

Responding to Cultural Scripts for Learning: Addressing International Pedagogies Meaningfully

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Abstract

The issues around international higher education are widely addressed. However, the nature of the diverse student cohorts who reflect multiple cultures and different perceptions of knowing, the impact of such differences on pedagogy and using these differences to enrich higher education pedagogies still remain vague beyond mission statements of internationalization. Using the findings of an empirical study conducted with 30 international students and 15 teachers in British higher education this paper highlights that international pedagogic contexts largely ignore the cultural differences of learning and assimilate students to Western ways of knowing. It argues that this promotes parochialization of certain ways of knowing and the economic agenda of education while ignoring epistemic virtues of global significance that leads to genuine internationalization.

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Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the need for creating genuinely international pedagogies with a reflexive and critical approach to internationalization which reflects a dialectic relationship between self and others. The international pedagogies have to deny the fixed nature of cultures since that view limits self-examination and the possibility of transformation through human interaction. Pedagogic encounters within international contexts of higher education need to encourage learners and teachers to imaginatively engage with differences and create possibilities of learning that move beyond economic agenda of globalization and internationalization.

While acknowledging the publicity and the enthusiasm that exist among Anglophone universities to promote international pedagogic situations, the paper examines how most of the efforts of internationalization of pedagogies are centered on marketisation of higher education. Consequently, the notion of internationalization of pedagogy has become ubiquitous and celebratory which lacks depths of meanings and practices. They only advocate the “economic instrumentalism” of a neo-liberal imaginary (Rizvi, 2007, p.391) and fail to address the interconnectivity and interdependence of cultures which appreciates the cultural situatedness of people and the kind of knowledge they create.

Method

The empirical study discussed in this paper is based on the social constructivist view of making knowledge which recognizes the possibility of multiple realities and interpretations of the world (Gergen, 1999; Berger & Luckman, 1996). The study interviewed 30 international students during 2004-2005 while 15 teachers in 3 British universities were interviewed in 2008 as a follow up research using opportunity sampling. The study was designed within the narrative approach and the data were collected employing active interviewing. 18 of the student sample were females while 12 of them were male. The students come from 30 different cultures in Asia, Africa and Europe. 99% of the student sample was professionals in the field of education in their home countries while only 1% was employed in the field of arts and theatre.

The teachers were from three universities in three different parts of the country and during the period of interviewing they taught subjects related to education in the faculty of Humanities. These particular universities were selected since they had considerably high numbers of international students. Even though a selection of teachers from different disciplines may have enriched the stories constructed within the process of this research, it was assumed that the teacher sample needs to match the student sample in terms of their field of study which was education. Among the 15 teachers 11 identified themselves as British academics, while others mentioned that they belong to different other cultures and nevertheless had British passports. 11 of the teachers had more than 10 years' of experience in teaching in UK higher education whereas 4 of them had less than 5 years of experience in teaching in UK.

The choice of using narrative approach and active interview was shaped by the social constructivist view of knowledge construction. This approach seemed to best address the main purpose of the study which was to explore the students' experience of learning in British universities. Narrative stance on human action and understanding reflects the constructivist perspective which "considers that human beings are sense-making animals who engage in interpretive acts to give meaning to their worlds (Watkins, 2006, p. 1). Narrative approach enabled the researcher to engage in authentic relationships with the respondents and the research process by exposing herself to subtle issues of cultural politics of the stories narrated by the respondents (Mishler, 1986; Sarbin, 1986). Active interviewing which was used to construct stories of teaching and learning harmonized with the conceptual and theoretical framework of narrative focus of the study. Active interviewing operates differently from the standard ways of conducting interviews and assumes that meaning is socially constructed and all knowledge is created from the action taken to obtain it (Silverman, 1993).

The data were analysed using a thematic approach which focused on action and the ways which inform meaning making within particular pedagogic situations and also the actions that are informed by those meaning making processes. The study revealed that the pedagogic sites in international UK higher education encapsulates diverse cultural scripts (generalized action knowledge, which informs how someone makes meaning of a situation and which also guides their action in particular contexts) for learning. The notion of culture adopted in this study reflects the "ensemble of stories we tell ourselves about ourselves (Geertz, 1975, p.448). The learning culture comprises stories told about learning.

Encountering different pedagogic stories

The study indicates that learners who represent varying cultures go about in writing, reading, talking and thinking for learning in different ways. It also emerged that the relationships between teachers and students and role relationships among peer learners for learning are entwined with varying cultural ways of going about such role relationships. These cultural scripts, which are fluid in nature, shape the learners' learning experience considerably. Most significantly, when there are gaps between their own cultural scripts for learning and the host pedagogic approaches the students experience tensions. The cultural scripts also guide students to reinterpret the host pedagogy in terms of the university's perception of internationalization.

In the mean time, the different cultural ways of knowing encourage the learners to make sense of the pedagogic encounter in a constructive manner. The learners mentioned that they expect to experience a kind of hybrid pedagogy that opens up opportunities for active interaction with diverse epistemic ways of knowing. On the contrary, the host university pedagogy continuously attempts to assimilate all the learners to Western pedagogy irrespective of the different ontological backgrounds they come from (Traha, 2008). Such pedagogies reduce the process of learning to a process of imitation of a particular way of knowledge creation, which is increasingly influenced by the economic agenda of Western higher education.

Within this context, the students question the relevance of pedagogic practices and assumptions of the host university in relation to its excessive use of the discourse related to internationalization. Instead of accepting the host pedagogic practices as inevitable givens in the global society the learners make sense of it in terms of cultural politics of learning. Therefore, without willingly assimilating themselves into host pedagogic practices, the learners respond by making agency, showing resistance and also making accommodations when they find that host pedagogy is applicable within their own cultural environments.

Responding critically: students' resistance, accommodation and agency

The main thrust of the complex expressions of students was that their host teaching/learning context imposes certain cultural ways of knowing on students. These imposed pedagogies create unrealistic learning experiences for some learners. The students then use resistance or agency to make their own learning meaningful for themselves (Giroux, 2001). They resist the “myth of homogeneity” (Kress, 2001, p.257) of themselves as the audience of their host learning site and the assumed stability embedded in the pedagogic experience (Barnett, 2000).

Teachers' assistance, mediation and ambivalence

The study identified that similarly to students, teachers also hold complex views about their own pedagogic practices and assumptions. Some teachers provide assistance to the promotion of Western pedagogic practices honestly believing that students cross geo-cultural boundaries only to learn the Western ways of knowing. They imagine that the

success of international higher education reflects the degree to which the students can adjust to the host university's pedagogic practices. Asked what they mean by international pedagogy they mentioned that meeting different people and a different way of knowing (Western ways of knowing) itself is the international experience.

Teachers who had previously been international students in Anglophone universities showed a wider understanding of diverse cultural scripts for learning. They identify themselves as co-inquirers and negotiate different ontologies and epistemologies. Some others teachers appreciate the notion of diversity and call themselves intercultural teachers. However, they highlight that students need to follow the host pedagogic practices and maintain that the pedagogic strategies used in UK universities are always applicable and appreciated across cultures. This results in the naïve perpetuation of doing the West though education.

Pedagogies of Encounter: Implications for teaching and learning

This paper argues that the ways in which both teachers and students express their views about the assumed power of certain pedagogic practices in British higher education and its relevance within the internationalization agenda of university pedagogy. Students expect to experience pedagogic situations which equip them as active citizens in the global society. They believe that complex encounters of different ways of knowledge making create hybrid pedagogic sites. However, the majority of the teachers believe in the continuation of the epistemic practices with which they are comfortable for years irrespective of the cultural diversity of student cohorts. This creates barriers to construct inclusive and

imaginative pedagogies which problematize the hegemonic pedagogic practices which increasingly address the market orientation of higher education. It is through hybrid and imaginative pedagogies that we can develop epistemic virtues of global significance which would lay the foundation for the construction of truly international universities.

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