

The Idea of internationalisation of curriculum: A new form of social imaginary?

Abstract

The idea of internationalisation of higher education curriculum has become a ubiquitous slogan within the current market-oriented Anglophone universities. This paper argues that internationalisation of curriculum is a complex process with multiple challenges which have not yet been sufficiently addressed by universities. The data collected from 30 international students and 15 university teachers in the UK reveals that internationalisation of curriculum is understood in different ways by teachers and students while within institutions internationalisation is treated in celebratory manner within a neo-liberal imaginary of global competency agenda. The paper deals with three issues: complex meanings and purposes of international curriculum; the nature of curriculum discourse that speaks neo-liberal social imaginary that privileges market-driven education and the challenge of re-articulation of diversity, equity and cultures of knowledge in economic terms which restricts teachers and learners of developing critical alternatives of internationalisation and globalisation.

Key words:

Intercultural higher education, cultural scripts for learning, neo-liberal social imaginary, global labour market, parochial cultural boundaries.

Thushari Welikala is a senior research fellow in the School of Education in Nottingham University. She is also an associate at the Institute of Education, University of London. She completed her PhD at the Institute of Education, University of London on the mediation of culture in teaching and learning in UK higher education. Her main research interests are cultural politics of learning in multicultural contexts of higher education, hybrid pedagogies, internationalisation of higher education and narrative approach to conducting sociological research.

Introduction

The phenomenon of international students from different countries attending universities in the West to achieve higher degrees is not new. Today, however, the movement and the purpose of education of international students within the Western university has taken a different picture. International higher education is mainly framed within the market orientation of the academia which constructs higher education curriculum around a neo-liberal 'social imaginary' (Taylor, 2004:21) that privileges a kind of globalisation that promotes Western economic and political ideologies (Cohen and Kennedy, 2000). This restricts the meanings and actions related with the internationalisation of curriculum to a non-critical rhetoric which encourages learners and teachers to overlook their own cultural boundaries and the possibilities of questioning their moral responsibility towards their own cultures as well to the society as a whole (Appadurai, 2000). One of the major challenges today is to address the constructed social imaginary of international curriculum which advocates the acceptance of neo-liberal economic agenda of education without criticality and reflexivity. This results in constructing an imaginary that approves curricula which endorses (only) global market logic.

Contextualizing the study

The discussion in this article is based on the findings that emerged from an empirical study conducted with 30 international postgraduate students and 15 university teachers in UK universities. Active interviewing was used to collect stories about learning and teaching (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). The study was designed using a social constructivist view of knowledge making (Gergen, 1999) and narrative approach (Mishler 1986; Sarbin, 1986). My intention to employ a narrative approach was the need to use a culturally-politically influenced methodology and a methodologically influenced cultural-politics in the process of constructing meaning. The active interview agenda which operates differently from the standard ways of conducting interviews assumes that meaning is socially constructed and all knowledge is created from the action taken to obtain it. The data were analysed using a thematic approach within the narrative structure.

18 of the student sample were female while 12 of them were male. Out of 30 students 16 were reading for their MA and 14 were following their doctoral studies in education. They were all professionals in their home countries.

The teachers were from faculties of humanities in three universities from different parts of the country. These universities had considerably high numbers of international students. Among the 15 teachers, 11 identified themselves as British academics. Others were British citizens but their countries of birth were different. 11 of them had more than 10 years' of experience in teaching in the UK while 4 of them had less than 10 years' experience.

Encountering local within the global

The study revealed that students who come from diverse cultures bring different cultural scripts (generalised action knowledge, which informs how someone makes meaning of a situation and which also guides their action in particular contexts) for learning (Welikala, 2006). The meaning of culture in this study reflects "ensemble of stories we tell ourselves about ourselves (Geertz, 1975: 448). Therefore the learning/teaching culture comprises stories told about learning/teaching (Welikala and Watkins 2008).

The teachers respond to different cultural scripts for learning in different and complex ways using their own pedagogic assumptions and practices and their views about international curriculum. The students responded to the curricula experience of their host university in complex ways negotiating cultural differences for learning and making agency to make their own learning meaningful for them. They also resisted some of the experiences and interpreted them in terms of cultural politics embedded in their host university curriculum.

Understanding the host curriculum: Resisting the out-dated nature

The students positioned themselves as learners who have been given the identity of customers. Being mature students, none of them talked about the discourse and the learning experiences they live in their host university in neutral terms. They resisted certain pedagogic discourses and showed how they are being used to perpetuate the Western illusion of improving and civilizing other cultures (Holliday, 2005). Whereas some teachers mention the non-Western pedagogy as 'traditional' the students found their host pedagogy and curriculum

out-dated and stagnating within economic agenda and not addressing the other vital socio-cultural needs.

Some, who call themselves ‘intercultural teachers’ criticised the imperialistic nature of their curriculum. They believed that it shapes students in such a way so that the Western universities can continue to colonize other parts of the world intellectually. Nevertheless, the students resisted the experiences which are culturally irrelevant and also showed how they recolonize the west on the one hand, by making their host university relying too much on international students’ financial contribution and on the other, by using English language to empower themselves so that they can question and negotiate the Western knowledge practices critically and reflexively.

International curriculum: Does it really exist?

The study revealed that teachers had complex and vague views about international curricula while most of the students had complex yet clearer understandings of it. The students expected richer experiences and interactive pedagogic situations as well as meaningful use of discourse that move beyond the institute website into practices within learning sites in the university. Some teachers imagine that learners pay high fees and cross geo-political boundaries for the sole purpose of learning the West. Hence they think that mastering skills, knowledge and attitudes promoted by the host curriculum completes the process of internationalisation.

However, students make sense of pedagogy and curricula differently, using their own politico- cultural understandings. The skills and attitudes being promoted within the discourse of ‘intercultural learning’ mainly reflect instrumental economic agendas which direct relationships and interactions towards a ‘global labour market’. According to students the very notion of globalisation, the global market and global skills are interpreted in terms of trade discourse that encourages learners to imagine that the commodified nature of higher education as the best option (Rizvi, 2007).

Implications

I argue that we need to rethink the discourse, the rhetoric and the assumptions related to international curriculum in UK higher education. Teachers still hold out-dated and

romanticised views about internationalisation, while showing empathy and at the same time luxuriating in the imagination of colonising effect of international curriculum. On the contrary, the students read the host university curriculum using the existing socio-political discourse which advocate practices that influence the universalization of neo-liberal imaginary of globalisation- 'a system of meaning that constitute intuitions, practices and identities in contradictory and disjunctive ways' (Friedman, 2000:12, in Rizvi, 2007). They question and critique the practices that endorse education mainly as a commodity to be sold in the international market. The students and some teachers understand how the discourse and experiences provided by the host curriculum encourage the meaning of globalisation as inevitable market logic.

Such understandings and practices restrict teachers and learners from critically reflecting on their experiences to develop different social imaginaries. What is needed today is to encourage higher education curricula which provide learners and teachers to accept their cultural situatedness while promoting their ability to think beyond their parochial boundaries to create processes that can interrogate neo-liberal narratives about international curriculum.

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