Transnational imaginaries in curriculum inquiry: performances and representations

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Abstract

This paper explores issues emerging from recent and ongoing efforts by a number of curriculum scholars (particularly in North America) to 'internationalise' curriculum studies. As a participant in (and constructive critic of) these efforts, I am interested in exploring ways in which diverse local knowledge traditions in such fields as curriculum studies can be sustained and amplified transnationally without being absorbed into an imperialist archive. In this paper I argue that resisting the homogenising effects of cultural globalisation and internationalisation may be facilitated by emphasising the performative rather than the representational aspects of curriculum inquiry. The 'internationalisation' of curriculum studies might then be understood not so much in terms of translating local representations of curriculum into a universal discourse but, rather, as creating transnational 'spaces' in which local knowledge traditions in curriculum inquiry can be performed together.

Positioning this paper methodologically/autobiographically

This paper is positioned in a confluence of several ongoing and immanent research and teaching development activities in which issues of *internationalisation*, *globalisation*, and *curriculum* are key foci for inquiry. Summarised briefly these activities are:

   • a project examining interrelationships between economic and cultural globalisation, new curriculum priorities, and curriculum change in Australian schools; this research focuses on the ways in which globalisation processes are represented in curriculum policies and school programs, and expressed by teachers and students, with particular reference to the ways in which meanings that circulate in increasingly globalised media (television, the internet) are deployed in the construction of school knowledge (see Gough 1997b, 1998, in press-b). (1)

   • an Australia-South Africa Institutional Links Program, 'Educating for socio-ecological change: capacity-building in environmental education, focussing on South Africa's tertiary educators' (see Gough 1997a, in press-a). (2)

   • an invitation to participate in an 'internationalisation of curriculum studies' project (involving predominantly US and Canadian curriculum scholars) planned for the year 2000. (3)

   • a commitment to collaborate with fellow editors and associates of the *Journal of Curriculum Studies* to produce a special 'Millennial' issue of the journal in the year 2000, with my particular contribution being to write an essay that responds to the question: 'Does a shrinking world imply an internationalisation of curriculum?' This issue is planned to address a number of critical questions—some retrospective and some prospective—that the editors have collectively identified as being particularly significant for curriculum inquiry in the year 2000.

This paper—or more accurately, *essay* (4)is, in effect, a first and tentative step towards both troubling and responding constructively to the last of the activities described above, but I have mentioned the others because each has influenced the standpoint from which this step is taken. In particular, my recent experiences of working with colleagues in southern Africa have sensitised me to the very different ways in which the economic and social processes we call 'internationalisation' and 'globalisation' are being expressed in countries such as South Africa and Australia and the very different effects on, and potentials for, curriculum work that accompany these processes.

I should perhaps emphasise at this point that I initially opposed the proposal to publish a special 'Millennial' issue of *JCS*, for reasons similar to those expressed by Judyth Sachs (1998: 2):

> While we need to prepare ourselves intellectually and emotionally to deal with uncertainty and ambiguity we need not succumb to [the] inevitability and banality inherent in the mantra-like phrase 'as we approach the millennium' which suggests that some of the social commentators have themselves succumbed to their favourite condition 'Pre Millennial Tension'.

My coeditors persuaded me that the year 2000 (5) special issue need not succumb to stereotypical millennialism and, following some lengthy deliberations about the structure and contents of the issue, we agreed that my contribution would be to address the question on which the remainder of this essay is focussed.

Does a shrinking world imply an internationalisation of curriculum?

Ideas such as 'a shrinking world' and 'internationalisation', like Marshall McLuhan's 'global village' of the 1960s (see McLuhan and Fiore 1967ab) and the 'globalisation' agendas of the 1980s and 1990s, have at least two aspects—what we might call the 'facts' of transnational communication processes, and our heightened reflexive awareness of the need to be (and to be *seen* to be) aware that such concepts and 'facts' are, indeed, worthy of our attention. In this essay I will focus on the latter, with particular reference to those traces of internationalisation and globalisation that, following Rob Wilson and Wimal Dissanayake (1996), I will call *transnational imaginaries*. These are the anticipated (but as yet unrealised) horizons of contemporary cultural production which beckon us towards a disaggregation of national spaces/identities of political allegiance and economic regulation and encourage us to reshape communities at both macropolitical (global) and micropolitical (cultural) levels.

Curriculum inquiry is one form of contemporary cultural production through which such transnational imaginaries are expressed and negotiated. To take an example that is very pertinent to the task in which I am engaged, the current style sheet for the *Journal of Curriculum Studies* advises authors to take note that:

> *JCS* does not aspire to be international in the ways that McDonald's restaurants or Hilton Hotels are 'international'; we much prefer papers that, where appropriate, reflect the particularities of each education system.

This advice (6) expresses a view of global/local relations that seems to resist 'globalisation' —understood as economic integration achieved through 'free trade' in a deregulated global marketplace—while affirming 'internationalism' (in the sense of promoting global peace, social justice and well-being through intergovernmental cooperation and transnational social movements, agencies, and communities—such as the international community of curriculum scholars that produces and reads *JCS)*. (7) In this essay I want to refine and amplify some of the tacit assumptions underlying this advice to authors, by considering ways in which diverse

local knowledge traditions—as may still be represented in at least some local and national curriculum policies and syllabuses, as well as in some 'indigenous' approaches to curriculum studies *per se*—can be sustained and amplified transnationally while resisting the forms of cultural homogenisation for which McDonalds and Hilton Hotels are emblematic.

Globalising local knowledge traditions: travel and trust

The literature that I have found most useful in thinking about globalisation and international-isation in relation to local knowledge production is, broadly speaking, that which Sandra Harding (1998b) calls Post-Kuhnian and postcolonial science and technology studies (see also Harding 1993a, 1994, 1998a), and more particularly the work of David Turnbull (1993, 1997; see also Watson-Verran and Turnbull 1995). Turnbull argues that all knowledge traditions are spatial in that they link people, sites and skills. His approach is thus to recognise knowledge systems (including Western science) as sets of local practices so that it becomes possible to 'decentre' them and develop a framework within which different knowledge traditions can be equitably compared rather than absorbed into an imperialist archive.

While both Harding and Turnbull share postcolonialist and anti-imperialist positions, and assert that all knowledges are always situated and constituted initially within specific sets of local conditions and cultural values, their interests are subtly different in ways that I find thought provoking. Put crudely, Harding seems more interested in the universalising tendencies that accompany the 'travel' of knowledges beyond the localities in which they were initially produced, whereas Turnbull is more concerned with how trust is established between heterogeneous knowledges that 'arrive' (or are produced) in the same space. For example, after reviewing the various implications of postcolonialist and feminist science and technology studies for research epistemologies and methodologies, Harding (1998b: 46) writes:

> the distinction between universally valid knowledge and merely local opinion—superstitions, folk knowledge, or indigenous knowledge systems—is much less useful than the older epistemologies supposed. If, as the post-Kuhnian, postcolonial and feminist accounts argue, all knowledge systems have integrity with the cultures that produce them and continue to find them useful, then nothing in principle is possible but local opinion— though some local opinions (e.g., the laws of gravity) definitely travel farther and retain usefulness longer than do others. (…) More productive is the project of seeking to understand the devices through which originally local knowledges (as all are) get to circulate and travel far from their origin, and how the most effective balances between these universalising tendencies and the necessary localising tendencies have been and can be nourished and maintained.

Elsewhere, Harding (1998a: 182) again uses the travel metaphor to capture her sense of the ways in which 'different modern scientific projects have maintained valuable tensions between the local and the global':

> the most widely successful [knowledge systems], such as many parts of modern sciences, manage to travel effectively to become useful in other sets of local conditions—parts of nature, interests, discursive resources, ways of organizing the production of knowledge— that are different in significant respects from those that originally produced them. Without claiming a universality for them that we can now see is historically and conceptually misleading, how could we usefully think about valuable tensions between the local and this movability, or ability to travel, that has

characterized parts of modern sciences in particular, but also parts of other knowledge systems (e.g., the concept zero and acupuncture)?

Despite her doubts about many of the claims that have been made for the universality of some knowledge systems (especially those based in masculinist and Western imperialist epistemologies), (Sandra Harding in press) has recently entertained the possibility of 'universal ethnoscience', arguing that all knowledge systems are ethnosciences and capable of being universal if they adopt her principle of 'strong objectivity' (see Harding 1992, 1993b, 1998b, esp. ch. 8), a version of empiricism which privileges multiculturalist and feminist value positions ('standpoint epistemologies'). (8)

Turnbull, however, detaches a knowledge tradition's 'ability to travel' from any assumptions about its supposed 'universalising tendencies', preferring instead to find ways in which different knowledge systems can coexist. An important aspect of Turnbull's strategy is to abandon an 'overly representational view of knowledge' in favor of recognising that all knowledge is 'both performative and representational' (1997: 553). In other words, Turnbull is less interested in characterising science's 'ability to travel' by reference to the movement of its representations and abstractions (such as 'the laws of gravity' or 'the concept zero' to which Harding refers) and more concerned with the *activity* of knowledge production in particular social spaces:

> we can reconceive the social history of knowledge in a variety of intersecting and overlapping ways which move beyond simple contextualisation. Science may be seen as a history of visualisation or as a history of measurement and rational calculation. However, I would like to argue that a particularly perspicuous cross-cultural history of knowledge production is as a social history of space. That is as a history of the contingent processes of making assemblages and linkages, of creating spaces in which knowledge is possible (Turnbull 1997: 553).

Using such diverse examples as the building of gothic cathedrals in medieval Europe, the Polynesian colonisation of the Pacific islands, the establishment of modern cartography, and rice farming in Indonesia, Turnbull shows how particular knowledge spaces can be constructed from differing social, moral and technical components in a variety of cultural and historical contexts—or, following Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1987: 90), an 'assemblage' of people, skills, local knowledge and equipment linked by various social strategies and technical devices.

> From this spatialised perspective, universality, objectivity, rationality, efficacy and accumulation cease to be unique and special characteristics of technoscientific knowledge; rather these traits are effects of collective work of the knowledge producers in a given knowledge space. To move knowledge from the local site and moment of its production and application to other places and times, knowledge producers deploy a variety of social strategies and technical devices for creating the equivalences and connections between otherwise heterogeneous and isolated knowledges. The standardisation and homogenisation required for knowledge to be accumulated and rendered truthlike is achieved through social methods of organising the production, transmission and utilisation of knowledge. An essential component is the social organisation of trust (Turnbull 1997: 553).

Turnbull here echoes Steven Shapin (1994: 36) who argues in his social history of science in 17th century England that the basis of knowledge is not empirical verification (as the orthodox view of 'scientific method' would have it) but trust: 'Mundane reason is the space across which trust plays. It provides a set of presuppositions about self, others, and the world which embed trust and which permit both consensus and civil dissensus to occur'. In a

gesture towards Bruno Latour's (1987, 1993) 'actor network theory', Turnbull (1997: 553) also suggest that the linking of heterogeneous components of a knowledge system is achieved by both social strategies and 'technical devices which may include maps, templates, diagrams and drawings, but are typically techniques spatial visualisation'.

Turnbull (1997: 553) argues that a major analytic advantage of this spatialised perspective is that, because all knowledge systems have localness in common, many of the small but significant differences between them can be explained in terms of the different kinds of work—of *performance*—that are involved in constructing 'assemblages' from the people, practices, theories and instruments in a given space:

> Some [knowledge] traditions move it and assemble it through art, ceremony and ritual; science does it through forming disciplinary societies, building instruments, standardising techniques and writing articles. In both cases it is a process of knowledge assembly through making connections and negotiating equivalences between the heterogeneous components while simultaneously establishing a social order of trust and authority resulting in a knowledge space. It is on this basis that it is possible to compare and frame knowledge traditions.

This is not the place to explore Turnbull's specific examples in detail but his analysis demonstrates that the achievements of gothic cathedral building, Polynesian navigation, modern cartography, Indonesian rice farming *and* modern (Western) science are, in each case, better understood performatively—as diverse combinations of social and technical practices—than as results of any internal epistemological features to which 'universal' validity can be ascribed.

As already noted, the purpose of Turnbull's emphasis on analysing knowledge systems comparatively in terms of spatiality and performance is to find ways in which diverse knowledge traditions can coexist rather than one displacing others. He argues that nourishing such diversity is dependent on the creation of 'a third space, an interstitial space' in which local knowledge traditions can be 'reframed, decentred and the social organisation of trust can be negotiated'. The production of such a space is 'crucially dependent' on 'the reinclusion of the performative side of knowledge':

> Knowledge, in so far as it is portrayed as essentially a form of representation, will tend towards universal homogenous information at the expense of local knowledge traditions. If knowledge is recognised as both representational and performative it will be possible to create a space in which knowledge traditions can be performed together (Turnbull 1997: 560-1).

Performing transnational imaginaries in curriculum inquiry

Turnbull's analysis suggests to me that resistance to the homogenising effects of globalisation and internationalisation in the field of curriculum studies might be facilitated by emphasising the performative rather than the representational aspects of curriculum inquiry. The 'international-isation' of curriculum and curriculum inquiry might then be understood not so much in terms of translating local representations of curriculum into a universalised discourse but, rather, as a process of creating transnational 'spaces' in which local knowledge traditions in curriculum inquiry can be performed together.

It can be argued that international journals, through their social and technical protocols, traditions and conventions, should more deliberately and reflexively aspire to be transnational performative spaces of this kind. I certainly want to examine carefully the extent to which the *Journal of Curriculum Studies* may already have succeeded in this

respect, as well as determining or refining some of the textual strategies (for both authors and editors) which might advance the performative aspects of curriculum inquiry in such transnational spaces as *JCS*.

However, the implications of emphasising spatiality and performance in curriculum inquiry extend well beyond the practices of writing for and editing scholarly journals. Indeed, the need for vigorously and rigorously recuperating local knowledge systems, in both their performative and representational idioms, has been amplified for me by some recent experiences of doing curriculum work in southern Africa, where many local knowledge traditions have been rendered invisible by the effects of universalising imperialist discourses and practices. For example, in countries such as Zimbabwe and Malawi, the concept of a 'good education' for the vast majority of African students, most of whom live in rural subsistence settlements, is equated with failing Cambridge University O-level examinations in English. The absurdity of this situation to Western eyes is captured by Doris Lessing's (1992: 200-1) recollections of visiting a rural school in Zimbabwe in 1988 during which one member of her party lamented the country's unserviceable infrastructure and the lack of people skilled in—or being trained to be skilled in—mending broken valves, taps or pipes:

> 'The trouble is that all these poor bloody kids, in all the schools of Zimbabwe, have decided that only a literary education is worth having. Where do you find the ultimate bastion of respect for the Humanities? Not in Thatcher's Britain! No, in the bush, where generations of black kids have decided they are too good to be engineers and electricians, and are taking O-levels in English which they mostly fail… (9)

> 'I was in an office in Harare. An American Aid worker was arguing that the education being given to the children was inappropriate, what was the point of teaching them the British syllabus, with books suitable for Europe? What was needed was a good basic technical education. A black woman who was waiting her turn turned furiously on her. She said, "I see you whites are still just the same. You don't want our children to have a real education. Oh no, that's for your children. We want a good education for our children, just the same as yours".'

Thinking about this incident in terms of represented and performed curriculum is illuminating. The apparent point of disagreement between the Aid worker and the black woman is that the curriculum in question, 'the British syllabus, with books suitable for Europe', represents 'a real education… a good education' in *both* Western and Zimbabwean contexts for the black woman but in only *one* context (Western) for the Aid worker (we could also say that the black woman imagines 'a good education' transnationally whereas the Aid worker is imagining it locally). Many of us might want to argue that the represented curriculum is as 'inappropriate' in Thatcher's Britain as in Mugabe's Zimbabwe. But both women might agree that this British syllabus produces, in Turnbull's terms, a performative 'equivalence', especially if it can be shown that (say) exhibiting perfect recall of the key events and protagonists in the English Reformation is a necessary condition for winning the class struggle in postcolonial Zimbabwe. As Lessing (1992: 212) writes, 'In Zimbabwe today [1988] you need five [O-level] passes to get a job. With three you can train to be a nurse'. A key curriculum problem here is the instrumental role of a curriculum in effecting social stratification—a problem which may be obscured by focusing on issues of superficial 'appropriateness' or 'relevance'—and if the performative function of the curriculum is, in effect, to make both black kids and white kids jump through white hoops, merely painting one set of hoops black does not resolve the problem.

One of the questions raised by Lessing's vignette is: who is deploying a transnational imaginary here? Stereotypically we might expect the American Aid worker to have a more 'global' or 'international' perspective, but it is the black woman who seems to be assuming

(or desiring) English O-levels to be part of the global economy of 'a good education' and the Aid worker who wants to privilege (or 'protect' in economic terms) local knowledge. The difficulty I perceive for the field of curriculum inquiry is that I suspect that our intellectual resources are presently geared towards defending the Aid worker's position rather than responding constructively and, in a literal sense, *hopefully* to the black woman.

Notes

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2 This project is being supported for two years (1998-99) by an AusAID Institutional Development Grant and is being conducted in collaboration with Annette Gough and Ian Robottom, Deakin University, members of the Centre for Innovation and Research in Environmental Education, Griffith University, and partners in six South African higher education institutions (three universities and three colleges).

3 This embryonic initiative is one facet of the Curriculum Theory Project sponsored by the Department of Curriculum and Instruction, Louisiana State University, under the direction of William Pinar.

4 I am using 'essay' here as a verb–to attempt, to try, to test. In conceptual inquiry an essay serves a similar function to that of the experiment in empirical research–a disciplined way of investigating a question, problem or issue. Both 'essay' and 'assay' come to us through the French *essayer* from the Latin *exigere,* to weigh; I write essays to test ideas, to 'weigh' them up, to give me (and eventually, I hope, my colleagues) a sense of their worth. For me, writing an essay–whether it be for a conference presentation or for a scholarly journal–is an authentic inquiry: most of the time, I really do not know what the final thesis of my essay will be when I start to write.

5 I also lost the argument that a millennial issue, if published at all, should appear in the year 2001 rather than 2000…

6 I was, in fact, responsible for this particular form of words, first incorporating them into the supplementary notes I prepared for authors in Australia and New Zealand shortly after I assumed the Australian editorship of *JCS* in 1986; however, I acknowledge that this characterisation of the journal's 'internationalism' paraphrases advice provided in a personal communication to me from the then General Editor, William Reid.

7 For a very useful discussion of globalisation vis-à-vis internationalism see Phillip Jones (1997).

8 As Turnbull (1997: 561) observes, Harding's 'universal' ethnoscience 'looks very much like the original ethnoscience project whereby imperialist science adds ethnoscience to its collections of specimens'.

9 Some of the reasons for their failure are not difficult to discern. As one of Lessing's (1992: 205) informants, a young teacher from England, recalls: 'for instance, there was an exam paper set in Britain, one of the questions had the word "shutter". These people don't have shutters. One of the meanings of the word was a camera shutter. Most of them have never seen a camera, let alone used one'.

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