

Media in Asia: Teaching Asian Culture within an Australian Context.

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Abstract

This article traces the pedagogical success of the unit Media in Asia taught at Edith Cowan University, Australia, since the 1990s, as the part of the Media & Cultural Studies and Mass Communications major. In unit evaluation reports since 2005 the unit has ranked higher in student satisfaction than other units in the School of Communications and Arts and the faculty. The article conveys the successful teaching strategies and student engagement with the unit, with its emphasis on the role of international students in the class to breakdown prejudices and misunderstandings concerning Asian culture. The article also traces the unit's vital role in reflecting wider Australian initiatives and University based policies on internationalisation.

Keywords: Asian media, Australia, university teaching, internationalisation

Australia's close geographical positioning within the Asian region makes it integral for a cultural understanding of its neighbours. This article explores strategies and pedagogical efforts within the unit, Media in Asia, conducted at Edith Cowan University in Perth, Western Australia to enhance and promote Asian society and culture, as part of the Mass Communications and Media and Cultural Studies course. The article will explore some of the challenges and highlights how aspects of Asian culture are transmitted through key media in Asia. In the unit themes of diversity, religion, gender, politics and 'Asian values' are explored, as well as an emphasis on comparative studies.

In the Media & Cultural Studies and Mass Communications stream at the School of Communications and Arts, Edith Cowan University (ECU), Media in Asia is a compulsory unit, with an enrolment of around 40 students per year. Whereas the other units of the undergraduate course focus specifically on broader tenets of cultural studies, such as the significance and theoretical emphasis of gender, environment, nationalism and globalization, Media in Asia encompasses all these matters, in an interdisciplinary manner with a focus on developing a critical awareness of the major issues facing contemporary Asia.

The unit also moves away from Anglo/Eurocentric course materials, and encourages student contribution. The following student comment relates to the point of the limited international outlook within the overall course structure at ECU and how the unit material has enriched cultural understanding. The student states, "I have never really learned anything about

Asian countries” before “therefore I have learned a lot of new things about Asia” in the unit (Edith Cowan University, Unit Teaching Evaluation Instrument (UTEI) report, 2008). Media in Asia became a core unit in 2006 and reflects a small shift from Edith Cowan University’s focus on internationalisation to “educating students to participate in, and contribute to, a global society” (“Internationalisation: assessment and future directions” ECU report, 2005, p. 56).

The unit was initiated in the late 1990s and is credited to Professor Brian Shoesmith whose interest and scholarly work concerns the Asian region and the media¹. He asserts that around that time there were an increasing number of students from Asia and the unit offered a forum in “speak with some authority whereas the Eurocentric model used widely in the course tended to disempower them” (Shoesmith, 2009, personal email). Despite an initial lack of School interest about the unit, Media in Asia, which reflected Shoesmith’s research-led material, has become one of the most successfully rating units in student evaluations, in both the School and Faculty.

Political Background

The introduction of the unit within the course also reflects wider Australian political initiatives to “prioritise Asian languages and studies in the education system for the potential to broaden Australia's conceptual framework about the region” (Henderson, 2003a, p. 22).

Henderson has identified a series of reports and policy papers have that have emphasised the significance of developing Asia-literate Australians for our national interest (Henderson, 2003).

She states:

An example of this is the Asian Studies Council (1988), which argued in its National Strategy that ‘the study of Asia should not be an elective’ and that ‘the proper study of Asia and its languages is about national survival in an intensely competitive world’ (p.2). A year later the Ingleson Report claimed that Asian studies was ‘the obverse side of the coin to Australian studies’ and it was vital ‘that in teaching about Asia and its languages we constantly seek ways of reiterating this to our own society ...’ (Ingleson, 1989, Vol. 1, p. 13). More recently, the Rudd Report claimed that Australia required an ‘export culture’. This involved ‘the range of linguistic and cultural competencies required by Australians to operate effectively at different levels

¹ Since 2005 the unit has been coordinated by Dr Panizza Allmark, course coordinator Mass Communications and Media & Cultural Studies, School of Communications and Arts, Edith Cowan University.

in their various dealings with the region – as individuals, organisations and as a nation' (Rudd 1994: ii). (Henderson, 2003b, p. 1)

Similarly, the Asian Studies Association of Australia report 'Maximizing Australia's Asia Knowledge: Repositioning and Renewal of a National Asset' (2002) highlights that skillful planning and investment will be necessary to "make the most of the Asia-knowledge asset", as "many Australians have become 'Asia Mobile' in ideas and imagination – without really thinking about it" (p.7). Also summarising the Ingleson Report (Asia in Australian Higher Education) it highlights the challenges of tertiary education concerning Asia. Overall, the Australian reports emphasise that knowledge about Asia is essential in a globalised world. The UNESCO paper "Higher Education in a Globalized Society" (2003) has also identified opportunities for support for the diversification and a generation of new academic environment to promote a wider knowledge economy.

On a local level, the unit Media in Asia aims to produce an ECU graduate who "is culturally sensitive, appreciates other cultures and demonstrates international and global perspectives" ("Internationalisation: assessment and future directions" ECU report, 2005, p. 58). The unit provides an overview of the media in Asia, paying attention to the economic, cultural and political dimensions. Importantly, it is stressed that the term Asia is used as label of convenience and covers a geographic, cultural, linguistic and economic diversity. It is acknowledged that simply defining "Asian cultures and Asian values are problematic, nor can they be capable of providing a cultural basis for East Asian regionalism" (He, 2004, p. 121). As such, students are encouraged to examine definitions of Asia and what it means to be Asian and in particular its relationship with Australia. Various media, such as film, television and music, are analysed within a postcolonial context. Case studies are used and the students are encouraged to actively contribute through guided, inquiry-based and reflective discussion. A comment from a student relating to the unit that "The best aspect was the fact that it made me see Asia in a different light" reflects the positive sentiments voiced, in teaching evaluation reports and informal comments, towards the teaching and learning initiatives established over the past five years (UTEI report, 2009).

Teaching Strategies

A constructivist approach to teaching, which consists of “fitting new understanding and knowledge into and with extending and supplanting, old understanding and knowledge”, is undertaken (Fry, Kettridge & Marshall, 2009, p.10). In the initial lecture, students are asked to consider a series of questions, such as what their concept of Asia is? Can they list the countries of Asia? What level of interaction have they had with Asian culture? How do they define culture? What does it mean to be Asian? Extracts from popular media, such as the Facebook quiz ‘How Asian are you?’ and films such as *Ghandi* (1982), *Slum Dog Millionaire* (2008) and *The Year of Living Dangerously* (1982) are also shown and students are asked to consider the concept of Orientalism and are introduced to alternative perspectives and debates. Student have commented that they “like the use of movies to reinforce key concepts of the course” and the “use of contemporary examples that they could relate to” (UTEI report, 2007). The lectures and tutorials attempt to building upon previous understandings and (mis)conceptions concerning Asia.

The learning outcomes consist of students being able to identify significant developments in the Asian mediascape; analyse trends in media development in Asia; develop a critical awareness of the major issues shaping the Asian mediascape; and assess the significance of globalisation for the Asian media. Other significant issues such as censorship, press freedom, the development of values through the media, propaganda and globalisation are also covered. At the commencement of each lecture students need to contribute their news findings from topics of the week from Asian media. As such, they are encouraged to actively engage and develop awareness of reporting from Asian media. These findings are then briefly discussed and, thus, align with the learning outcomes.

The unit now comprises of a one-hour lecture and a two-hour tutorial for twelve weeks. This is a modification to the previous initial unit structure in which the lecture ran for a two hours session. The shortening of the lecture time and the lengthening of the tutorial duration have provided more time for class discussion and to encourage interactions between local and international students. As previously highlighted, students are encouraged to actively contribute through guided, inquiry-based and reflective discussion.

In particular, the emphasis on an inquiry-based discussion task, in which “learners are further required to bring in information and issues from outside the textbook or classroom for

discussion” enables the students from various parts of Asia to provide interesting insights (Ngeow & Kong, 2003). Through their anecdotal recollections the Asian students provide a valuable contribution in providing breadth and ‘real life’ experience to the unit content. A good example of student involvement is in a module looking at the influence of the SARS epidemic and media reporting, where a number of students have recounted their own experiences of the crisis. Their anecdotal reports, such as the use of the mobile phone texting to receive and convey information provided an alternative insight into communicative models, aside from the mainstream media. Similarly, the module on tourism in Bali provides an opportunity for students (both local and international) to share stories of cultural experiences. A comment from an Indonesian student, “that Bali mainly caters for Western tourists”, is certainly pertinent cause for reflection in considering the idea that, for many Australians, Bali is considered a ‘neighbourhood playground’ (Lewis & de Masi, 2007; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2007). The opportunity for discussion allows for cross-cultural exchange. This is particularly significant in the introductory module on the debate concerning Asian values, which is highly politicized and contested (Wee, 1999; Chua Beng Huat, 1998; Lee, 2007).

Student Assessments

The unit also requires students to complete a media profile of one country in Asia. This gives the students an opportunity to investigate a country of their choosing in which they need to report on the significance of the media, press freedoms and cultural impact. Acknowledging the diversity between countries, students are also called upon to present their reports to the class. This gives the opportunity for the entire class to gain some insight into a comparative analysis of neighbouring countries. This initial exploration provides a starting point for more in depth research into media and cultural impacts, and what it means to live in a globalised world. Comments from students include: “As an Australian with limited travel experience it was cool to study our neighbourhood, particularly enjoyed doing the media profile” and “The content is interesting and gives you a want to learn more on the topic” (UTEI report, 2009).

Students are also required to present on tutorial topics and write accompanying blogs, which consists of a short summary style essay on the topic of around 250-300 words. The unit has also a final examination paper, which consists of short answer questions and an essay. The approach of the assessments and unit structure follows a standard university assessment format

but also pursues White's (1998) curriculum perspectives in Asian studies centred around human values and culture, which should involve students in investigative research and is a model which aims to facilitate informed attitude formation. The success of the unit has resulted in positive Unit and Teaching Evaluation reports. Over the past five years, the unit and lecturer have often scored a mean and student satisfaction rating of up to 22% higher than other units in the School and Faculty (UTEI, Lecture report 2005). With up to 70% response rate, which is much higher than the standard 45% of other units in the completion of the UTEI forms, the positive student satisfaction suggests that the unit is successful in achieving its goals of introducing, engaging and also encouraging research into Asian culture and the media.

Guest Teaching Staff

Maintaining a high quality of teaching has been an essential aim of the course coordinator. Various students have commented that "she was a good listener and seemed to know what she was talking about, i.e., drew on her experiences. She welcomed comments from students in lectures. This broke it up a bit and made the concepts clearer and "She was very enthusiastic and entertaining. Even in the less exciting parts of the course she managed to keep us all engaged." (UTEI report, 2007, 2006). Student engagement with the course material is a high priority to maintain interest and to achieve learning outcomes. The encouragement and showcasing of independent research is also a priority.

A number of students enrolled in the unit are also postgraduate students who intend to undertake research projects in the area of Asian media and culture. The unit provides a sound foundation in the consideration of research topics. The encouragement of further research into the area is also facilitated by the quality of the lecture material and staff. Alongside the coordinator of the unit's research and background in cultural geography, guest lecturers who are researching in the Asian context are utilised. Their research-led teaching provides a "close and symbiotic relationship between research and teaching" which brings currency to the unit (Robertson & Bond, 2001, p. 5). Their expertise in teaching and research engagement provides varied perspectives to enhance the overall quality of learning experience.

Dr. CY Hoon, author of *Chinese Identity in Post-Suharto Indonesia* (2008), who presented a lecture on popular media in Indonesia, is an example of the research-led guest lecturers. His lecture which discussed the role of media in defining culture and disseminating

popular cultural products provided insights into the negotiation of conflicting values, such as national identity versus global identity and the ubiquitous east versus west debate. His discussion of Indonesian Idol, its localisation and hybridisation provided an accessible example of a globalised media product. Similarly, his elaborations concerning Pan-Asian identity and the intra-regional flow of cultural products provided further understandings of contemporary considerations in regards to regionalism and cultural identity.

Dr. Jonathan James, the Honorary International Director of Asia Evangelistic Fellowship International (AEFI) has also given lectures, tutorials and discussed his research concerning Tele Evangelism in India, *McDonaldisation, Masala McGospel and Om Economics* (2010). His expertise, based on his fieldwork on the Church and Hindu Community has provided students with interesting insights into the influence of transnational televangelism in contemporary, urban India. A student comment such as “he was encouraging and approachable, and was able to speak from experience in some instances, so it was good to mix that with the more theoretical side (which I love)” reflects his valuable contribution to the unit (UTEI report, 2009). Another guest lecturer, Dr. Dean Chan, co-editor of *Gaming Cultures and Place in Asia-Pacific* (2009), presented on his area of research concerning East Asian gaming. He presented a discussion of intra-Asian cultural flows and the marketing of Asianness in online games. Chan citing from Iwabuchi’s (2004) *Introduction on Cultural Globalization and Asian Media Connections* highlighted that intra-Asian cultural flows newly highlight structural asymmetry and uneven power relations in the region. This is a significant consideration in terms of regionalism and cultural identity, in which for example it has been argued that “Asian values, rather than regional universalism”, have been pushed (Katzenstein, 2000). Nevertheless, in the Chinese gaming industry, for example, national identity has been heavily promoted in its characters, settings, and narratives (Hearn & Willis, 2008). Considering aspects of national identity, globalisation, regionalism and mainstream popular culture are themes that generate through the discourse of Media in Asia.

The course also utilises research from current or past postgraduates. An example of this is the outstanding ECU Master’s thesis by an Indonesian scholarship student Titik Rahayu, on “DetEksi Newspaper Polls: The Representation and Commodification of Indonesian Teenagers' Identity” (2009). The original research that examines discourses on the politics of representation, contemporary Indonesian youth identity, post-Suharto Indonesian print media capitalism and

precision journalism provides an interesting case study, which contributes to the research content of Media in Asia.

Unit Success

The unit success can be contributed to the quality of the coordination and lecture staff. Yet, what also contributes to the student satisfaction is the ability to engage with the material, either by reflecting on personal experience or through discussion. One of the unit's initial intent to offer a forum in which international students "could speak with some authority" is certainly a key attribute. Certainly, student comments such as "in the lecture we look at not only theory but also case studies, and in tute we can discuss about the things related lecture. It really helped my understanding in this unit." And the best aspect was "interactivity and it was an interesting and relevant unit" (UTEI report, 2007), seems to suggest that the level of student engagement and satisfaction is high. Other student comments, which have been pervasive over the past five years, state that "the encouragement given and willing to voice our opinions and experiences" was the best aspect of the unit (UTEI report, 2007). The teaching design of the unit aimed to encourage intercourse between local and international students also reflects Australian political initiatives set up in the early 1950s. For example in 1952, Richard Casey, Australia's Minister for External Affairs, argued that "for Asian students to see Australia at an impressionable stage of their lives and to exchange views at our universities and with our officials should do a great deal to break down prejudices and misunderstandings on both sides" (cited in Oakman, 2002, p. 89). This view is also shared, as previously discussed early in this paper, with subsequent numerous reports on the emphasis of Asian studies in Australia. Nevertheless, teaching media in Asia within an Australian context still poses some challenges in terms of gaining student interest. There has been occasional resistance from the local students in having to undertake this unit as part of their degree. This may be attributed, unfortunately, to the insularity of some Australian students who are not convinced that there is a need for to study the subject area². To address these concern various modifications to the unit to have been implemented. For example, more emphasis is given to argue the case of the significance of the unit. This is achieved by drawing upon University initiatives for internationalization and wider Australian cultural politics of the

² An interesting point to note is that modules in the Media in Asia unit have been offered in 2007 and 2008 to consortiums of international students from Germany who have been eager to engage with studies of the Asian region.

importance of the unit material to local students. Nonetheless, as previously discussed the unit has been considerably successful in contributing to a wider understanding of the media in Asia, and cultural exchange amongst students which, in turn, has the potential for 'Maximising Australia's knowledge of Asia' as well as empowering international Asian students in valuing their contribution to the content and quality of the unit.

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