ANALYSING CULTURAL PROBLEMS IN INTERNATIONAL PROJECTS

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With the fast development of globalisation, more and more construction projects involve participants from different countries or different cultural backgrounds. This challenges previous approaches and is creating a new context for the industry. Besides the obvious language barrier, people from different cultural backgrounds may also have different faiths, assumptions and behaviour norms which can and do cause conflicts. As part of a wider project to establish how practitioners can work more effectively in cross cultural situations, this paper describes the authors' recent experience of working with a Chinese partner on a master planning project, and discusses some of the issues arising from the multicultural project environment. The analysis uses personal construct theory to interpret many of the problems in perception and communications and also to reveal the problem of emotion. It concludes that to work effectively in such a situation, we need to work with our personal constructs and pay more attention to informal communications.

Keywords: cross cultural environment, international project, personal constructs, communication.

INTRODUCTION

We are at a time in which globalisation is part of our daily life. Construction is no exception. It is very common that construction projects involve participants from different countries, but even the expectations of design, efficiency and management are more and more being set globally. All this is set within a pervasive internationalisation around attitudes to culture, the environment, legislation and the financial world. Even for the domestic projects, there still exist the cross-cultural issues. French and Flemish Belgians; Francophone and Anglophone Canadians; Ibo, Hausa and Yoruba Nigerians; Chinese, Malay, and Indians in Malaysia and the 16 government-recognised cultural and linguistic groups in India are just a few noticeable examples around the world (Limaye and Victor, 1995). In the UK, due to the immigration after the World War II and the surge of guest workers since the recent enlargement of EU, many of the professional and trade resources are provided by people from other cultural backgrounds, which challenges previous approaches and is creating a new context for the industry. For example, CITB-ConstructionSkills estimates that 20% of the construction workforce in London and the South East do not use English as their first language (Schellekens and Smith, 2004).

It is generally understood that people from different cultures have different views on the world and hold different assumptions about life and work, so they behave

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differently (Hoecklin, 1994; Harris *et al.*, 2004). For example, in Western cultures, time is linear and therefore all the tasks have to be fragmented into units and scheduled into predetermined time frames. But in Hindu and Buddhist countries as well as in many agricultural societies, time is regarded as a renewable resource and is not considered subject to waste (Limaye and Victor, 1995). Gift giving and hospitality are generally not part of doing business in the UK, but they are an essential business custom in Korea (Kang *et al.*, 2006). These differences in value, attitude, perception, and behaviour norms affect people working in a cross-cultural environment but conflicts occur due to misreading and misinterpreting the signs and symbols of other cultures. It is difficult to prepare for cross-cultural working situations as a lot of problems are very contextual and a solution to one particular problem may not be readily applied to another situation. Most of the cultural knowledge is not formally referenced, indexed, and filed; rather, it is diffusely distributed within people and society (Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars, 2000).

With the increasing internationalisation of construction projects, some organisations have noticed the problems originating from the cross-cultural working environment and started to take actions. For example, to break down the language barriers, some construction companies employ full-time professional interpreters and bilingual managers to support the foreign workers (Schellekens and Smith, 2004), provide induction training and health and safety leaflets in different languages, and form working groups/gangs with people from the same countries whenever possible. No doubt, these measures can ease the immediate difficulties. But language is only one of the obvious barriers in any cross-cultural project environment, and there are some deeper and more complicated cultural issues to be tackled.

The overall project, within which this paper sits, aims to improve the practice of managing multi-cultural teams. In order to explore concepts of cross-cultural working which are useful in practice, this paper analyses a case study in which the authors were directly involved as such it also explores a methodological problem of accessing information about the subject. Through the case study we will reflect on how projects are initiated and how they progress. The paper uses personal construct theory and theories of communications to explain the rich and volatile situations that exist before and can develop during cross-cultural engagements. In particular, the study will draw out the emotional elements of cross-cultural working as this aspect seems to be universally neglected in theoretical analyses. It concludes that to work effectively in such a situation, we need to adjust our personal constructs and pay more attention to the emotions in a situation enabling the presentation of an open mind and the establishment and maintenance of trust with our partners through explicit communication.

METHODOLOGY

As has been discussed in a previous paper (Xiao and Boyd, 2007), the study of cultural differences is problematic and requires exploration of methodology and approaches to accessing data. The wider project also involves the further methodological challenge of trying to help practitioners work better in cross-cultural situations. This compounds the problem of method as thinking about action is different from thinking to create academic output (Boyd, 2007; Swarnidhapthi and Boyd, 2008).

The authors are the participants in this research as both subjects and researchers although there are others involved who do not have a voice. They are also the research

instrument and the research analysis is created by a dialogue between the researchers. Thus this paper uses the notions of action research and experiential research (Winter, 1989) for taking this research forward but this requires the reflection and theorising on the bias of the participants. The cultural differences between the researchers is a critical aspect of this as these differences expose not only different issues but also issues that are important for tackling the problems from these perspectives. The participation in the data gathering clearly is not value free but can be value reflective. However, it does enable a clearer and more direct expression of the emotional side of cross-cultural work which is most often omitted in other research enquiries. The ability to be open and honest in the dialogue between cultures requires trust and respect that each is trying to move the problem forward. In this we have to acknowledge (and so must all cross-cultural researchers and practitioners) that the problem may be ourselves.

The usefulness and validation of this approach may not be generalisable but it is anticipated that the outputs will be used with practitioners in their own struggle to perform the task that the authors have undertaken hence to help them to find their own approaches to tackling the problems of cross-cultural projects. The role of theory is then of a tool to enquire into the world rather than as a demonstration of the actual operation of the world. The notion of different lenses through which we can appreciate different aspects of a situation is important; it also may enable different people with different needs to explore different situations.

A CASE OF INTERNATIONAL PROJECT

D and H, in a recent trip to China, were involved in developing a project. A local investment and development company invited our school to work with them on the master planning of a district of Shanghai because of already established links with an associated educational enterprise.

The president (C) of the development company arranged a chauffeur to take us to the Head Quarters of the company, which is a 29 storey multi-functional building situated in one of the city's the business districts. After welcoming us in his impressive office on the 18th floor, we had ceremonial photos taken. His staff introduced the company and then showed us lots of slides of the development. However, we discovered after about an hour that this was not the development that they were wanting us to work on but one that they had already masterminded and planned for a 'Creative Industry Town' near the site of Expo 2010. They then rapidly presented the information about the district that they would like our involvement in indicating the need for a new creative solution with iconic designs. At the end of meeting, C gave us a copy of a "secret" document (in Chinese) signed between his company and the local government about the project and asked us to keep it safe and private.

We showed our great interests in cooperation with them because we believed we had the expertise in master planning and that this was a great chance to raise the profile of our university internationally. After the discussion, our host showed us around their education enterprise where there was a display of many photos of C shaking hands with different senior level VIPs. The meeting finished with a banquet in an expensive restaurant in a luxurious shopping mall.

The next morning, at our request, three staff of the company took us to the district to enable our preliminary investigation. We noticed that there was already a relatively complete infrastructure and some fairly new buildings on that land, including a

distribution centre for Unilever, and there were new projects under construction. There was also the building of the Development Agency for the district. All these seemed contradictory to the impression C gave us that we could plan the area freely. When posing the questions of how to deal with the existing buildings and projects, the staff did not provide a clear answer as if they did not understand the question.

After we came back and discussed with our planning staff, we realised that although they provided the detailed maps of the area, we were still not sure about some basic details of the project, such as the nature of the task, the source of investment, the relationship between the existing buildings and projects with the local government and the new development plan. When we asked for clarifications about these details, their chief architect's response again did not really answer our questions. With the insufficient information and very tight deadline (3 weeks), we could not produce any proper work up to our professional standard, and as a result, we decided to pull out from the cooperation and informed the company. A week later, they responded and insisted on our participation and extended the deadline for another 40 days with some more information. The process is on-going.

CROSS-CULTURE ANALYSIS

Many researchers have developed analytical frameworks to describe cross-cultural situations. Brett *et al.* (2006) identified four factors which create barriers for successful multicultural teams: direct vs. indirect communication; trouble with accents and fluency; differing attitudes toward hierarchy and authority; and conflicting norms for decision making. Hofstede (2001) also identified four factors: uncertainty avoidance, power distance, individualism vs. collectivism, and masculinity vs. feminity. Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars (1995) presented seven factors: 1) universalism vs. particularism; 2) analyzing vs. integrating; 3) individualism vs. communitarianism; 4) inner-directed vs. outer-directed orientation; 5) time as sequence vs. time as synchronization; 6) achieved status vs. ascribed status; and 7) equality vs. hierarchy. The use of these frameworks in describing events from different cultures was found problematic (Xiao and Boyd, 2007). These are all very abstract analytical categories and we believe do not immediately lend themselves to preparing people for the experience of cross-cultural working.

We believe that personal construct theory is a more suitable tool. We have used personal construct theory to analyse situations to make them useful for knowledge management (Xiao and Boyd, 2006) and to help practitioners engage with learning in the industry (Boyd and Wild, 1996). Kelly's (1955) personal construct theory focuses on individuals continually trying to understand and predict outcomes of the world which they inhabit. These constructs are our mind maps and we use them to predict and control the world around us which is essentially a course of events. As we all have different life experiences, each of us has different constructs to understand our situation and so acts on it differently. Those constructs may not always correctly represent and interpret the real world, but without them, the world appears to be such an undifferentiated homogeneity that we are unable to make any sense out of it.

The consequences of this are that people tend to see only what their constructs can explain. This is because our personal constructs are limited so we normally choose to deal with things we are familiar with first. It is our contention that individual constructs are of more limited influence in cross cultural situation because the gaps between our personal constructs about our own world and the reality are quite distant. But we continuously struggle to make our personal constructs fit this different world.

There is always a tendency to see things as if they were the same. Thus, we may feel things appear the same, but in reality, they are not!

Reconstructing personal constructs

This happened to D in this case. This was his first trip to China so a lot of things were new to him. He approached this project with great enthusiasm using his British construct that this was a tremendous opportunity. As events transpired with a presentation about another project, this optimism caused the assumption that this was the project. Only later through a lack of understanding and a struggle to make the developing construct fit the information did D realise that it was not the project. C did not show any pictures of the site, but presented it like a green field site, and it seemed completely open for us to work on. A later interpretation was that the whole way C presented was to make an impression but not to assist the development of a construct for working on this project.

Deep down, D felt something was not quite right. But in a cross-cultural situation, D was not sure if the problem lay in his existing personal constructs or the new situation itself. Only until we visited the site the next day and found that the site was not the green field as C had described, and H indicated his own unease, did D realise the confusion and misunderstanding actually was not his failure to understand the situation.

A construct formed in Britain sees developers operating at edges of legitimacy but are subject to a relatively complete systems of control and exhibit self control. This construct cannot adequately deal with China where what is legitimate is more blurred. In Britain, such regeneration projects are undertaken in a consultative manner with the many stakeholders involved plus a reference to the historic aspects of the district. In this a balance of interests is struck in order to create an acceptable and sustainable development. In a British construct, there is a strong belief that iconic design gives an area identity and can attract and sustain business, but it cannot understand a Chinese construct which would create an iconic design 'out of context' with no consultation. The local government's interests in such a development would be crucial in Britain.

In this case, the proposed project may actually benefit the local economy, the local government and people, but the problem from a British construct lies in how C is doing it. C is using (or even creating) ambiguity and gaps to make money and disregard the local situation. This could not be expressed in straight answers but provided some ambiguous explanations. H, from his Chinese constructs, suspects that by cooperating with us, C is trying to use our legitimacy to legitimise himself as evidenced by the approach and other symbols presented in the engagement.

Reading between the lines

Communication is the way we access much information to test against our personal constructs. In Western cultures, communication is typically direct, explicit and specific, while in many other cultures the true meaning is often embedded in the way the message is presented and has to be accessed through the context, nonverbal cues, and between-the-lines interpretation of what is actually said or written (Limaye and Victor, 1995; Brett *et al.*, 2006). In cross-cultural situations, communication is carried out at both formal and informal level. At a formal level, everything is done in straight communication and it is easy to understand through straight translation. The difficulty in cross-cultural communication is at the informal level. There is a deeper meaning of words and body language. In our own cultural environment, we would have developed

tactics to pick up the subtle meanings from this informal communication, or in other words, being street wise. Things are quite different and out of our control in an alien culture. Missing that vital embedded subtle information would result in misunderstanding or even conflicts through using the assumptions based on constructs from a different culture.

In this case, D had assumed everything was formal and in straight communication. Some of C's staff speak English so they could translate for C who does not speak English. At the formal level, C greeted us at his grand but structured office, and there was a photographer to capture the handshaking. At the conference room, we sat at the opposite sides of the table and the meeting was recorded and more photos were taken. Both sides expressed their interests in the project and would like to explore further cooperation beyond this project. The atmosphere was very ceremonial, formal yet warm and friendly.

But underneath this formal setting, there was also a lot of informal communication going on. For example, C's business card was an enlarged folded one with 18 affiliations. He put Professor as one of his many titles, but did not indicate for which education institutions. Business people are usually self-publicists, such as Sir Alan Sugar and Sir Richard Branson in Britain, and it is also a common practice in China but the significance of this is difficult to interpret. At the company gallery, instead of showing pictures of the projects his company has done as you would expect of an investment and property company, the two dozen or so large framed pictures are all C shaking hands with senior government officers or celebrities, even a couple of blurred ones.

C gave us the so-called 'secret' document (which turned out to be a public notice from the local government without mentioning C's company) to demonstrate his close connection to the local government, which is very important to do business in China and part of a Chinese construct but seen differently as an important support within a UK construct. C seemed to have forgotten that H has a Chinese construct and can understand the document and the background well, and is not just a translator of the formal communications but an interpreter of the whole situation. C's construct of status and role sees H as merely a translator. When asked for more information after we came back, C's chief architect responded in Chinese, even though in his email he attached a copy of his architect registration in Hong Kong (therefore from our existing personal constructs, we would expect he can speak reasonable English), together with a picture of him with a celebrity TV presenter. C's failure to provide what D needed to develop a working construct of a project in China made us hesitate to engage in the project.

D reflected on the experience later that if he had gone there by himself, he would have been carried along by their view of things as he could not have pick up those embedded subtle information and realised the problems in the cooperation. We believe that hat is very common because when we are trying to understand things by bringing our own cultural constructs into a cross-cultural situation, we come out with mistaken assumptions. This is because people from the same culture may share patterns that enable them to see the same things in the same way, understand events and behaviour, and anticipate how other people are likely to behave, which holds them together but is alien to the outsiders (Hoecklin, 1994). Active communications which explores each other's constructs is required to build a shared construct of a situation.

Wear your heart on your sleeves?

Another issue of working in cross-cultural environment is emotion, which includes such matters as the development of trust. Fineman (2003) relates a number of theories of emotion from biological determinism where they are wired into genes, through psychodynamic where they are constructed in early childhood experiences, to social construction where they borrowed from cultural and organisational norms. Personal construct theory also presents an explanation of emotions (Kelly, 1955). Emotions (anxiety, guilt, threat, fear, hostility and aggressiveness) result as people meet situations which generate inconsistencies in their construct system. Anxiety is experienced when individual's constructs do not adequately represent a situation. Guilt occurs when individual's act in a way which does not fit within their construct of themselves. Threat and fear relate to situations in which individual's constructs may be invalidated in a fundamental or peripheral way respectively. Hostility is the forced creation of a situation which allows individuals to reconfirm their constructs often as self preservation, and aggressiveness is the emotion individual's project as they actively test out and explore a situation.

Cross-cultural situations are full of emotions because the gap between a person's constructs and the situation that they are in is so large. Anxiety is often the first emotion as D and H experienced as they entered the project with no awareness of what was involved and who they were going to deal with. This induces a relief when presented with an impressive and respectful environment, and a false optimism about the opportunities of the project based on British constructs. There is an underlying guilt, however, as there are still doubts as both D and H experienced acting outside the normal construct of themselves. Failure to get confirming communications when asking for information led to hostility on H's part as he understood the situation more. This surely was not the intention of C but his construct of H and the situation failed to create the communications at a suitable level to move the situation forward. Both D and H have guilt after this situation because they did not make the project happen after saying that they would do it. This is unprofessional within a British construct and also anger at being forced into this position by C.

Emotions are endemic in a cross cultural situation and can create volatility. It is not possible to suppress emotion and so this must be dealt with more explicitly.

CONCLUSIONS

Working in a cross-cultural project environment can be problematic because, besides the obvious language barriers, people may have different ways of thinking and view the world differently. However, Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars (2000) argue that cultural differences are sometimes unnecessarily amplified, and different cultures are actually often 'mirror images of one another's values, reversals of the order and sequence of looking and learning'. Therefore, it is possible for people to understand each other and work harmoniously. To achieve this, we need to accept and appreciate the modes of thinking, values, and communication practices different from our own.

In this paper, we shared our recent experience of working with a Chinese company in a planning project. By applying the principle of action research and experiential research, we used our own different personal constructs generated from our own unique cultural backgrounds to interpret and analyse the cultural differences involved in a cross-cultural project through a series of dialogue and reflection. Although this approach inevitably brings some personal or even biased subjective judgement on

certain cultural phenomena, the candid and open discussion between us did reveal some cultural differences in the case study, from which we can find a common ground and identify the issues we need to work on to move forward.

We have learned that our personal constructs established through our own life experience within our own culture are not readily applicable in a different cultural setting, and we have to intentionally loosen them in order to effectively modify them to suit the new cultural environment. In a cross-cultural situation, communication is carried out at different levels in different forms. Although the formal communication is more direct and can be translated and so is easier to understand, in reality more communication is through the informal form and a lot of information is subtly embedded in the nonverbal communication. Different cultures also have different attitudes towards ambiguity and ignorance to that may cause unsure assumptions resulting in emotions of anxiety and anger thus unnecessary conflicts. Emotion must be recognised and dealt with explicitly. The building of trust is very important in cross-cultural cooperation but it is also very difficult to establish and maintain. It requires active attempts on both sides to develop shared constructs. It is very useful to learn some specific cultural knowledge or even the languages of your future partners, but there is a limit in this aspect. More often than not, however, it is our personal constructs that are inadequate in the new cross-cultural situations. Our existing personal constructs can help us prepare for what is most likely, but may prove unreliable in any one given case. More important, therefore, is to improve our capability to learn new things and adjust to new cultural environment. The best possible preparation is to go beyond learning specific cultural information and to 'learn how to learn' about other cultures (Hughes-Wiener, 1995).

Future research could bring in other participants involved in the cross-cultural project to see whether and how the analysis process and its results will be affected. It is hope that trust can be built and business opportunities with mutual benefits can be created and developed as a result.

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