK Project	[Name], Chinese steering committee member
14.30	Discussion Theme 4: Publication of Results	
	UK Representation	[Name], British project member, re-

		sponsible for leading dissemination plans in UK
15.10	Tea break	
15.30	Discussion Theme 5: Post-Project Development	
16.30	Summary Speech by Chinese and UK Representatives	
16.30	Chinese Representation	
16.40	UK Representation	
16.50	Close of the workshop	
17.10	Dinner	
18.30	Depart for the Lao She Tea House	
19.50	Show starts	
21.20	Show ends	
22:00	Back in the hotel	

Marie immediately shared the revised programme with the British project members. Everyone was greatly dismayed, as the following comments illustrate:

It has changed very considerably from our version and is turning into the nightmare I was dreading.

Marie, 4 February 2005

There are clearly some problems with this [...] draft.

HEFCE staff member, 4 February 2005

Talk about winds of change. [...] what are the degrees of freedom here, if any?

British project member, 4 February 2005

Oh dear me ... No idea what to suggest.

British project member, 4 February 2005

I can imagine you must be feeling a little put-out by this, Marie! My first reaction is that the timetable barely resembles what we collectively discussed at our meeting. [...] Overall, my first impression is that our programme has been “hijacked”!!! A “little” disappointing – but maybe we can still influence it.

British project member, 7 February 2005

3 Background knowledge

3.1 The author’s point of reference

Helen Spencer-Oatey, am a university professor who researches, teaches and supervises in the area of intercultural communication. My interest grew out of many years of living and working in Hong Kong and Shanghai, during which time I became fascinated by the subtle (and not so subtle) differences in styles of interaction displayed by foreign and local teachers. My academic degrees are in both psychology

and applied linguistics and this multidisciplinary background strongly influences my approach to intercultural interaction in that I favour an interdisciplinary perspective.

All analyses of intercultural interaction require some kind of conceptualization of culture and for me, a multi-layered perspective is particularly helpful. A framework that I use frequently in my teaching can be summarized as the 3Ps: Products, Practices and Perspectives (cf. Moran 2001). *Products*: these are the “concrete” or “codified” aspects of culture, which in this case study comprise (inter alia) the workshop agenda and the venue in which it takes place. *Practices*: these are patterns of behaviour that we display, or desire, and that influence cultural products such as agendas and venue design. They include our patterns of speaking and preferences for styles of interaction, and typically reflect the rules, conventions and norms of the social group in which we are interacting. *Perspectives*: these are the deep-seated and often unconscious attitudes, values and beliefs that we hold about life, such as respect for elders, the need for modesty, and the importance of independence and self-sufficiency. They influence our practices, but often without our awareness. There are many different perspectives and almost infinite numbers of practices; key ones for this case study are explained below. You may be able to identify additional ones.

3.2 Concepts, models, frameworks

3.2.1 The perspectives of high/low power distance and their impact

A large number of researchers (e.g. Hofstede 1991; Schwartz 1999; House et al. 2004) have found that people’s attitudes to power differ significantly across cultural groups. Some are supportive of hierarchical differences and feel comfortable with it; others believe in greater egalitarianism and prefer to downplay any status differences. This perspective, or value, is particularly relevant to this case study, most notably in its influence on practices. For example, with respect to the planning of a collaborative workshop, it can influence who is invited to attend, the status of people giving presentations, how many people speak, and so on.

3.2.2 The perspectives of task and relationship orientation and their impact

Some researchers (e.g. Adler 2007; Schneider & Barsoux 2002) have argued that in international business/management contexts, the relative importance that people attach to task achievement compared with relationship development/management can vary across cultural groups. Some people are very task oriented and place goal achievement as their top priority. Others are much more relationship oriented, and want to dedicate adequate time to developing, maintaining and building relationships. This perspective, or value, is highly relevant to this case study, and again influences practices. Since it affects people’s priorities for social activities compared with task goals, it influences, for example, their preferences for the scheduling of different types of events.

3.2.3 The perspectives of learning as knowledge transfer and learning as co-constructed, and their impact

Some researchers (e.g. Jin and Cortazzi 1998; Watkins & Biggs 1996) have pointed out that people’s beliefs about the best ways to learn can vary considerably across cultural groups. Some people believe that highest priority should be given to the clear and explicit transfer of knowledge, while others believe that this does not lead to deep, motivated learning and for that to occur, people must engage in interaction with others. They believe that this results in the co-construction of learning, in that the outcome is great-

er than the separate contributions. These beliefs naturally influence practices in terms of the “events”, such as presentations and discussion groups, that are organized for learning.

3.3 Recommended reading

Bowe, H. & Martin, K. (2007). *Communication across Cultures. Mutual Understanding in a Global World*. Cambridge: CUP.

This book provides an introductory linguistic perspective on communication across cultures and is intended for interdisciplinary readers. It examines the different ways in which the spoken and written word may be interpreted, depending on the context and expectations of the participants. It has many examples from a variety of languages and cultures – from Japan to Germany, from the Americas to Africa, and to Australia. It uses key concepts of linguistic pragmatics, discourse analysis, politeness theory and intercultural communication to analyse the examples.

<http://www.cambridge.org/us/academic/subjects/languages-linguistics/sociolinguistics/communication-across-cultures-mutual-understanding-global-world>

Spencer-Oatey, H. (Ed.) (2008). *Culturally Speaking. Culture, Communication and Politeness Theory*. London: Continuum.

This book offers a comprehensive introduction to cross-cultural and intercultural pragmatics. It includes both theoretical and empirical chapters. The former explore key issues in culture and communication and the latter report comparative and interactional studies of speakers of a variety of languages, including German, Greek, Japanese and Chinese. The final section of the book comprises practical chapters on pragmatics research, recording and analysing data, and projects in intercultural pragmatics.

<http://www.bloomsbury.com/uk/culturally-speaking-second-edition-9780826493101/#sthash.LqIXzyKQ.dpuf>

Spencer-Oatey, H. (2012). “What is culture? A compilation of quotations”. In: *GlobalPAD Core Concepts*. Available at GlobalPAD Open House

This is a collection of quotations on culture, organized by sub-topic and incorporating perspectives from a wide variety of authors.

<http://www.warwick.ac.uk/globalpadintercultural/>

Spencer-Oatey, H. & Franklin, P. (2009). *Intercultural Interaction. A Multidisciplinary Approach to Intercultural Communication*. London: Palgrave.

This book “provides rapid and authoritative access to current ideas and practice in intercultural communication. Drawing on concepts and findings from a range of different disciplines and using authentic examples of intercultural interaction to illustrate points, it offers a wealth of insights into the process. Part 1 explores conceptual issues: the nature of culture and intercultural interaction competence; the impact of language and culture on understanding, rapport and impression management; cultural and adaptation processes. Part 2 deals with practical applications: how competence in intercultural interaction can be assessed and developed. Part 3 focuses on research: topic areas that can be investigated and methods and approaches for doing so. Part 4 provides a rich list of resources for further study.”

http://www.palgrave.com/page/detail/?sf1=id_product&st1=275014

Spencer-Oatey, H. & Tang, M. (2007). “Managing collaborative processes in international projects: Programme management perspectives”. In: Spencer-Oatey, H. (Ed.), *e-Learning Initiatives in China: Pedagogy, Policy and Culture*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 159–173.

This chapter provides further insights into the collaboration experiences of the eChina–UK teams who are the focus of this chapter’s case study.

<http://hongkong.universitypressscholarship.com/view/10.5790/hongkong/9789622098671.001.0001/upso-9789622098671>

Ting-Toomey, S. (1999). *Communicating Across Cultures*. New York: Guilford Press.

This book takes a human communication disciplinary perspective. It “presents an identity-based framework for understanding the impact of culture on communication and for helping students develop mindful intercultural communication skills. With illustrative examples from around the globe, the book shows that communicating involves much more than transmitting a particular message – it also reflects each participant’s self-image, group identifications and values, and network and relational needs.”

<http://www.guilford.com/books/Communicating-Across-Cultures/Stella-Ting-Toomey/9781572304451>

4 Questions on the case

Consider the description of the 3Ps above, in particular the perspectives mentioned, and compare Tables 3.2 and 3.3. Then reflect on the following questions:

- 4.1 Why were the British members upset when they received the Chinese version of the programme draft? What elements of the programme had been changed? Which aspects of the revised programme were likely to be problematic for them, and why? The table below may help you to structure your insights.

Issue	Product/Practice	Perspective
a) Who takes an active part?		
b) What is the nature of the interaction in the workshop?		
c) Should there be a free-time activity?		

- 4.2 Why do you think the Chinese members revised the programme in this way? What might have been problematic for them in the British initial draft, and why? What do you think they were trying to achieve in their revised version? The table below may help you to structure your insights.

Issue	Product/Practice	Perspective
a) Who takes an active part?		
b) What is the nature of the interaction in the workshop?		
c) Should there be a free-time activity?		

- 4.3 What do you think the final programme looked like? How could both the British and Chinese aspirations for the workshop best be achieved? Please make a suggestion by drawing up an alternative programme.

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