

Methodology

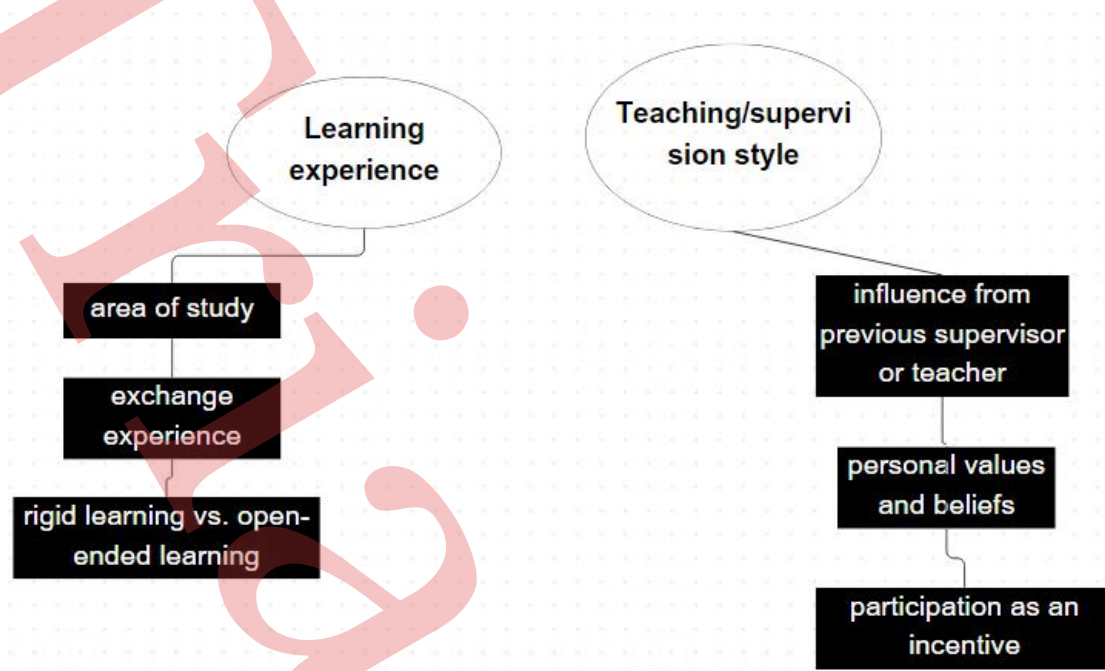
The research questions of the current study are as follows:

- How does university major influence the way that the interviewees view their education experience?
- How does exchange experience affect the views that interviewees had towards their education experience?
- How does the flexibility level of the learning impact interviewees' views on their education experience?
- What things have contributed to shaping the interviewees' teaching styles?
- What are the similarities between interviewees' teaching styles?

The current study is based on a dataset comprising semi-structured interviews with four doctoral students at a UK university; each interview lasted around 15 minutes. Thematic analysis is defined as “a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Answering the aforementioned research questions using reflexive thematic analysis, the present study was done inductively with no particular predetermined objectives or hypotheses in mind. Through coding the dataset of interview transcripts, a series of repeated, overarching themes and sub-themes emerged, which can be seen in the coding map (Figure 1) below.

Figure 1

Coding Map



Analysis

Learning experience

Area of study

Several things influence the way that interviewees view their undergraduate and postgraduate experience, one of which is the area of study. Specifically, whether or not the major or area of study was chosen voluntarily dictates much of how the first, third, and fourth interviewee see their college and postgraduate education experience as either positive or negative. When being asked about the undergraduate experience, the first interviewee revealed that the having to study a major involuntarily made the experience negative, while being able to pick the area of study during postgraduate education made the experience enjoyable.

...I felt really negative about my undergraduate studies, because I didn't want to study politics. So it was mostly my parents who pushed me to study politics. (Interviewee 1/29-30)

I really enjoyed my masters because I actually picked what I was studying. (Interviewee 1/40)

The third interviewee, though did not state verbatim, also values the fact that he/she was able to choose the major during his undergraduate education. It could have been a different trajectory had the interviewee not chose an area of study of his interest, but it remains unknown.

...my undergraduate education experience was a game changer for me because I was never a good student...then I came to university and studied something that I was genuinely really interested in. And I was suddenly really good. So that was a very interesting and very nice discovery. (Interviewee 3/3-6)

Akin to the first interviewee, the fourth interviewee did not voluntarily choose his major during undergraduate study. While studying a major that was voluntarily chosen made the learning boring, according him, it provided the fourth interviewee with a opportunity to study abroad as an exchange student, which not only made the overall undergraduate studies experience more enjoyable, but also prepared him the ability to acculturate himself to different educational systems later on.

Actually, this major wasn't my first choice (Interviewee 4/3)

I didn't really really enjoy learning a minor European language because it's a bit boring when you must remember numerous Slovak words...I wasn't quite happy with my self-learning process. (Interviewee 4/7-9)

And I was lucky to have an intercultural exchange experience in Slovakia for one year...the best, the happiest and the carefree time during my undergrad study (Interviewee 4/12-14)

I didn't have much culture shock or have many problems with acculturation in terms of the different educational system...maybe it's because I had that cultural exchange experience. (Interviewee 4/31-35)

The second interviewee, unlike all the other interviewees, was able to study a major of his choice, which enabled him to attain a sense of achievement through reading a book recommended by his classmate and getting to know the logic behind the grammar as a result.

So for my undergrad I chose English...I was talking to a classmate...he recommends a really good book to me...And then after that, I started to know what really good English grammar is...so I

felt really good about myself at that time. (Interviewee 2/12-20)

Being able to study a self-chosen major has positive effects on the education experience from the perspectives of the first and the third interviewee, but it does not always offset displeasure caused by other factors including inherent attributes of the education system, grading criteria, and attitudes held by the peers. Meanwhile, studying a major that is not self-chosen can be two-sided, for it possesses the potential of allowing one to engage in activities that could not be accessed otherwise, such as in the fourth interviewee's case where he participated in an exchange program as a Slovak major, a major both degraded and facilitated the learning experience.

Exchange experience

Exchange experience is something that enhanced the enjoyment felt in the learning experience by the first interviewee who might appreciate the value of cultural diversity as opposed to a learning environment predominated by students from the UK.

...I was also quite lucky to be able to do exchanges during my undergraduate education, which I think was the best part. So I got to study in France and I got to study in Hong Kong as part of my undergraduate degree. I don't think I enjoyed it in the UK very much. I would say everyone was from the UK...So that wasn't very nice. I didn't enjoy that. (Interviewee 1/2-6).

It is apparent that the fourth interviewee, who also did exchanges during his undergraduate years, valued cultural diversity as well. Only in this case, did the interviewee elaborate on the many benefits that accompanied being an exchange student at the time and the proficient acculturation that exchange experience endowed him later on.

And I was lucky to have an intercultural exchange experience in Slovakia for one year...the best, the happiest and the carefree time during my undergrad study (Interviewee 4/12-14)

...it was a good chance for me to make new friends that from different cultures and to learn about their perceptions towards different things and to learn about different cultures. (Interview 4/19-20)

I didn't have much culture shock or have many problems with acculturation in terms of the different educational system...maybe it's because I had that cultural exchange experience. (Interviewee 4/31-35)

Rigid learning vs. Open-ended (flexible) learning

Both the second and the fourth interviewee reported frustration having to adhere to the rigid learning during their undergraduate education. The second interviewee ascribed it to attributes inherent to the Chinese education system.

...it was in a Chinese environment and based on the Chinese education system...sometimes I feel like I didn't really have the freedom to kind of be really independent or learn a lot of things by myself...I was just like memorising stuff. And then I have to give the correct answers, which I didn't really enjoy this part. (Interviewee 2/3-6)

In the fourth interviewee's case, the rigidity of his learning is not due to the same reason; rather, it is something embedded within foreign language learning, especially for those without a natural environment wherein the language is being spoken.

...I didn't really enjoy learning a minor European language because it's a bit boring when you must remember numerous Slovak words and learn grammar that would be very difficult for a Chinese native speaker. So wasn't quite happy with my self-learning process. (Interviewee 4/7-10)

In contrast, flexible or open-ended learning made the learning experience enjoyable to the second interviewee.

I really enjoyed the fact that we can just...speak up and share all opinions...when we write essays, there's like, no correct answers, and then we can just read and then develop our own opinion, then. And our opinion matters...I really loved that! (Interviewee 2/31-38)

The third interviewee expressed similar appreciation toward open-ended learning as well when asked about the good things of his undergraduate education experience.

...I liked the way more than I ever thought it would when I was just reading texts and discussing them and going into quite a lot of detail about it, but also the whole aspect of critical thinking and questioning concepts that I was taking for granted...just sort of discussing texts for hours and realising that we got different things from them. (Interviewee 3/18-24).

Teaching/Supervision style

Influence from previous teacher or supervisor

Some of the interviewees' teaching styles were influenced by their previous supervisor or teacher. It is particularly salient for the third and the fourth interviewee while appears less so from what the second interviewee disclosed about what he may use of his supervisor's way of teaching in his own supervision.

...he was always supportive...so I feel like a lot of time he kind of encouraged me to do to read more myself and then sort of figure out things myself, but then when I struggle, he's always there to kind of give me advice. That's good. (Interviewee 2/78--82)

The third interviewee applied his previous supervisor's approach to his supervision.

I needed to talk about my research and to have a relationship with my supervisor which allowed me to ask questions when I needed to, but at the same time encourage me to...really work in between...And so I'm trying to do this sort of process with my students. (Interviewee 3/73-76)

It is obvious that this student-centred approach to supervision where the supervisor embraces being supportive and encouraging while promoting independence and allowing for freedom among students is regarded highly by the third and fourth interviewees.

My supervisor helped me to, like, get on track for my academic career. She gives me much freedom to address things myself and arrange my own time at work. Her supervising style is motivational and she's passionate about what she does (Interviewee 4/68-70)

The fourth interviewee also mentioned individualised supervision by which he was influenced. In the end, his mentioning of taking into account the "cultural things" when adjusting his teaching style might be partly due to his exchange experience (Interviewee 4/76).

Also she teaches and supervises students, like, in accordance with their aptitude...so I would say my approach to teaching and supervision was influenced by this... (Interviewee 4/68-72)

Personal values and beliefs

Notably, personal views play a role in shaping the first and second interviewee's teaching or supervision style. The first interviewee held that the teacher-student

relationship is reciprocal, emphasising that the essence of teaching lies in propelling students to think through classroom interaction and beyond instead of always trying to deliver interesting, novel content.

You can only do so much as an instructor...because I feel you are also learning with your students...it's more rewarding if your students are participating because you get to learn from each other and you get to become better as a teacher. My personal view is that you are not necessarily delivering content that is new to the students...That is my approach to teaching. (Interviewee 1/76-80).

The second interviewee believed that fostering independence is the key to teaching.

...my own opinion is that because they are going to be independent, especially maybe if in the future they want to continue studying or if they go into the workplace, I just feel like it's nice for them to know, or to figure out what to do themselves rather than just following other people. (Interviewee 2/68-71)

Participation as an incentive

Classroom participation is a significant aspect of teaching according to the first interviewee. Although he used the word interaction, it is probably safely argued that "interaction that you have in the classroom. That back and forth..." warrants participation on the student's end in any case.

...it's about that interaction that you have in the classroom. That back and forth, of maybe being kind of nudged to think "Oh, what if I thought about it from THIS point of view...So that's kind of the whole point for me of education, I mean, being in that classroom is to facilitate that (Interviewee 1/86-90)

Interestingly, it seems as though a cognitive dissonance was present in the first interviewee given that he disapproved of marking students based on participation and viewed classroom participation to be an internal motivation solely, the latter of which defies his emphasis on the teacher's role of facilitating participation from students.

I didn't really go and schmooze the professor afterwards. And I just got like, you know, the average for participation, I showed up. So I guess you would get a B for showing up and then A if you were like the person with your hand up all the time. So for me that was a bit unjust, to be graded on that. (Interviewee 1/65-68)

I don't think marking people for participation necessarily influences people or motivates people to participate...How do you motivate someone to participate in a class? I think that is a very internal motivation to someone. (Interviewee 1/72-74)

This view stands in stark contrast to the third interviewee's view on incentivising learning through the requirement of participation.

But if they know that you're going to talk about them in class and that they will be required to talk about them, there's more of a tendency to read them and independently engage with the material. (Interviewee 3/68-70)

Voluntary choice of major generally results in interviewees viewing their education experience as more positive. Likewise, exchange experience makes the learning experience more enjoyable for the first and fourth interviewees. The more flexible the learning is, the more enjoyable the learning experience is to the second, third, and fourth interviewees. The things that have contributed to shaping the interviewees' teaching styles include influence from previous supervisor and personal views among the interviewees. One salient similarity between interviewees' teaching styles is that all the interviewees value student-centred teaching.

Reference

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology.

Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3(2), 77–101.

<https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>

Appendix

Table 1

Main Themes, subthemes, and codes

Main Themes	Subthemes	Codes
Learning Experience	Area of study	<p>Feeling negative during the freshman year because the choice of major was not voluntary</p> <p>Enjoy graduate study because he was able to pick what he wanted to study</p> <p>Mentioning of studying a self-chosen major during undergraduate education</p> <p>Positive view on being able to study a major he was genuinely really interested in</p> <p>Involuntary choice of major</p>
	Exchange experience	<p>Studying in France and Hong Kong as an exchange student made the undergraduate experience more enjoyable</p> <p>Exchange experience seen as positive</p>
	Rigid learning vs. Open-ended learning	<p>Lack of freedom in the Chinese education system and being forced to memorise stuff</p> <p>Freedom of speech combined with open-ended style of essay stand in stark contrast to rigid undergraduate years in China</p> <p>Similarity between the third and second interviewees in terms of critical thinking and</p>

		open-ended learning
Teaching/Supervision Style	Influence from previous supervisor or teacher	Being supported and nudged to work independently by the previous supervisor Previous supervisor being supportive but emphasizing student being independent and self-motivated Admitting influence from previous supervisor
	Personal values and beliefs	Fostering independence among students Required participation as an incentive, contrary to the first interviewee's view
	Participation as an incentive	Getting marked lower because of participation Viewing in-class participation as an internal motivation Valuing classroom participation