




Chapter 7

Engaging Students as ‘Country Specialists’ to Counter the ‘Africa is a Country’ Misconception

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Introduction

Students do not enter into their study programmes with blank minds about the subject to be studied. This is particularly credible for courses focusing on Africa, a continent which is highly stereotyped despite receiving unprecedented attention in the turn to global education in a highly interconnected era. Students come into their courses on Africa with preconceptions; some factual, some inaccurate. A misconception of Africa that is notorious not only for its blatant inaccuracy but also for its pervasiveness is the well-known ‘Africa is a country’ stereotype (Randolph & DeMulder, 2008; Faloyin, 2022; Knight et al., 2022). For instance, in a written anonymous preconception quiz on Africa administered in September 2023 in a module titled “International Politics of Development in Africa” (IPDA) which I teach in a Sino-British joint venture university in China, 14 out of 88 (15.9%) participants in the quiz portrayed Africa as a country. IPDA is a foundational module in the Bachelor of Arts in International Relations programme at Xi’an Jiaotong-Liverpool University (XJTLU). It is particularly pertinent to redress misconceptions in introductory courses before students move-on to senior undergraduate courses.

Left uncorrected, misconceptions can hamper transformative learning and impede transformative behaviour. Misconceptions pose obstacles to student progression from lower- to higher-order categories of learning, from novice to expert, from surface to deep learning, from knowledge consumers to knowledge generators, from descriptive to critical thinkers, and from concept memorisation to concept application (Engelmann & Huntoon, 2011:465). Holding on to the specific 'Africa is a country' stereotype potentially translates to unsubstantiated Africa-wide generalisations in student assessments, risking poor grades, and ultimately upon graduation, risking undifferentiated attitudes to foreign policies vis-à-vis African countries. If a Chinese student views Africa as a uniform monolithic entity and goes through their studies - including on scope and consequences of Chinese engagements in Africa - without developing sensitivity to the diversity of Africa and its institutions, the student may struggle to critically analyse and substantiate foreign policy development and debates relating to Sino-African relations. Specific reference is made to Chinese students here because of the context of IPDA's delivery in a China-based university, but the same could be said in relation to students in courses on Africa in non-Chinese contexts. The fundamental point being made is that a variegated understanding of Africa is necessary for any student who may eventually participate in Africa-related foreign policymaking, implementation, and discussion.

While it is vital to dismantle the misconception of Africa as a country, theories on operational dynamics of the brain suggest human inclinations to 'resist' remedial conceptual change. Cognitive theory of belief perseverance highlights vulnerability of misconception-discrediting information to be resisted, including through ignoring, downplaying, and even challenging the incoming discrediting information. This resistance is problematic as it allows the misconception and its detrimental effects to persist. How can module delivery of content on Africa be designed to mitigate student resistance to information correcting the misconception of Africa as a country? Using the author's own teaching experience in the Sino-British

transnational higher education context of XJTLU and drawing on Freirian principles of dialogic student partnership, this chapter proposes an anti-misconception pedagogic model wherein the traditional divide between teachers as lecturers and students as passive listeners is blunted, with students contributing to interactivity in the classroom as ‘country specialists’.

In the proposed misconception-targeting model, each student is required to choose one African country, develop specialist knowledge on the chosen country, and apply that knowledge in seminar discussions of how themes covered in the module and related readings are corroborated or contradicted by institutions and historical and current events in the selected countries. The model integrates pedagogic features of problem posing, co-investigation, and shared reflection (based on student podcasts and structured discussions) to mitigate incentives for resisting corrections and holding-on to the ‘Africa is a country’ misconception.

Based on data collected through a survey of students’ subjective perceptions and more objective pre- and post-module delivery misconception assessments, I argue that the above-mentioned multidimensional pedagogic approach to engaging students as country specialists helps to ultimately (by the end of the semester) reduce the number of students who misconceive Africa as a country. Incentives to resist correction of the ‘Africa is a country’ inaccuracy at the start of the semester are ultimately subdued in the proposed anti-misconception pedagogic model via various but not unrelated channels, including through: triggering curiosity for learning about Africa’s diversity; inspiring rational evaluations of cognitive bases for engaging in anti-misconception learning activities; and exposing students regularly to multiple sources of mutually reinforcing information evincing Africa’s diversity for nuanced and critical thinking learning outcomes in relation to Africa.

Contributions to Related Education Literature

This chapter makes a few contributions to literature on political science and development education. First, much of the existing political science and development education literature illuminate and discuss pedagogic methods for supporting learning on related discipline concepts such as anarchy, bureaucracy, democracy, elections, foreign aid, human rights, and power, while ultimately targeting transformation of students into critical thinkers, problem solvers, and civic activists (e.g., Latimer & Hempson, 2012; Bogaards & Deutsch, 2015; Mulcare & Shwedel, 2017). However, the existing literature largely overlooks the potential of students' preconceptions and misconceptions to hinder transformative learning and action, as noted earlier. Through its theoretical framework and pedagogical model, this chapter contributes towards mitigating the deficit on anti-misconception scholarship.

Second, limited anti-misconception education studies are largely confined to the natural sciences (Zeilik, & Bisard, 2000; Limón, 2001; Robbins & Roy, 2007; Sadler, 2009; Wrinkle & Manivannan, 2009; Engelmann & Huntoon, 2011) which typically confront misconceptions by using teacher-centred experiments or discrepant events with adaptability challenges in the context of political and social sciences which deal with relatively more abstract concepts. Very few non-natural science education studies deal with misconceptions (Goldsmith, 2006; Baylouny, 2009; Milleret et al., 2010; Abboud, 2015; Çavdar et al., 2019), and these few studies illuminate only a few anti-misconception pedagogic strategies, notably case-based learning, simulations, and lectures. By using a multidimensional pedagogical approach to deal with the 'Africa is a country' stereotype, this chapter contributes to expanding illustrations of possible pedagogic methods for overcoming misconceptions.

Third, this chapter contributes to the literature on student partnership in higher education. Much of the literature on student partnership reports various partnership practices and related challenges in the areas of curriculum planning and course design (Bovill et al., 2011; Bergmark & Westman, 2016;

Bovill & Felton, 2016; Bovill et al., 2016; Woolmer et al., 2016), generating feedback on teaching and learning (Seale et al., 2015; Jensen & Bennett, 2016), and institutional strategy and academic administration (Healey et al., 2010; Carey, 2013; Deeley, 2014; Deeley & Bovill, 2017). Relatively less is published on student partnership in teaching delivery and learning assessment (the few studies in these areas notably include Healey et al., 2014; Bain, 2010), particularly with respect to dialogic partnership in anti-misconception teaching and learning. Basing its theoretical framework on Freirian principles of dialogic partnership, this chapter contributes to literature on students as partners with specific respect to the role of students as partners in dialogue in the multidimensional anti-misconception pedagogical model used in the IPDA for countering the 'Africa is a country' stereotype.

Furthermore, while most of the extant political and social science education research relating to misconceptions were done in Western (American and European) tertiary institutions with long-established cultures of liberal interactive learning (Goldsmith, 2006; Miller et al., 2010; Çavdar et al., 2019), the IPDA study reported in this chapter is in a China-based university (XJTLU) with transnational ties to a British university (University of Liverpool). Given linguistic and learning culture differences in transnational contexts such as XJTLU's, risks of classroom reticence – especially amongst Chinese students who are typically accustomed to teacher-centred classroom cultures in their pre-university education experience (Ergenc, 2020:4) – pose a peculiar challenge to IPDA's anti-misconception pedagogic model which engages students as country specialists and requires verbal interactivity in the classroom. While I have previously highlighted the utility of student podcasts for overcoming the challenge of classroom reticence (Che, 2023), the anti-misconception effectiveness of engaging students as country specialists, including in podcast tasks, remains underexplored. In addition to data previously collected from a survey of student perceptions from January to March 2022, this chapter innovatively draws on misconception pre-tests in September 2023 and post-module delivery of mechanical

reviews of student essays in January 2024 to substantiate the utility of IPDA's misconception-targeting pedagogical model.

The rest of this chapter proceeds in a number of sections. First, I outline the chapter's theoretical framework and related misconception-targeting multidimensional pedagogical model, building on insight from Savion's (2009) cognitive theory on misconception persistence and Freirian principles of dialogic student partnership (Freire, 1996; Peters & Mathias, 2018) relevant for detecting and dispelling stereotypes. Because Savion (2009:89-90) places 'dialogue' at the top of her list of recommended student-centred pedagogic strategies for overcoming persistent misconceptions without elaboration, I draw on Freire's (1996) pioneering philosophy on active learning through student-student and student-teacher dialogic partnership for wisdom on principles suitable for anchoring classroom dialogue and alleviating anxieties which sustain misconceptions in Savion's cognitive theory. Second, I discuss application of Freirian principles in the anti-misconception delivery design of IPDA, which engages students as country specialists. Next, the chapter reports its evaluative research design and related findings on utility and challenges of engaging students as country specialists for overcoming the misconception of Africa as a country. The chapter concludes by highlighting key takeaways and guiding principles for instructors interested in adapting this chapter's anti-misconception model.

Theoretical Framework

Colonial Western-centric views of Africa, including in modernisation theory of development, typically portray Africa as a homogenous entity belonging to a so-called 'underdeveloped world' or 'third world'. Such a reductionist aggregative depiction of Africa ostensibly underlies ubiquity of the 'Africa is a country' misconception given conventional dominance of modernisation theory in development studies. However, modernisation theory's aggregative view of African societies cannot explain why a person may maintain such a view in the face of discrediting information from multiple

sources (books, films, social media, etc) in a highly globalised and interconnected era. Savion's (2009) cognitive theory of perception perseverance seems more appropriate for explaining why a person may continue to stereotype Africa as a country despite probably having previously encountered factual information to the contrary.

According to Savion's theory, when a person encounters information discrediting a long-held misconception, a cognitive disequilibrium is created as the brain experiences a conflict between the new information and pre-held ideas. This state of cognitive conflict is accompanied by fears of: i) losing control over use of preconceptions to find coherence, meaningfulness, and order in the world and to predict behaviour and events; ii) losing rapidity processing large amounts of information, including about diversity of the world, with little cognitive effort; and iii) losing sense of self or bruising own ego from admitting inaccuracy of the pre-held perception (Savion, 2009:83). Interpreted in the context of the 'Africa is a country' misconception, these fears are ostensibly supported by apprehension over complexities that diversity of the African continent poses for variegated analysis, necessitating substantial cognitive investment for nuanced and substantiated information analysis contrasting processing rapidity proffered by reductionist references to Africa as a country. Fear of bruising ego is particularly pertinent in the context of the 'Africa is a country' misconception because discrediting information potentially challenges not only inaccuracy of the misconception but also provides a basis for doubting and questioning other opinions or perceptions held about the so-called country.

Because the state of cognitive conflict and fear is uncomfortable, there is a human disposition to try to restore equilibrium by actively or passively resisting the discrediting information. Modes of resistance include conveniently misinterpreting, deliberately challenging, passively avoiding discussion, downplaying, and attaching little value to the discrediting information, or at best confining its validity to a "convenient paradigm" (Savion, 2009:82). Albeit void of empirical tests for validity, Savion's (2009) theory cogently

provides an innovative shift from explaining universality of misconceptions to highlighting cognitive resistance to discrediting information as the driver of misconception persistence over time.

Partnership in Anti-Misconception Pedagogy: Engaging Students as Country Specialists

If cognitive resistance to information discrediting misconceptions is supported by certain fears as outlined in Savion's theory above, then a pedagogical model oriented towards overcoming the 'Africa is a country' misconception amongst students should confront those fears. Hence, a traditional teacher-centred lecture-based approach for dealing with the 'Africa is a country' misconception becomes unappealing. In a teacher-centred approach wherein the teacher is 'sage on the stage' (King, 1993:30) doing all the talking, including via misconception-targeted lectures about the diversity of Africa and using various African countries (despite the teacher's possibly limited expertise on some of the countries) to substantiate lectures, students' fears may be strengthened rather than weakened, increasing risks of resistance. Dominating the stage with anti-misconception lectures leaves students powerless, with limited to no influence over using the classroom to explore and test (in)effectiveness of their pre-conceptions for finding coherence, meaningfulness, and order in the world. This sense of powerlessness can be counterproductive for anti-misconception teaching as students may misinterpret misconception-targeted lectures as attempts by the teacher to impose their views on students.

Moreover, fear of losing rapidity in processing large amounts of information relating to the diversity of Africa without much cognitive investment is not alleviated in a teacher-centred approach. Misconception-oriented lectures leaves limited or no opportunities for students to actively engage their senses, to emotionally connect and collaborate with each other in anti-misconception learning, and to orally interact with each other (Tusmith & Reddy, 2002). Limited

student engagement in the teacher-centred approach to anti-misconception teaching and learning potentially results in a concentration of the burden of detecting and confronting misconceptions around the teacher. This concentrated burden is especially problematic if the teacher's own knowledge on Africa is limited, or even worse, if the teacher holds misconceptions of their own or is unable to correctly judge misconceptions in students' prior knowledge. Given the risk of misjudging students' misconceptions without interactive opportunities to rectify such misjudgements and given the risk of transmitting and reinforcing misconceptions through the traditional lecture-based approach, students may feel frustration (Savion, 2009:89) including by the lack of interactivity, leaving fears of losing information processing swiftness afforded by Africa-wide generalisations unbroken.

Compared to the traditional teacher-centred approach, a student-centred pedagogical approach - which engages students actively in the teaching and learning process while displacing the teacher from 'sage on the stage' to 'guide on the side' (King, 1993:30; Sarkar Arani et al., 2019:233) - seems more promising for alleviating fears underlying resistance to information discrediting misconceptions. Savion (2009:89-90; 2005) proposes a list of student-centred, anti-misconception instructional techniques, at the top of which 'dialogue' is emphasised.

The prominent role of student-student and student-teacher conversations in active teaching and learning is fundamentally rooted on renowned transformative education thinker Freire's (1996) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* which criticises the traditional divide between responsibilities of the teacher and the student. According to the traditional divide, "the teacher teaches and the students are taught ... the teacher talks and the students listen" (Freire, 1996:54). Restricting students to passive listeners hinders student contribution to knowledge generation, facilitating conformity to the political and socio-economic status quo. Conversely in Freire's (1996) transformative pedagogical model, the student not only listens but is a collaborative partner, functioning as a teacher, even if

only temporarily, by vocally participating in teaching through dialogue. In the transformative model, the teacher becomes a teacher-student and the student becomes a student-teacher.

Enacting dialogic student partnerships necessitates teaching and learning methods which allow for problem posing, co-investigation, and shared reflection, amongst other Freirian principles (Peters & Mathias, 2018:63). Consistent with these Freirian principles, the anti-misconception pedagogical model used in IPDA is multidimensional whilst fundamentally engaging students as country specialists. Essentially, each student in the module had a chance to act as a 'student-teacher' by specialising on one African country, researching how each topic and related readings apply to the specific country, making a real-time or recorded audio presentation (podcast) which is collectively listened to in class, and participating in seminar discussions of points derived from the presentation. Country choices were confirmed by the teacher on a 'first-come, first-served' basis. Because of much larger class sizes (over 100 students), the presentation component was excluded from the delivery design of IPDA in the last two academic years (2022-2024), albeit retained in another module taught by myself with more administrative and teaching support at the same foundational level of the Bachelor of Arts in International Relations at XJTLU.

Application of Freirian Principles of Dialogic Partnership in IPDA

Although Savion (2009:89-90) prescribes 'dialogue' as a leading student-centred pedagogic strategy for overcoming persistent misconceptions, very little additional information is provided by the cognitive theorist to elaborate attributes or guiding principles of a classroom dialogic approach for overcoming misconceptions. Hence, as noted earlier, Freire's (1996) pioneering philosophy on active learning through student-student and student-teacher dialogue is relevant for wisdom on principles underlying the potential of dialogue to weaken fears associated with misconception persistence. This

section discusses how the already-mentioned Freirian principles of dialogic partnership (problem posing, co-investigation, and shared reflection) are applied in IPDA's 'engaging students as country specialists' model for confronting the 'Africa is a country' misconception.

To start off, IPDA incorporated the Freirian principle of problem posing by using quizzes and questions before and during module delivery to generate curiosity and test knowledge on the diversity of Africa. In the first week of module delivery I typically administer a quiz to gauge students' prior conceptions and identify possible misconceptions about Africa. Prior to the 2023-2024 academic year, questions in the quiz were posed orally to the entire class, and often only the most confident and least reticent students responded. However, at the start of the 2023-2024 academic year, I administered the quiz in written format and each student was required to write down and submit their answer sheets without including their names and registration numbers for purposes of anonymity in reviewing responses.

Following the pre-test, I usually highlight correct answers discrediting misconceptions and then introduce students to the module and its delivery design, emphasising student-teacher responsibilities of students as class country specialists and the importance of using specific countries to substantiate presentations, discussions, and assessment essays in IPDA. This initial session serves, in part, to trigger student curiosity and attention to the anti-misconception orientation of IPDA while inspiring students to re-evaluate cognitive processing rapidity afforded by Africa-wide generalisations as being costly in unsubstantiated end-of-semester essays and in the long-run for engagement with the policy world following graduation.

Sustaining problem posing throughout the semester, each topic in the module is accompanied by specific questions or problems designed to pool ideas of country specialists while allowing for diverse case-based substantiation of abstract learning. For instance, on the linkage between colonialism and underdevelopment, IPDA poses the problem: "How did

colonialism weaken the development of African states?” On ethnic patronage and underdevelopment, the module asks: “How does ethnicity affect provision of public goods in African states?” Posed problems and seminar discussions were expected to keep students exposed to regular and recurrent evidence (from country specialist student teachers) discrediting the ‘Africa is a country’ stereotype.

Problem posing and shared reflection are bridged in IPDA by co-investigation. As clarified by Peters and Mathias (2018:63), co-investigation does not necessarily entail working together in groups but must involve a sense of collective purpose. In IPDA, co-investigation involved all module participants reading certain texts prescribed by instructors and undertaking additional country-specific research for the collective purpose of determining if, and in what ways, concepts and issues in required readings apply or do not apply to chosen African countries. Through co-investigation, students encounter scholarly literature containing empirical references to specific African countries which equip students for nuanced, substantiated analysis of themes in the module, and by extension mitigate the fear of discarding the ‘Africa is a country’ myth based on cognitive inclinations for information processing swiftness.

Finally, the Freirian principle of shared reflection is strung into IPDA’s pedagogic model of ‘engaging students as country specialists’ by requiring brief (5–10 minutes) student presentations and group discussions. To mitigate oral reticence in class, students can record their presentations as audio podcasts which are then played in the classroom by the teacher for collective listening by the class. Whether conducted live in person or recorded, the presentation task facilitates student engagement as student-teachers, allowing each student to voice their interpretation of module readings with respect to their specific country of specialisation, providing a basis for group-based discussions of variations (or the absence thereof) in dynamics of underdevelopment challenges across different African countries.

Through the presentation task, it can be anticipated that each student's sense of value expectation (as a partner in teaching) would be fostered, inspiring them to read extensively, reflect critically, and substantiate knowledge application with nuance, all values which bode well for building self-confidence and discarding long-held misconceptions without fear of losing analytical processing swiftness. Collectively listening to audio podcasts and/or in-person presentations potentially fosters emotional bonding, facilitating development of friendly, collaborative learning relationships which can help to cushion the fear of bruising self-ego in otherwise embarrassing circumstances of admitting misconceptions. Discussions in IPDA are structured based on content of presentations and in relation to problems posed on each topic in the module. Through the weekly discussions, students become recurrently exposed to the use of diverse specific countries in substantiation of arguments, sustaining consciousness about redundancy of the misconception that 'Africa is a country' while potentially inspiring application of more contextual nuance in analyses of issues relating to development in Africa.

Methodology

To evaluate the effects of engaging students as country specialists to rectify the 'Africa is a country' misconception, this pedagogic research relied on mixed methods involving: a survey in January to March 2022 of students' subjective perceptions; and more objective measures entailing a preconception quiz on Africa in September 2023 (prior to module delivery in the 2023-2024 academic year), and mechanical reviews of end-of-semester assessment essays (in January 2024) for references to specific African countries in substantiating arguments (as opposed to generic references to Africa). This study focused on the IPDA module in XJTLU which I have taught since September 2021 using similar course materials.

The survey data is drawn from a study which I conducted in 2022 as part of a pedagogic action research (Che, 2023). Upon taking charge of the IPDA module in 2021, I introduced student audio podcasts in module delivery to foster interactivity and

active learning in the module. The podcasting task required each student to record their views on how assigned readings relate to specific African countries chosen by students in the module. While Che (2023) largely focused on examining perceptions of students about the pedagogic utility of student podcasts, some of the feedback collected in the survey highlighted anti-misconception learning gains. Much of the feedback relating to anti-misconception learning is not reported in the 2023 publication.

In addition to the previously unreported survey data, the present chapter draws on a written pre-test (preconception quiz) on Africa and post-module delivery mechanical review of essays to gauge persistence of the 'Africa is a country' stereotype. Administering a preconception quiz helps towards detecting stereotypes and inaccurate views prior to module delivery. In previous academic years (prior to September 2023), I administered the quiz orally by voicing questions to the class, and after a few response attempts from students, I clarified the correct answers. A challenge that I have observed with this oral approach to the preconception quiz is that very few students, mostly the least reticent tend to participate, making it difficult to confidently ascertain the number of students with Africa-related misconceptions.

To rectify the above challenge, I administered the preconception quiz in written format at the start of the 2023-2024 academic year. In the first class session in September 2023, every student who attended received a typewritten question asking whether Africa is a country or continent. Students were instructed not to communicate with one another, and not to write their names or other identification details on their answers. The duration of the quiz was five minutes after which all answer sheets were collected by the teacher for purposes of checking how many students misconceived Africa as a country.

A key limitation of this study's design is that evaluation of the (in)effectiveness of engaging students as country specialists did not specifically target only students who had expressed the 'Africa is a country' stereotype in pre-module

delivery misconception quizzes. To increase response rates, the misconception pre-test was designed to be anonymously answered. Because of this anonymity, it was impossible to identify and target only misconception-holding students in the post-module delivery research evaluating persistence of misconceptions.

However, IPDA's design engaged all students as country specialists. Thus all IPDA student module participants in the academic year 2021-2022 were targeted for participation in the survey which was administered as a written questionnaire online (Lime Survey). Settings in the Lime Survey were configured to ensure anonymity in student responses. Thus, although I shared the survey link exclusively with students in the module, answered questionnaires did not contain the identification details of students. Students were also given assurances that participation in the survey will not affect their grades in conformity with ethical clearance for the research from XJTU's Ethics Committee.

To gauge student pedagogic perceptions of engaging students as country specialists, I included a closed-ended question in the questionnaire requiring students to rate on a Likert attitudinal scale the extent to which they agree with pre-explained utility of country specialisation for developing critical, variegated perspectives about Africa while challenging the misconception of Africa as a country.

Findings and Discussion

Thirty-five students answered the questionnaire out of a total of 47 students in the 2021-2022 cohort (74.5% response rate). As shown in the graph below, the majority (31) of the 35 responses either agreed or strongly agreed that engaging students as country specialists was useful for cultivating nuanced differentiated perspectives about Africa.

How We Teach Africa Matters

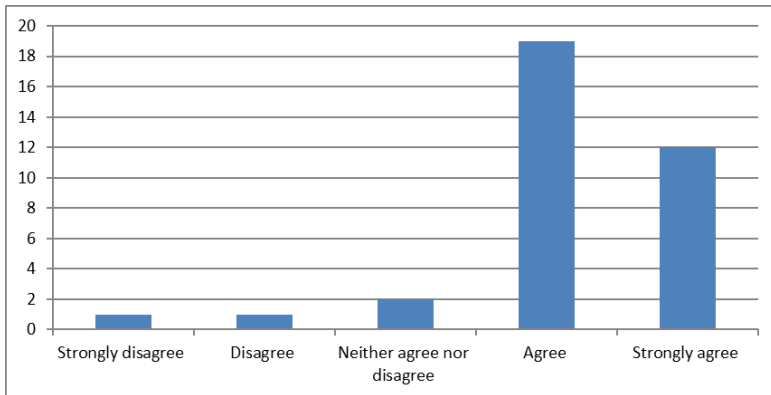


Figure 7.1: Extent to which students (dis)agree with pedagogic utility of engaging students as country specialists for countering the 'Africa is a country' misconception. Source: Author's conceptualisation

Immediately following closed-ended answer options in the questionnaire, students were given the opportunity to enter open-ended comments to substantiate their ratings. Students' comments were diverse and pointed to variegated learning gains about Africa from the various teaching and learning activities in IPDA. Most of the comments reveal an enhanced sense of value expectation associated especially with the presentation and discussion components of the module as a pertinent factor underlying affirmative perceptions of IPDA's multidimensional engagement of students as country specialists. Some revealing excerpts:

Before taking the module, we had very little information on any African state, so specializing on specific countries was a useful way for effectively linking what we learn in the module with the real world.

I think the idea of allocating one student one country is really useful for corroborating our views in the podcasts. I wanted my podcast to sound really academic so I read a lot about my chosen country which increased my confidence to substantiate discussions on the challenge of corruption to development.

Chapter 7

Initially I was worried because of my limited knowledge on Africa...To avoid making mistakes and incorrect claims in my podcast, I did the readings carefully and researched my [chosen] African country a lot.

[Through the podcasts and discussions of specific countries] we get different ideas from all classmates and this made us to understand that Africa is a very diverse continent.

The tasks in this module pushed students to use more private time in reading, researching specific countries, and preparing to explain one's views in the seminar.

During the seminar discussions students encountered different perspectives relating to the countries we chose for analyses. Students could also ask questions which allowed us to get comprehensive answers and knowledge about Africa.

I think my podcast was somewhat relevant in helping me to research and learn more about my [chosen] African country.

Getting us [students] to discuss applicability of ideas in the podcasts to various countries is a good way for us to learn about different development experiences and different cultures in Africa.

In a section of the questionnaire asking about students' perceived challenges in IPDA module delivery, responses flagged a few concerns relating to variations in quality of podcasts, repetitive podcast recording, difficulty in sourcing reading materials, underestimation of class knowledge about Africa's diversity, and overestimation of capacity of students to act as teachers. Some representative excerpts to substantiate these concerns:

It was difficult to understand some of the podcasts, especially because of the different accents of students. This is worsened because of the lack of visual supporting material. Making a [powerpoint presentation] isn't that

How We Teach Africa Matters

much more difficult but I believe it will help increase understanding significantly.

Too much time was wasted on improving my recording as I wanted it to sound good for the class.

Only [a few days' notice] was given for choosing countries in the module. I did not get enough time to search information on different countries before choosing. I think students should be given a longer [notice] period to minimize uncertainty about their choices.

The readings are difficult. And finding readings on my [African] country of specialisation is not easy.

There is very little information in the media about some of the African countries. I struggled to find information on [my chosen African country].

I think [the teacher] underestimate[s] how much the students know about Africa. It would have been better to let students freely decide how they want to illustrate their arguments.

... the burden of teaching is partially moved from the very capable and experienced lecturer to a student. I believe that in a worst-case scenario, this can negatively affect the learning and motivation for the rest of the class.

However, the concerns raised were few and none of them challenged the asserted utility of country specialisation in the module for teaching-back the 'Africa is a country' misconception. Evidence from the mechanical review of essays in the module further corroborates the usefulness of engaging students as country specialists in countering the 'Africa is a country' misconception. As a less subjective measure of the anti-misconception effectiveness of engaging students as country specialists, I mechanically reviewed end-of-semester essays for substantiating references to specific African countries as opposed to naive generic mentions of Africa without nuance. The summative essay required students to use development theories and experiences of any African country to discuss one contemporary development challenge.

Given IPDA's anti-misconception emphasis and formative feedback on application of specific country cases in student presentations and group discussions, I expected that each essay will mention the name of at least one country at least once, reflecting empirical nuance that defies the 'Africa is a country' stereotype. To pass the essay assessment, there were additional requirements, including traditionally tested abilities to write coherently, clearly, critically, and convincingly. Mechanical reviews of essays in the context of this pedagogic research only served to determine if any student still misconceived Africa as a country and was unable to mention an African country by name following IPDA's misconception-oriented delivery.

Of 43 essays submitted for assessment in the 2021-2022 academic year, only one student failed to mention one or more specific African countries to substantiate analysis, compared to three students who had admitted in the survey questionnaire that they held misconceptions of Africa as a country prior to joining the module. Regarding the misconception quiz administered at the start of the 2023-2024 academic year, 88 students answered the quiz. Of the 88 responses, 14 (15.9%) portrayed Africa as a country rather than a continent. While 9 of the students simply specified 'country' in response to the quiz as to whether Africa is a country or continent, 5 students elaborated their inaccurate perceptions of Africa as follows:

Africa is one of the largest states.

Actually, I don't know much about Africa, but I think it is a big country.

It [Africa] is the second largest country in the world.

I guess it [Africa] is a country, one of the biggest.

Africa can be considered a country.

Although 14 students expressed the 'Africa is a country' stereotype in IPDA's misconception pre-test in September 2023, only one student's end-of-semester essay evinced misconception persistence as the essay failed to mention a specific country to substantiate arguments following application of the module's anti-misconception design. I am, however,

not certain if the author of the essay was one of the students who inaccurately depicted Africa as a country in the pre-test as some students did not attend the first lecture in which the preconception quiz was administered.

The remarkable decline in the number of students holding the 'Africa is a country' misconception at the end (relative to the start) of the semester bears evidence to effectiveness of engaging students as country specialists towards dispelling fears underlying cognitive conflicts between long-held misconceptions and encountered discrediting or corrective information. According to Savion's (2009) cognitive theory of belief perseverance reviewed earlier, communicating corrective information after the misconception pre-test at the start of the semester could only have served to trigger a cognitive disequilibrium for students holding the 'Africa is a country' misconception.

A misconception-oriented module delivery design was necessary if students were to become equipped with the enthusiasm and confidence needed to overcome fears motivating resistance to discrediting information and sustaining misconceptions in Savion's theory. Engaging students actively as country specialists in teaching and learning about Africa, including through student podcasts and podcast-based seminar discussions, helped to boost students' sense of value expectation in the classroom which in turn inspired enthusiasm to conduct the module's readings and substantiate thematic views with empirical details drawn from experiences of specific African countries.

In hindsight, recurrently participating in module activities as 'student-teachers' while drawing on developments from selected African countries gave students opportunities to express thoughts, pose questions, obtain answers, and discuss similarities and differences in experiences of African countries on various themes. Ostensibly, as students performed their roles as country specialists on a weekly basis, they became more conscious about Africa's diversity and more confident to jettison the stereotypical 'Africa is a country' monolithic approach to

analysis for differentiated approaches requiring much cognitive investment for nuanced substantiations. Moreover, through researching their countries of specialisation, students with prior misconceptions of Africa as a country had opportunities to develop analytical coherence within the context of their chosen countries, boosting confidence to discard the use of misconceptions in making generalisations about Africa whilst seeking to articulate order, coherence, and meaningfulness in perceptions of the continent.

Conclusion

While the challenge of misconceptions to education and misconception-oriented pedagogies are well documented in the natural sciences, there is a deficit of studies dealing with misconceptions in the social and political science education, in part because of the constructivist nature of the latter disciplines. Contributing towards curbing this deficit while focusing on the infamous yet persistent 'Africa is a country' misconception, this chapter has shared an anti-misconception pedagogic model engaging students as country specialists. The model builds on cognitive theory of misconception persistence and Freirian principles of dialogic partnership to actively involve students in module delivery for purposes of tackling anxieties underlying human dispositions to resist information discrediting long-held misconceptions.

After reporting application of the model to IPDA, an undergraduate International Relations module in a China-based transnational university, the chapter documents empirical evaluation of pedagogic utility of IPDA's anti-misconception model. The evaluation involved both a survey of student perceptions and mechanical reviews of student essays for references to specific African countries as opposed to generic Africa references. The survey notably revealed an increase in students' sense of value expectation – owing to partnership responsibilities in the module's anti-misconception model – which boosted students' motivation for and engagement in differentiated learning about Africa, ultimately enhancing

confidence and capacity for nuanced substantiation of analysis using specific African countries.

Findings from the mechanical reviews of essays revealed only two students (one in academic year 2021–2022 and one in 2023–2024) failing to substantiate analysis with one or more specific African countries and instead portraying Africa as a country. Testament to the usefulness of the IPDA’s anti-misconception model, this chapter reported a decline in the number of students depicting Africa as a country at the end of the semester following the engagement of students as country specialists. However, the effectiveness of the IPDA’s model could be further researched by investigating whether students previously engaged as country specialists continue to hold or revert to the specific ‘Africa is a country’ misconception long after graduation.

Nevertheless, given the drop in number of students misconceptualising Africa as a country in the IPDA by the end of the semester, some takeaway principles could be highlighted from the IPDA’s anti-misconception model and related research for purposes of inspiring and facilitating adaptation by interested teachers. First, inquisitiveness: even before adapting the model, it is important to find out (e.g., through misconception pre-tests, surveys, and informal chats) if some students actually misconceptualise Africa as a country, otherwise misconception-oriented course delivery is not justifiable. Second, transparency: for students to collaborate as partners in anti-misconception teaching delivery, it is essential to be open and communicative about why and how students are expected to participate as country specialists, including in the course or module handbook. Finally, resourcefulness: as some students may struggle to find credible academic material by themselves, especially in the foundational year of undergraduate studies, adaptation of the IPDA’s model will benefit from the resourcefulness of teachers in sourcing and sharing with students relevant readings.

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Chapter 7

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How We Teach Africa Matters

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Chapter 7

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