LEARNING SHOCK – THE TRAUMA OF RETURN TO FORMAL LEARNING

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Learning shock – the Trauma of return to Formal learning

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It is now widely accepted, even by management scholars, that learning is a highly problematic concept (Chia & Morgan, 1996; Clegg, 2001; Clegg, Hudson, & Steel, 2003; Contu, Grey, & Örtenblad, 2003; Currie & Knights, 2003; Czarniawska, 2003; Dehler, Welsh, & Lewis, 2001; Mingers, 2000; Watson, 1996) It is also becoming clear that learning is a profoundly reflexive construct. First it entails the undoing of earlier learning (Akgun, Lynn, & Byrne, 2003; Chia, 2003; French & Vince, 1999b; Nystrom & Starbuck, 1984; Sheaffer & Mano-Negrin, 2003; Wijnhoven, 2001) and second, it is now widely acknowledged that learning is not a process taking place within the realm of individual cognition (Brown & Duguid, 1994; Mingers, 2000; Simpson, French, & Vince, 2000; Tsoukas, 2002; Vince, 2001, 2002; Wenger, 1998, 2000). The entire person, group or even organization can become involved in the learning process. The importance of emotional factors both for individual and for organizational learning can hardly be over-estimated (Antonacopoulou & Gabriel, 2001; Fineman, 1997, 2000a, b; French & Vince, 1999a; French et al., 1999b; Höpfl & Linstead, 1997; Vince, 2001). Some learning can involve painful or disturbing experiences, leading to feelings of failure and disappointment. Other learning experiences can entail feelings of discovery, optimism and exhilaration. The interface between emotion and learning is a complex and uneven one. Positive emotions, such as hope, elation and self-confidence, can enhance learning. Negative emotions such as fear, anxiety and anger, can stand in the way of learning. Equally, however, positive emotions can stand in the way of learning, just as negative emotions, in the right circumstances, can enhance it. The situation is further complicated by the fact that emotions are themselves products of learning in two very real senses. On the one hand, we learn emotions and emotional displays appropriate to different social and organizational situations; on the other, we learn to read our emotions and the emotions of others, to channel them, contain them and control them.

In this article we examine one particular phenomenon that generates very powerful emotions in the context of learning, a phenomenon we have termed 'learning shock'. We have used this term to highlight its similarities with a similar phenomenon, culture shock, which has already attracted considerable attention from researchers. Learning shock refers to experiences of acute frustration, confusion and anxiety experienced by some students. These students find themselves exposed to
unfamiliar learning and teaching methods, bombarded by unexpected and disorienting cues and subject to ambiguous and conflicting expectations. The article is based on field research undertaken to examine the incidence of learning shock among a group of full-time students studying towards a Masters in Business Administration degree at Imperial College. It aims to identify some of the causes of learning shock; some of its principal manifestations; some of the coping strategies used by students in handling learning shock and the relative effectiveness of such strategies. Finally, we use our field material to begin to develop a theoretical understanding of the core emotional experiences associated with learning shock and, more broadly, with management learning.

The absence of a substantial literature on learning shock is surprising, since there can hardly be any educationist who has not encountered it. Scarcely a day seems to go by without us, as teachers, encountering students who experience extreme and often incapacitating anxieties, self-doubts and disappointments. Many of us find ourselves straying into the territory of counsellors and psychotherapists in dealing with these extreme emotional experiences; virtually all of us can relate stories of students who overcame enormous obstacles to get their degrees or others who appeared determined to fail, no matter how well equipped they appeared to be when they started. Our own project was sparked by one exceptionally vivid example of a student who appeared to fall to pieces soon after he started his MBA studies. A confident, competent production manager, with an excellent engineering degree and many years’ experience in one of India’s chief manufacturing companies, he experienced - when confronted with his MBA programme - what we can only describe as an existential crisis which lasted throughout his studies. Away from his family and culture, separated from all the familiar props of position, status and power, this student (with whom all three authors were acquainted, one as teacher, one as personal tutor and another as counsellor) found himself facing a void, unable to build relationships and friendships with his peers, his self-confidence drained away. Remarkably, the student progressed through the course without failing a single subject, yet the anxiety did not lift until the final results were out and, successful, he could return to his country and to the acclamation of family and employers and a substantially improved position in the organization. It was our close contact with this student that raised the idea of a learning shock affecting adults who return to education after a protracted absence.
The experience of learning shock is of evident interest to educationists – it strongly colours the students' learning experience, affecting what and how is learned; it can shape the students' perceptions of their fellow-students, their teachers and the academic environment in which they study. It has the potential of inhibiting all learning, by paralysing the critical faculties, yet it also has the potential of enhancing learning and opening new possibilities of learning; it may indeed be that learning shock is a feature of the most profound types of learning, those that involve a radical reconstruction of identity, outlook on life and values. The emotional experience of the shock, while never pleasant, may become a milestone of an individual's life story, marking the moment of greatest crisis and despair but also the turning point of a new start; it may then mark the point where a trial turns into a triumph. This article, therefore, does not start from the assumption that learning shock is necessarily a negative experience, nor does it aim directly at discovering recipes for its containment and 'management'. Instead it seeks to uncover its extent and its implications for the learning process.

**CULTURE SHOCK**

A good point to start an analysis of learning shock is culture shock, since it shares several characteristics with it. Culture shock has long been the topic of academic study (Adler, 1981; Adler, 1975; Oberg, 1960; Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001) It refers to experiences of intense disorientation, confusion and anxiety that are experienced when people are immersed into new and unfamiliar cultures with different social conventions, values and norms. Oberg (1960), for example, argued that "culture shock is precipitated by the anxiety that results from losing all our familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse" (p. 177). Adler (1975) theorised culture shock as a set of emotional reactions to the loss of perceptual reinforcements from one's own culture, to new cultural stimuli which have little or no meaning, and to the misunderstanding of new and diverse experiences. He argued that it may encompass feelings of helplessness, irritability, and fears of being cheated, contaminated, injured or disregarded. (p. 13.) The absence of reassuring reinforcement is made more acute by an experience of being 'bombarded' by cues that are difficult to decode or by familiar signs which harbour unfamiliar meanings (Adler, 1981). Different scholars have developed theories of stages of adaptation, as the new culture gradually loses its alien and threatening qualities and begins to be assimilated by the new entrant (Ward et al., 2001).
A theme in this literature of particular pertinence to our study is that of ‘sojourners’ and their expectations. Sojourners are defined as people who temporarily leave their native place with a view to returning there (Berry, 1997; Goldstein & Smith, 1999; Klineberg, 1976; Lysgaard, 1955; Sussman, 2002; Ward et al., 2001). Overseas students, expatriates and refugees are all contemporary examples. Research on overseas students is now extensive and focuses on the stages of their adjustment (or not), the difficulties they face and the factors that influence their adjustment (Churchman & Mitrani, 1997; Egerton, 2002; Furnham, 2004; Gaw, 2000; Klineberg, 1976, 1981; Klineberg & Hull, 1979; Knox, 2000; McKinlay, Pattison, & Gross, 1996; Miyamoto & Kuhlman, 2001; Pines, Zaidmana, Wang, Han, & Ping, 2003; Raschio, 1987; Schmitt, Spears, & Branscombe, 2003; Sussman, 2002; Waugh, 2002). Consistently identified difficulties focus on building friendships outside their cultural group; language skills and an unfamiliar style of teaching and learning.

Reverse culture shock has also attracted attention in relation to repatriation of individuals exposed to protracted periods abroad (Gaw, 2000; Hsiaoying, 1995; Raschio, 1987). This is precipitated by a discovery that time has not stood still in the home country which is experienced as having changed, sometimes beyond recognition. Disappointment, confusion and split loyalties are some of the symptoms of reverse culture shock – in extreme cases, it may lead to acute depression, feelings of total loss and of being an alien in one’s own land.

Learning shock has similarities with both culture shock and reverse culture shock. Like culture shock, it entails a sudden and disorienting immersion in a new environment where familiar routines and reference points are lost. As in culture, communication with others becomes very problematic at all levels – simple linguistic comprehension, non-verbal clues, jokes, idioms all become challenges and causes of anxiety. There is a sense of not being able to function competently in many aspects of social life and the frustrations and anxieties that this engenders. At the same time, learning shock has similarities with reverse culture shock. Many adult students return to an environment that they believe they know from earlier experiences; for many of them, their years as undergraduates may mark some of the happiest of their lives. Returning to education after many years can lead to feelings of confusion, disappointment and disbelief. Far from being a familiar environment, the university or the business school is experienced as an environment at odds with the earlier images, idealized or not, resulting in confusion and possible disappointment.
In spite of such similarities, learning shock cannot be seen simply as a special case of culture shock and reverse culture shock. In the first place, part of the shock is accounted for by the learning experience itself. Students who relied on proven routines and methods to master engineering, law or history may find themselves needing different learning approaches to study finance, marketing or organizational theory. Students who relied on memory to pass examinations may find themselves perplexed when dealing with case studies without clear-cut answers or a single correct way of tackling them. The international student mix on many business courses may be another source of shock bringing as it does a mixture of teaching and learning experiences and a range of expectations about what is appropriate behaviour. Students accustomed to passive learning from a teacher whose authority is unquestioned, may be annoyed or angered by comments by fellow students which they perceive to be critical or challenging of the lecturer's authority. On top of all these, the renewed acquaintance with assessments and examinations can trigger off unpleasant memories from the past, memories of examination disappointments, anxieties and failures. Even individuals who have been previously successful with examinations and assessments may be afflicted by feelings of insecurity and inadequacy (Chasseguet-Smirgel, 1976) which resurface when suddenly they find themselves confronting them in later life. Particular anxieties about numerical ability or essay-writing may then become points of psychological vulnerability and insecurity.

In the case of mature students studying towards MBA degrees there are two additional circumstances which may precipitate learning shock. One is the diversity of learning methods, assignments and assessments which characterize these courses. Many students, including some with advanced academic qualifications including doctorates, can find the diversity of learning styles and learning approaches quite distressing; they may, in other words, lack the learning style (Kennington, SitkoLutek, Rakowska, & Griffiths, 1996; Loo, 1999; Reynolds, 1997; Sadler-Smith, 2001) flexibility that enables them to approach quantitative and discursive, technical and critical, abstract and concrete subjects in a suitable manner. The genuine distress of the student who insists on "How does all this apply to the real world?" or "Why can't you just tell me the right answer that will earn me an A?" is well known to all who have experience of teaching advanced management courses.
The other special circumstance arises from the spirit of consumerism that imbues many offerings in postgraduate business education (Currie et al., 2003; Parker & Jary, 1995; Prichard & Willmott, 1997; Sturdy & Gabriel, 2000). From the moment they decide to pursue a postgraduate business education, students become immersed in a discourse of consumerism in choosing courses. They often engage in exhaustive researches into the reputation of different business schools, their position in different league tables, their supposed value for money and so forth. This discourse is characterized by the usual hyperbole of sales talk by universities themselves, aided and abetted by various publications which offer consumer advice to prospective students, often strongly influenced by highly esoteric and arbitrary criteria. Students express their core anxiety about considerable expenditure involved in enrolling for an MBA through the rituals of searches and infinitesimal comparisons, attendance at fairs, discussions with like-minded people and immersion in a virtual universe of advice discourse. Entry to a university of one’s choice is further hampered by the rituals of selection, the GMAT test, interviews and so forth. The student who finally gets admitted to a school of his/her choice, having parted with a very substantial sum of money, tends to idealize the course of which s/he is now an approved customer. S/he arrives at college with expectations little short of encountering the twelve gods of Olympus, only to be surprised or shocked by creaky university bureaucracies, often faulty or inadequate facilities and merely human (albeit often brilliant) lecturers. The shock of the punter who, having spent a great deal of money on a coveted new car, discovers a sticky gear-box and a faulty electrical system is not so far removed from that of the MBA student who discovers both that his/her substantial outlay has not secured the conveniences, comforts and efficiencies that customers of high-quality hotels, shops or consultancy firms would take for granted and that s/he will have to work very hard to be successful (Sturdy et al., 2000). And, to draw another parallel from the literature on culture shock, Ward et al (Ward et al., 2001) point to the importance of the accuracy of expectations. Students, both home and overseas, who arrive with unrealistic expectations of what awaits them will experience more problems.

The purpose of our field work was to identify the incidence of learning shock among MBA students; to explore its causes and correlates; to study the consequences of learning shock on learning and on the mental and physical health of the students; to examine coping and defense mechanisms employed by students and their relative effectiveness; and, finally, to propose a theoretical framework for studying this phenomenon.
THE FIELD-WORK

Four detailed questionnaires were administered to all 2002-3 full-time MBA students (N=145) at Imperial College, at critical parts of the course (at the end of the first, third, eighth and nineteenth weeks). The questionnaires included progressively more detailed questions on the student’s experiences on the course, their difficulties, and the ways they went about overcoming them. All students indicating a high degree of difficulty after the third questionnaire were approached with requests for interviews. In addition a number of other students who seemed to be progressing happily through the course were also interviewed. In all 27 interviews were conducted with 24 students between January and July 2003 (three students were interviewed twice). All the interviews were conducted by one of the authors who had already known the students as their lecturer. The personal and confidential nature of these interviews made it necessary to build trust and be able to ‘read cues’, which express the deeper and more painful experiences of students on the course. The interviewer was aware of the ethical responsibilities of opening up areas of personal vulnerability which could leave students feeling exposed and exploited. Several of the students have maintained contact with the interviewer following the end of the research.

The returns to the first two questionnaires exceeded 50%, though the third and fourth were considerably less (34% and and 25% respectively). Initially, we assumed that this was due to the fact that the majority of students were coping well with the demands of the course. Later, however, a different explanation suggested itself.

One of the first observations resulting from the questionnaire was that students recognized in the concept of 'learning shock', if not an actual experience they had had, at least a potential experience they might have at a later stage – it was an idea that made sense to them and one that did not require a great deal of explaining. Already in the first questionnaire (Week 1 of the course) 37% of the respondents (28 students) acknowledged moments of shock, a figure that remained constant throughout the first three months of the course. On the final questionnaire (March 2003) a direct question on learning shock was included, in which students were asked to assess the extent to which they had experienced it over the year on a five point scale (with 1 representing none and 5 representing a great deal). Responses among the 34 students who filled in this questionnaire included 6 who responded 'a
great deal' (point 5 on the scale and 8 who responded a 'considerable amount' (point 4 on the scale).

THE FINDINGS

The questionnaire data were compared to the interview data. In the case of a few students, the questionnaire returns indicated greater difficulties than the interviews, but generally the opposite was the case. Based on both questionnaire and interview data, 17 (12%) of the students described symptoms consistent with a learning shock; 5 of these 17 described very painful symptoms persisting over a prolonged period of time and are viewed as the acute cases. This figure of 12% is certainly an underestimate. Of the 19 students who failed one or more subjects in the Part 1 examinations, 12 responded neither to the questionnaire nor to a request for an interview. Importantly, of the 7 who did respond 5 reported learning shock. While numbers are too small to be statistically significant we nevertheless concluded, tentatively, that there might be an adverse relationship between experiencing learning shock and performance for some students. Whereas overall 13% of the students failed one or more exam in Part 1 the failure rate was 29% amongst those reporting learning shock. And, our interview data with some of those who failed their examinations and had not responded to the questionnaires suggested that they were all experiencing such extreme learning shock that they felt unable to respond.

Who suffers from learning shock?

Ten of the 17 sufferers were women, who made up about only 32% of the student population. This may be due to higher incidence of shock among women students, or alternatively it may reflect their greater willingness to share their experiences with the researchers. All five of the acute learning shock students were international students who were non-native English speakers. Five of the remaining 12 were native speakers. No other generalization can be made about who suffers from learning shock at this stage. Both older and younger students, those from scientific backgrounds and from social science/humanities backgrounds suffer from it. Linguistic capability and the gap between their home pedagogic culture and western pedagogic culture do however, as would be expected, appear to amplify its effects.
Learning shock – THREE case studies

Our case studies describe three different experiences of learning shock. We begin with a UK student with a science PhD who struggled with unfamiliar subjects, experienced early shock but subsequently overcame it. We then describe the two students who experienced the greatest shock. The first was so severely shocked that she did not complete our questionnaires and the second was so severely shocked that he even lost contact with his home country peers.

Michael Armstrong is a student who experienced a substantial degree of learning shock in the early part of the course. A Chemistry PhD with considerable industrial and teaching experience, Michael found himself back in an academic environment after six years.

“It was a shock to find myself again as a novice. In chemistry, I am an expert, I can do things off the top of my head, I used my intuition. When I came here I realized that some people had more relevant backgrounds than mine and I found myself out of my depth. Now, this feeling of being out of my depth has subsided. I can make valid contributions to group discussions. I still feel some frustration at the prospect of having to adapt and apply all this knowledge to the real world, and I am impatient to get to that stage.”

“One of the hardest things about returning to study was learning to read again, learning to discipline yourself to read properly. I have had to learn to read more slowly, in chemistry I hardly had to read, I just scanned the figures and took it in, whereas on the MBA I had to learn to read more slowly, so that I could take it. But then again you realize that reading is an inefficient way of learning when you are under so much time pressure.”

While the initial shock subsided, feelings of anxiety and stress remained pronounced. Not surprisingly, the subject that caused Michael most trouble was organizational
behaviour, one that calls for radically different learning approaches from the ones that had served him so well as a student of chemistry.

“This is the subject I found hardest to adjust my learning style to. Was I taking on board all I needed? During the course I had a sense that I was not taking it in, that I was not going anywhere, in spite of the numerous times I came and talked to you [the lecturer]. And then, I realized how much I had learned. And then again, I was worried if I could put it to good use in answering the examination questions. In science there are right and wrong answers; with POK [People, Organizations and Knowledge] you can relate it to your earlier experience.”

In spite of getting one the highest marks in the class for this difficult subject, Michael continued to experience intense anxiety and stress during the second term. Increasingly, this resulted from a feeling of being constantly overstretched.

“I feel I am working at maximum capability and if someone gives me a tiny bit of extra work, I will collapse from overload. By the end of Week 10 last term I was struggling to keep going. At the last week-end, it was very hard. I stayed in bed several extra hours, got more sleep in order to get the strength to complete the work.”

Michael is not effusive about his feelings on the course, but likens the MBA to "an enormous wave that is unfolding over you but has not broken yet, and you don’t know when it going to crush and whether you will stay upright when it does." What Michael will talk about at length is his coping strategy for surviving the course. This amounts to a highly methodical use of his time and energy, careful planning for all assignments

I push myself a bit extra hard at certain peak times. I have learned not to panic when the list of things to do grows longer, knowing that you can cope stops you panicking. How do I do
it? By planning and organizing, having a plan but a floating plan, a plan that can change constantly. This stops me from feeling paralysed. If a meeting falls through and I have some free time I can do something else. Mind you, there is difficulty in working with a syndicate group whose timing differs from yours. This generates friction. ... So I have learnt that it is best not to be too rigid. Break large tasks down to smaller ones. Instead of one 3-hour job, do 3 one-hour jobs, even if it takes longer, by the time that you have switched in and out. Some tasks cannot be broken down – you have to do them in one go. But others can be broken down.

Finally, Michael relies on some diversion to help him cope with the pressure:

I guess another thing that I will do to get away from the stress is remember a nice place I used to go camping in Australia and picture it in my mind just as a relaxer. I may also promise myself a treat such as a piece of music or a bowl of ice-cream. Simple but it becomes a symbol of getting past an event (although I mustn't ignore how I am going to get there), even a quiet lunch on my own is often enough of a break from the work where I can get some tranquility.

Michael is one of the students who, while suffering from extensive anxiety and stress, copes through careful rationalizing, planning and diversionary day-dreaming. Does his experience amount to a 'shock' experience or would the label 'stress' suffice? It seemed to us that in his case an initial shock was rather successfully overcome without, however turning the learning into an enjoyable process. Other students were less successful.

Theresa Queen is a profoundly religious student from Taiwan. She was sponsored to study in London by her company. She did not complete any of the four questionnaires, because she was 'suffering from so much learning shock. You see, unlike most other students on the course, I am sponsored by my company. People there assume that I am good at my work. I started to worry whether people had
invested in the right person. I even questioned if the Lord had invested in me the right things.” Her memories of the early days of the course are of extreme isolation, confusion and self doubt.

“As soon as I arrived in the UK last September I felt frustrated. Before coming here, I had been confident about the work I did. I had the skills necessary for my work. Then I came here and I found myself lost. Lost physically, socially. … I remember the first case study we did. It was so frustrating. This was real learning shock. A big one. Everybody asking questions, talking at the same time. We were shown a video. Another nightmare. I thought I was the only one who didn’t understand what was going on. Since then, I spoke to others and realized that many had the same experience. Now, I know that I will be able to survive the rest of the course. But at the time, I felt I wouldn’t. Even the lecturer would not wait for us to write things down. How much less, the other students all talking together.”

One particular difficulty experienced by Theresa was working with her syndicate group. Learning as member of a group is a very important part of the MBA programme. Many syndicate groups work well generating synergies and maintaining a high level of motivation. Theresa’s experience, however, was that of being a member of a dysfunctional group.

“The syndicate work was a new experience for me. In the beginning, I didn’t even know what a syndicate was, or who was in my syndicate group. It took me some time to figure it out. Then there were more problems. People in the group did not know each other. Who was good at what. I panicked. I turned in work that was not what people had expected me to do. I didn’t dare ask questions, and even when I did, I did not understand the answers. I started to think: ‘Am I capable of getting through this?’ I had a lot of self-doubt. … I remember
Once we were discussing for 2 hours and I didn’t know what was going on. I had not a clue what they were saying – there were two English boys and an Australian one. Afterwards, I went out in the dark night for a walk. I was trying to get lost. Little by little, I started to understand the accents. I also started to speak faster myself. I felt that if I didn’t speak faster, people would run out of patience with me.”

Overcoming these syndicate group difficulties, however, had not eliminated feelings of depression (“I feel depressed the whole time”) and despair which were very acute. Following the first interview, the interviewer received an e-mail from her which included the following lines:

“Sorry for crying during our conversation. I didn't expect that I would have to recall some of the memories I didn't want to recall, at least not now. Despite the hard part, I do consider this year [to be] one of the most precious phases of my life and I do learn a great deal in different perspectives, say, both from culture shock and learning shock.”

Theresa expresses a wide range of feelings associated with learning shock through repeated use of words like nightmare, miserable, depressed, suffering and pain. These feelings include confusion, anxiety, a feeling of being bombarded, acute stress, despair, loneliness, frustration, anger (“sometimes I get so frustrated trying to understand what people are saying, their accent. I then get angry. I get angry at the person, at myself. I feel that my English is going backwards. British people talk so fast. Sometimes I get angry at the whole country! So anger follows from frustration”) and a profound sense of disappointment with herself. She repeatedly referred to her cold-sores which were both an expression of her suffering but also reinforced it by being seen as another instance of failure.

The emotions described by Theresa (though rarely so acutely and rarely all combining in the same way) are expressed by several other learning shock sufferers. The only painful emotions explicitly not part of her experience were homesickness (“I had no time to be homesick. I had to work so hard”) and the desire to quit. This was
due to a sense of obligation to her employer which bound her to the course and made quitting unthinkable. How did she try to cope with these feelings? Unlike Michael, Theresa was not a rationalizer or planner; not did she discuss her experience with other members of the course, not even her fellow Chinese students (“No, I don’t spend much time with them either. I don’t go out for fun. I am not able to do this. Besides, I am a lot older than them. They come from rich families and their parents are paying for their studies, while I have to make other people’s investment in me worth it. This puts a lot more pressure on me.”) Her one recourse was her religion and the support she received from her fellow believers:

My religion helped me a lot. I prayed a lot, I even complained to the Lord, I yelled at him. I spoke to my sisters in the church. At week-ends, I phoned home and spoke to my mother and to my sisters. This helped me get along.”

A few months after successfully completing the course, Theresa reflected on her experiences during the previous year. She had vivid recollections of loneliness, anxiety, fear and vulnerability and showed no tendency of neutralizing the emotional pain of her experience as a student.

There were countless nights I came back from the library with tears.... To me, London was a very depressing city. My life there was nothing but school, library, computer room, and my flat. The only entertainment I had in London was shopping at the supermarket. Since I don’t drink and I don’t smoke, the pub was never a good place for me. Shopping for food seemed to be the only way to release my stress. ... Everyday I had to put an invisible facial mask on before walking into the classroom. People thought I was very confident and I seemed to be smart and happy to them. Only myself knew that I was actually very frighten inside.

The second student with the most extreme experience of learning shock was Victor Omonuwa, a Nigerian student who had been very interested in POK (organisational behaviour) and who had had several conversations with the lecturer (YG). He had
seemed a very confident and happy person. His questionnaires had indicated a generally successful adaptation to the course, except for a curious statement that, had it not been for the help he had received from the Programme Director, he would have left the course; he also gave himself 4 (low) on happiness which seemed inconsistent with his image. At the interview, the interviewer asked about these two comments – it was as if a tap had been opened which hardly stopped for the next 59 minutes. It turned out that Victor had very deep learning and culture shocks and a degree of alienation from the course and from his peers that was quite exceptional. He is a very articulate man, capable of holding conflicting positions, making extreme statements, but also capable of very fine conceptual distinctions and nuanced opinions.

Like Theresa, Victor is someone who finds little comfort in the company of his fellow-students including his fellow-Nigerians. Like her, he is able to discuss his emotions in great detail and with great insight. His case, however, very much unlike Theresa’s is characterized by feelings of disappointment, betrayal and anger. He is also the only student who confessed to having a strong desire to quit and constantly having to do battle with this desire. The focus of Victor’s disappointment and anger is three-fold and mutually reinforcing: his fellow students, the programme itself, and Britain as a place where people do not know how to enjoy life, how to express their emotions etc.

Victor arrived in the UK with great expectations:

“When you look at the College from Nigeria, it looked like one of the best schools in the world. This was the only way to justify the high fees. College graduates occupy the highest positions in Nigeria. So, when I was seeking advice, I was told ‘Forget the costs, go for the best and then everything will take care of itself.’"

But disappointment set up very quickly, firstly with his fellow students, then with the programme and finally with the country as a whole.

“I was surprised from the minute that I arrived in the UK. First, I was surprised by my classmates. I had assumed that all of us would have one objective, to get an education, a better life, job, career. I assumed that we would use all the tools we
found here to get these things. But the course soon became a competition, like high school. People were trying to impress, as if they were competing for prizes. They showed a lot of selfish interest in the course, but not in the other students. This was the first shock. I could not get over it. I really did hit me.”

He soon found himself in difficulty with his syndicate group:

“This [the syndicate group] came as a shock. I didn’t know what the problem was, the people’s personalities or the mix. Normally if I have a problem I try to identify the fault, the things that make me annoyed, happy, the priorities I need to have.”

Victor’s experience with his syndicate group was truly traumatic. The group twice sent a delegation to complain about his contribution and it seems that he gradually withdrew from the group process:

“There was a clique against me; eventually this clique made all the decisions and just informed the others by email. … If I go to a meeting now, I don’t say anything. If they don’t see anything good in anything I say, then it is better not to say anything. It has been a hard time, but I have now put it all behind me. A problem is a problem only if you see it as one. So I avoid conflict, there is more peace this way, let sleeping dogs lie.”

This negative experience with the syndicate group was compounded by a very clear mismatch between his preferred learning style and what he encountered on the course:

“When I came here, I expected that someone else would impart knowledge in me without me having to go to books to do it. I did not expect having to spend over 6 hours reading
books in order to get the answers for a single lecture. I look at it differently. We were supposed to be taught, not to teach ourselves.”

The interview gradually developed into a litany of complaints and disappointments which coloured his every opinion and feeling. While he maintained contact with his fellow-Nigerian students on the course, he was generally withdrawn:

“I mix easily with people, but if people don’t welcome me, then I walk away … I tried doing some sport, playing football, but once the spirit was killed, I lost interest. I won’t be going to the party this week-end. … When I was at school, I was in charge of social events, drama, dances, films, competitions. I was the most organized among my classmates, even if I was not the one who had most fun. I know a lot about socials. But here, I have lost interest in social events. In the past, I mixed easily, I even DJed for a friend of mine. Here it’s different, Why should I be friends with people at a party, when they do not want to be my friends outside the party? … Initially, I wanted to do an internship in the UK, but now I have lost interest about staying here, unless a very good job turns up.”

“Once the spirit was killed” is an expression that captures vividly many aspects Victor’s experience. He gradually withdrew emotionally from the course and became apathetic and uninterested. Intermittently his lecturers reported displays of initiative, engagement and leadership by him – for the most part, however, this student endured the course, marking time.

One interesting feature of these three cases is that they suggest no ‘honeymoon period’ in the students’ experiences, a feature which has been extensively discussed in connection with culture shock (Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1963; Hsiaoying, 1995; Lysgaard, 1955; Oberg, 1960; Ward et al., 2001). They all three felt deeply uncomfortable from the start of their sojourns.
The perceived causes of learning shock

The 17 learning shock sufferers in the sample may not constitute a sample but they allow some generalizations into the causes of learning shock. The commonest perceived cause of learning shock among these students was the experience of working in syndicate groups (mentioned by 11 of them). Given the wide use of syndicate groups in MBA programmes and given the usual justifications of learning in groups this is an important finding. Many groups doubtless offer a supportive and stimulating learning forum for students and many had positive experiences. There can be little doubt, however, that dysfunctional syndicate groups leave profound scars on their members. Within such dysfunctional groups, some of the these students experienced feelings of anger, despair, betrayal, disappointment, collapse of self-esteem and anxiety reminiscent of Sartre’s famous “Hell is other people” (Huis Clos). Trapped into having to work with people from very different cultural and educational backgrounds, learning shock sufferers viewed some of their syndicate group partners as too competitive or too lazy, too loud and rude or too quiet and unassertive and so forth.

Akina Suzuki, a Japanese student, expressed views which were representative of many non-native speakers who found themselves in groups dominated by assertive native-speakers:

My syndicate group has been the biggest single source of problems. Out of the six students in the group, only two are from the Far East, I and a Chinese girl, and we could not make ourselves heard. There was a lot of conflict, which never got resolved. I prefer to work by myself, and found myself having to do a lot of group work. Some of the groups in which I participated were better than others. In the successful ones, the main difference was that people respected each other. I felt that others listened to me. I lack some confidence in my ability to express myself. I am confident in being able to understand, but cannot express myself as well as in my mother tongue, and this makes me less confident in explaining my views.”
But alienation from the syndicate groups was not limited to international students who did not have speak English as a first language. Elizabeth Phillips, a highly articulate and assertive student who had previously worked as an editor of a national arts magazine, said:

> For me, the shock was the result of coming back to an academic environment. Having spent a long time with right-brain, creative, co-operative people, I was not used to an environment where conflict escalated to the point of damaging relations. I was not used to people shouting … When the group started to disintegrate, … After a particularly nasty argument, a meeting where nothing was achieved, [one student] said “I have cooked some chapattis, shall we eat together? It was really bizarre. Conflict brings out different cultural responses in people. In our group, we just lacked a common language – I felt that if I said anything I would get shouted down. The atmosphere was aggressive, aggressive, aggressive. Most of the aggression came from one person and was directed at me. There was competition between us.

The level of aggression experienced by some students, along with feelings of anger and despair, suggests that some of these syndicate groups lapse into profoundly dysfunctional modes or what Bion described as ‘basic assumption’ group behaviour, (Anzieu, 1984; Bion, 1961; Hirschhorn, 1988). Our data suggests that most notable among basic assumption groups was the fight-flight group, which is fuelled by fantasies of persecution (“If I said anything I would get shouted down”) and seems to scapegoat particular individuals or cultural groups against whom massive amounts of aggression is channelled. In particular, it seemed that unassertive students were often cast in the role of ‘skiver’ and scapegoated. James O’Connor, a very hard-working and inquisitive student, said:

> The main cause of stress for me was coping with dysfunctional groups. I had assumed, wrongly, that all MBA students came with similar high expectations and similar high
standards. I have been in some groups with fantastic people. But I have also been in groups with students who were not willing to work hard or to contribute to the group process. For the first time last week, I actually lost my temper with someone. I didn’t actually shout at him, but was extremely angry. ... He is a lazy skiver and a slacker, I suspect he may fail the MBA as a whole. I just have no patience for this type of person. I found it very distressing. I didn’t want to take on a role in this confrontation, but could not let it pass either. My level of tolerance for such people is low. This came in the middle of a very busy week for me … I was under stress. The year was coming to a climax with different assignments due in, and I just lost it.”

Painful syndicate group experiences exacerbated what was the second commonest cause of learning shock, general cultural differences (mentioned by 9 of the 17 sufferers). Some of these cultural differences were based on nationality (the British students’ focus on the pub as the place for socializing being particularly alienating for some foreign students). Learning shock emerged when culture reinforced the group’s processes of inclusion and exclusion and, at times, rendered particular students irrelevant or even invisible to their peers. In the following long-extract, Akio Takashi, a Japanese student, offers a very perceptive account of the interaction of group and cultural factors:

When I first came here, I felt really angry. When people were impolite, I considered it a matter of personality, not of culture. In Japan, we have a very positive image of British people, summed up in the image of the British gentleman. When I met people who were shouting, interrupting and seeking to impose their views [in syndicate groups], I would asked myself “Why are you not a gentleman? Why are you so impolite?” Gradually, I started to realize that impoliteness is not a matter of personality, but a cultural difference. I started to realize the class difference among native speakers. The upper class
students, those from more privileged origins seemed to be more helpful and patient with Asian students.

Anger, frustration – these are the feelings I felt. It is difficult to tackle such feelings. Even now. Eventually I learned to cope by doing other things, I started playing badminton and joined a symphony orchestra playing the French horn. Coming into contact with other UK people, I realized that some of my prejudices about UK people were based on the MBA. MBA students are really aggressive. Not directly, but indirectly. For example, many native speakers already have some skills. They have pride in their opinions. Japanese students too have pride in their opinions, I for example have 7 years work experience and I had my own pride. But the opinions of native speakers denies this experience. It harmed my pride and I had to work hard to recover my injured pride.

“Many students, like me experience an injured sense of pride. Of course, they have a final solution or method. This is to do no work, to be a free rider. [Did you consider this?] No, I didn’t. I see it as impolite. I feel that I have to make a contribution. But too much contribution is also impolite. Some Asian students, however, adopted the final solution, they became free riders – otherwise we would drop out, we would suffer from deep psychological problems, maybe even kill ourselves.”

Mei Lin Teoh, a Malaysian student educated in Australia, spoke perfect English and experienced a profound ambivalence between a ‘Chinese’ and a ‘Western’ identity; her views on cultural differences were very intricate and interesting:

“What I noticed is that some Chinese students will give their opinion when asked. But when they are challenged, they can’t back it up, and then they withdraw into themselves. After that
it is as if they have lost all opinions. We [now speaking as a 'Chinese person'] like to voice our opinion, but not to be confronted. They [notice change from 'we'] don’t like to back-up what they say. On lecturers’ questionnaires, we recently had an email asking us if we would mind writing our names on the evaluations. But Asian students prefer to write anonymous evaluations. They don’t like to put their name, and then somebody may come and ask them to explain their views.”

Comments like these suggest that culture shock and learning shock have an interactive effect, exacerbating each other. Feeling culturally alienated makes the learning difficulties more pronounced and vice versa. Cultural factors accounted for learning shock even among native UK students. Some of them found the dominant political, sexual and racial attitudes among the majority of their fellow students shocking. Several students from the public sector reported considerable alienation from what they regarded as very pro-capitalist and pro-business attitudes among their private sector peers. Thus, Becky Hart, who had been in the British Civil Service, said:

“At the start of the course, there were several students who liked to make controversial statements or express highly politicised opinions – these were all pro-Conservative statements, some of which I found embarrassing. They also had the effect of isolating those people on the course who did not know or did not care about UK politics. I was also embarrassed in the first week, when we did the cultural exercise with Dot, where different groups of students made a presentation about their national culture. The person representing the UK group had been completely drunk at the pub before the presentation and his performance was embarrassing.”

Equal second as cause of learning shock was some students’ feeling of a particularly grave weakness in some aspect of their learning, an Achilles heel experience
consisting mostly of either poor quantitative skills or poor English language skills. Sakura Yamamoto, another Japanese student, and a former civil servant, said:

“My experience during the first week on the course was very painful. I was knocked down by my poor English. I couldn’t understand what the lecturers said and found it impossible to follow the case studies. I understood about 10-20%. In group discussions, there was nothing I could say. My confidence and self-esteem collapsed. ... I had expected these difficulties, but I had not expected the total collapse of my confidence. When the Japanese government sponsored me, I had conversations with other colleagues who had studied in the UK, so I had known all about the difficulties that language would cause me. ...I felt angry with myself, angry about how useless I was because of my English. This was my first experience where I could not say what I wanted to say. I also felt anger at the Japanese education, because they did not teach us more useful English.”

All three primary causes of learning shock (syndicate groups, different nationalities, Achilles heel) appear to re-inforce each other. They also become exacerbated by the learning shock experience, making up self-reinforcing vicious cycles. Others factors which made parts of these cycles were

- Specific difficulties with teaching and learning styles, (e.g. interruptions during the lectures, having to read books etc.) (6/17)
- Overwork – the feeling of continuous bombardment and deadlines (5/17)
- A return to an academic environment after some time away from it (4/17)

Interestingly, disappointment with the institution, the programme or the teaching staff did not feature among the factors contributing to learning shock with the notable exceptions of one or two students (which included Omonuwa above).

IN summary then, the causes of learning shock tend to be mutually re-inforcing – thus, for example, problems of communication can lead to isolation and subsequent
scapegoating within a syndicate group, resulting in stereotyping and acrimony, flight and withdrawal, as well as exhaustion, performance anxieties and failure.

**Coping mechanisms**

So, how did our students seek to cope with their learning shock? All but three of the 17 shock-sufferers (the exceptions included Victor and Michael Armstrong) mentioned **talking to others** as a major coping mechanism. It is notable that a larger number (which included Theresa) talked about their problems to outsiders (10) rather than to classmates (5). There is little doubt that talking was quite effective way of containing the painful emotions resulting from learning shock. This is consistent with literature on coping with culture shock (Adelman, 1988; Arthur, 2001; Berry, 1997; Chataway & Berry, 1989; Cross, 1995; Hsiaoying, 1995; Neill & Proeve, 2000; Schmitt et al., 2003; Ward et al., 2001). Talking to externals may offer a way of thinking through and coming to terms with negative emotions. Insiders, on the other hand, are more liable share the burden of the unhappiness, but also to exacerbate feelings of inadequacy, exclusion and victimization which may lead to a contagiousness of the shock experience.

A second, and sometimes parallel, way of coping with learning shock, reported by 9/17 students, involved **diversion** (which included visits to museums, shopping, watching TV, listening to music etc.) or **self-care** (which included relaxation techniques, praying, massage, meditation, acupuncture etc.). A third way of coping, reported by 7 students involved **planning, rationalizing and thinking things through**. This is the type of coping, a type of emotional self-coaching, is sometimes seen as ‘direct’ or ‘active’ and more effective than indirect or passive types of coping. (Adelman, 1988)

Is it possible to judge how effective these mechanisms were? All of them undoubtedly offered some comfort to the sufferers, but it is also possible that some of them reinforced the learning shock – for example, seeking solace in talking to people of the same nationality or with the same anxieties about their academic work could enhance isolation and, in some cases, alienation.

There is one final type of coping mechanism which we were not able to observe, with the single exception of Victor, and this is **emotional withdrawal** and possibly denial.
Such students would obviously be unwilling to discuss their experience with an interviewer, and may have included several of the 12 students who, having failed part of the course, ignored repeated invitations to participate in the research. It is telling that Victor only agreed to be interviewed because of a personal bond that he had formed with the interviewer. James O'Connor:

“Some of my fellow students resort to denial as a coping mechanism. Sometimes denial can keep us alive, but it does create problems for their fellow-students who have to work extra hard. … Take away all the academic content of the course – it is still a huge personal challenge. I had to confront a lot of aspects of myself. I was asked a lot of questions – I didn’t always like the answers I got, but it was important to confront them.”

CONCLUSIONS -- WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED?

This study has approached the MBA as an emotional learning experience, in contrast to many other studies that have concentrated on cognitive, discursive and other aspects. It has shown us first, that the learning process can be painful for many students, amounting to a learning shock experience for some. Second, that while poor language and mathematical skills and the distance between the home and teaching culture, increase the likelihood of any individual student experiencing learning shock, these factors alone cannot and do not explain it: learning shock can affect the most gregarious and previously successful of our students. Third, despite the contribution of effective syndicate groups to learning and the ‘MBA experience’, groups can be characterised by exclusion and aggression, becoming a major source of learning shock. And fourth, that students seek to cope through a variety of active and passive ways, some of which lead into a cycle of reinforcing the shock.

As sojourners in academia, all MBA students undergo a process of transition. This involves a variety of emotions, both positive and negative, and requires emotional literacy, management and learning. Some cope better than others. For some, it amounts to a tortuous experience where they struggle to adjust and to learn. The special demands of the MBA programme amplify the problems of adult learners
returning to study: the breadth of the programme and the associated challenges of managing subjects as diverse as organisation behaviour and statistics; the role of syndicate groups in the learning process and the complex context of simultaneously being both a high paying customer and a student whose performance is being judged. Add this to the culture of interpersonal rivalry which features on many MBA programmes and no wonder that some students struggle, especially those who carry with them the additional challenge of culture shock: working in an unfamiliar language, different teaching and learning styles, and often unrealistic expectations about what awaits them.

Many narratives and discourses surrounding the MBA disregard the emotional experience, focusing instead on the acquisition of new skills and knowledge, the development of networks and the improved job opportunities at the end. Our research has contributed to the recognition of the hidden life of an MBA, which can be fraught with misery, anxiety, insecurity and aggression. It has revealed that often students must wear masks of happiness, self-confidence and assertiveness to conceal deeper vulnerabilities and fears.

The research also suggests that the students’ learning can be enhanced by providing the right emotional climate in which conflicts and disagreements are aired and respect for difference is enhanced. Applying the lessons of our research has led us to make a number of changes to our MBA orientation and to the management of our syndicate groups. We now discuss the issue of learning shock early in the programme. Our intention in so doing is to signal that we recognise, and indeed, expect that some of our students will be experiencing it. By normalising it in this way we hope to offer support and help at an early stage. As part of this we give guidance on how to manage learning shock. We are also designing a student mentoring system whereby recent graduates provide mentoring support to their successors. And we have worked yet harder to build a culture of support rather than competition and have provided more support on how to manage conflict in syndicate groups. Finally we are experimenting with the composition of syndicate groups. This year, for the first time, we have allocated students to one of their groups on the basis of cultural affinity and we will shortly be evaluating their experiences of the different syndicates. This will form the basis of a subsequent paper.
In summary, our research with MBA students suggests that learning shock should be regarded as a distinct phenomenon experienced by many adult learners returning to study. While it shares many features with the related phenomenon of culture shock we believe it to be distinct for two reasons. First, it is experienced by students working within their home culture as well as those from without. Second, it is different from ‘reverse learning shock’ because in its articulation by sufferers it refers very explicitly to the experience of returning to the different and unfamiliar form of study which is the MBA degree. But as with culture shock, learning shock is primarily an emotional experience intimately tied to learning.


