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International education < understanding new cultures and new pedagogies*

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Abstract

Taking as a base understanding that pedagogies are themselves culturally situated knowledges, the intention is to explore the cultural understandings which underpin pedagogies used in international education. It is argued that these pedagogies are expressions of new cultural formations that both characterise and are facilitated by international education. Through an examination of Bauman's development of the consumer cooperative as a metaphor for postmodern culture, the argument is made that cross-cultural pedagogies at the heart of international education have a radical possibility which can be realised if the dialectical relationship between sameness and difference is mediated by an understanding that both students and teachers act and author in the classroom. This framework is used to explore interviews undertaken with international students for an ARC funded study. This is very much a work in progress and the intention here is to consider these students' experiences studying in Australia in relation to the role of international education more broadly. What role does international education play in assisting international and Australian students develop identities responsive to and representative of new cultural imperatives?

In Australia, larger numbers of schools are admitting international students and universities are not only increasingly concerned to enroll international students, but also to open offshore campuses. In this context, there is a particular need for us to consider the chalk-face or perhaps more aptly, the 'webface' of international education - the learning and teaching situations which lie at its heart. What are the assumptions we bring to international education that reflect a previous way of doing and thinking about teaching and learning? How can such assumptions be critically evaluated in relation to international education?

How do we teach and learn in classrooms where a range of assumptions which many of us have hitherto taken for granted are no longer relevant? In higher education, increasingly we don't see or hear our students. The disembodied nature of the virtual student, for me, represents the new pedagogic regime and most dramatically illustrates its realities, possibilities and potential pitfalls. Such developments need to be explored in relation to the new university with its shifting emphasis away from students and learning, to clients and certification (Coady 1999). This debate provides a backdrop for my exploration of cross-cultural pedagogies and international education.

Debate about the new university risks adopting a stance which reinscribes as binary opposites, research and teaching and related to this, knowledge and pedagogy. It is a debate which risks consolidating a somewhat nostalgic and conservative view of the academy as a place where knowledge is created through research, quite separately from teaching and learning, and then transferred to passive students by knowing lecturers. We are now told that society can no longer afford this medieval view of the university and that academics have to make their work relevant, accountable and open to the sobering scrutiny of the marketplace. What fascinates me about this debate, is the ease with which those opposed to the market paradigm can be shepherded towards the conservative view. If it is

marketable, somehow it has less intrinsic academic worth; juxtapose classics and tourism and hospitality, for example.

My argument is that within this landscape there is a failure to recognize the way knowledge is being constructed in these debates about so-called real and new universities. The debate proceeds in relation to which knowledges are taught and whether these are the erstwhile knowledges of the academy, those premised on research; or the lesser knowledges associated with those with managerial tendencies; those concerned with numbers, balance sheets and image-making. Commonly this is a debate which rarely asks us to (re)consider how we understand knowledge and its creation as worthwhile. This is particularly so in relation to the agency of students. On one side of the debate the student is a client, on the other side a passive consumer of academic knowledge. The place of pedagogy in relation to the creation of worthwhile academic knowledges and the radical potential of this relationship risks being ignored. Here my interest is to explore these issues in relation to international education particularly given its commonplace positioning within such debates at the lucrative and therefore 'new' side of the debate about the university. I wish to reconfigure this debate to argue that the cross-cultural pedagogies that define International Education have a radical potential because they sit at the cutting edge of the new cultures which are at the heart of what Hall (1996) has referred to as the 'new times'. The radical possibility of such pedagogies lies in their capacity to challenge understandings which reinscribe unequal and hegemonic relations between marginal and mainstream cultural locations.

Many of us cut our teaching teeth in a climate of advocacy related to student-centred pedagogy, curriculum and assessment. Frierean notions of empowerment have been the 'bread and butter' for those of us concerned with teaching, particularly teaching involving the 'Other'. If we were lucky, we did our teacher training with long-haired academics who had real, that is school-based teaching credentials, preferably from working class schools, who taught us that we were to go into classrooms to teach students, not subjects. We were to instil in our students feelings of self-worth premised on the value of what these students already knew and the value of what they wanted to learn, rather than the intrinsic worth of what we wanted to teach. Our job was to produce young adults who would challenge the status quo through skills of critical inquiry. Within the classroom of the self-styled liberatory pedagogue there existed clear distinctions between the marginal and the mainstream. How these divisions came into being and the ways in which these could be challenged were debated vigorously but nonetheless the divisions themselves remained relatively straightforward. There was little doubt that the working class or ethnic minority student would be cast as marginal and there was a relatively straightforward understanding of who was working class or ethnic minority, for example. These divisions are becoming less straightforward and this is one of the expressions of the fluidity of cultural identifications that illustrate postmodern times. International education sits squarely at the heart of these dynamics. Increasingly, cross-cultural education is linked to international education rather than 'migrant' education, and how we do it, is inextricably tied to new understandings of culture, privilege and minority status. I want to argue here that these new understandings of culture require responsive and creative pedagogies still premised on some of the precepts that underpin liberatory teaching and learning.

In relation to the exploration here, Bauman (1997) offers an insightful elaboration of new understandings of culture. He argues that the traditional purpose of culture has been to bring order. He describes culture as 'an anti-randomness device' (131) and states;

When facing the incoherence of norms, the state of behavioural ambivalence, the multitude of cultural products without obvious use 'for the system', we think either of a *conflict* between cultures, or of a cultural *crisis*. In either case

we consider the situation abnormal or diseased; we are alarmed and expect a morbid turn of events (Bauman 1997:131 original emphasis).

Bauman adopts the metaphor of the consumer co-operative to elucidate the meaning of culture. Given the importance of marketization within education where 'the student' has become 'the client', Bauman's metaphor is most useful. This is particularly so in relation to international education. Commonly the motive for institutional involvement in international education rarely extends beyond the market framework. Sometimes academics understand international education as something they have to do in order to sustain the university, the college or the school, and thus afford themselves the opportunity to continue their 'real' work.

Bauman understands the consumer co-operative not as a bureaucratic structure but in the sense intended by the Rochdale pioneers in 1844. This sense of co-operative is based on the notion that those who use the co-operative should manage the co-operative. And for Bauman, the character of the co-operative is marked by the fact that its history was a rebellious response to the lack of freedom experienced by these pioneers. He acknowledges that these rather idealistic aims did not eventuate but argues that nonetheless, the Rochdale initiative remains a useful metaphor (Bauman 1997:134). Of great significance to Bauman is the challenge this understanding of the consumer co-operative poses for traditional interpretations of culture as order making. He states;

Things which happen inside the ideal consumer co-operative are neither managed, nor random; uncoordinated moves meet each other and become tied up in various parts of the overall setting, only to cut themselves free again from all previously bound knots...in a consumer cooperative, just as in culture, it is not easy to set apart in its emerging patterns of interaction the 'author' from the 'actor'. Each member is expected to author as much as to act. Authorship and actorship are two aspects (aspects present, though with differing intensity, in every human action – not qualities of separate human categories) (Bauman 1997:135 –6 original emphasis)

Bauman's argument that everyone is expected to author and to act within a consumer co-operative is one I wish to explore. I am particularly interested in his argument that authorship and actorship are not separate categories but rather that every action combines both categories albeit with varying intensity. I would like to argue the relevance of this to international education.

The argument being made here is that within international education we can not presume a neat divide between 'us' and 'them'. Instead it is both symptomatic of and contributes to the cultural fluidities that mark the postmodern age. In this context, reciprocity and mutual benefit are not simply a choice for the benevolent, nor a strategic nod in the direction of equality but instead, a defining characteristic. The 'new times' (Hall 1996) of postmodern fragmentation in the context of globalization are characterised by the dialectical relationship between sameness and difference. Determination of what remains within the boundaries of one culture, one nation or a person's experience is unlikely and unimportant. Students regardless of their place of residence or birth will have in common cultural understandings linked to the hegemonic. Similarly, they are likely to understand what the hegemonic values as exotic. In relation to international education this dialectical relationship between sameness and difference is one which should provide comfort. Rather than teaching across seemingly insurmountable cultural boundaries we are establishing a reciprocal teaching and learning dynamic where some knowledges are common and new knowledges are shared.

Following Bauman (1997) I am situating my discussion of international education in a framework which rejects the understanding of culture as an anti-randomness device. Instead, I am assuming the positive nature of difference (Tsolidis 1997). Complimenting this is my attempt to adopt Bauman's metaphor of the consumer co-operative as a means of exploring different and responsive pedagogies for international education. The relationship between education and culture is inextricable. International education is part of the process whereby the understanding of culture as order making is being challenged. Through international education there is an exchange of the familiar and unfamiliar across national boundaries. There is an imperative to make such exchanges successful for all parties involved. It is no longer a matter of 'us' providing 'them' with something they need. Instead, the consumer co-operative that is formed through the international education classroom requires a mutually beneficial relationship for all involved. I am arguing that in order for this to eventuate, as teachers, we need to explicitly acknowledge that we, as well as our students, are both authors and actors in Bauman's terms.

Increasingly, we conceive of the subject as emerging out of particular times and places, discourses and representations, rather than being a point of reference standing outside of these. It is in this sense, that we come to understand the subject as multiple and shifting in response to context. With regard to cross-cultural education this is a significant issue because the student loses her monolithic identity and instead develops it as diasporic, fluid and responsive to the many contexts in which she functions.

I am using this framework to try and understand the experiences of Singaporean students who are currently studying or have studied in Australia. This is a case-study I have undertaken which is part of an ARC funded study with Rizvi and Singh. One key issue for consideration within this study is the role of international education in the formation of diasporic identities. International students from India and China are the subjects of the other two case-studies.

Singaporean Overseas Students at Monash University 2000

HDR			
	Female	Male	Total
Arts		2	2
Business	3	1	4
Engineering		3	3
Health	5	1	6
Science	2	5	7
Total	10	12	22
OPG			
	<u>Female</u>	Male	Total

Arts	13	5	18
Business	36	35	71
Engineering	1	3	4
Health	1		1
Science	6	5	11
Total	57	48	105
<u>UG</u>			
	Female	Male	Total
Non Award	16	24	40
Arts	154	59	213
Business	805	461	1266
Education	2		2
Engineering	8	22	30
Health	65	8	73
Law	2		2
Science	217	354	571
Total	1269	928	2197
<u>All Course Levels</u>			
	Female	Male	Total
Non Award	16	24	40
Arts	167	66	233
Business	844	497	1341
Education	2		2
Engineering	9	28	37
Health	71	9	80
Law	2		2
Science	225	364	589

Total	1336	988	2324
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Table supplied by I. R. Dobson, Monash University

Approximately 15 undergraduate students were interviewed at Monash including near equal numbers of females and males were included. Most of these students were in their second year of study. Attempts were made to interview students from a range of courses and ethnic backgrounds. However, this proved difficult and as a result most students in the study come from Chinese backgrounds and are undertaking business courses. Approximately 15 Monash alumni were interviewed in Singapore, including near equal numbers of females and males. Again most of the interviewees were from Chinese backgrounds however the range of courses was more varied. These students had completed their studies in Australia in the previous six months to 6 years and most had visited Australia since returning to Singapore. Students and alumni were contacted through various methods including letters, email, personal contact, referral, organizations for Singaporean and international students and alumni. It proved more difficult to get interviewees than initially anticipated, as a result all those who agreed to be interviewed were included.

I am currently in the process of analysing interview transcripts. What follows is an initial and tentative list of issues which have emerged from these as worthy of further exploration.

- A common construction of 'east' and 'west' in binary terms.
- An understanding of education within this schema as either 'eastern' or 'western' in its orientation.
- The use of these terms to indicate a type of homogeneity within each category. When this was explored further there was a slippage between terms including;
 - Asian
 - Singaporean
 - Chinese
 - International students
 - Overseas students.

(The usage, attributed meaning and priority within self attributions given to these terms was shifting between and within interviews.)

- A desire to obtain a 'western' education as this was understood as valuable in the context of global developments and therefore future careers.
- An understanding that such an education would supplement rather than replace current identifications and knowledges.

(Somehow they would remain Singaporean regardless of how each student understood the character of Singaporeans and this education was a necessary add-on if they were to succeed in the future. In fact, some described the desire to obtain such an education as itself characteristic of being Singaporean.)

- Students were divided as to their estimation of the intrinsic worth of 'western' styles of education which were identified as either lacking in rigour or requiring initiative and self-regulation.

- Living outside Singapore was an important component of acquiring this education, regardless of how this was done. (Living and socializing with other Singaporeans or attempting to experience Australian life with the 'locals'.)
- Studying overseas was akin to a rite of passage towards independent adulthood (especially by the women who had not had the experience of military service and were younger than their male counterparts). This was understood as a major contributing factor to the resultant cultural reorientation.
- Differing attitudes to authority were seen to characterise 'western' and 'eastern' styles of learning and teaching, relationships with future or current employers and relations within families (parents and children, husbands and wives). Encountering and understanding these was an important part of the overseas experience regardless of whether these were seen as desirable or not at a personal and/or professional level.
- Personal preferences on this issue of authority seemed a critical component in relation to shifting cultural identifications. This was particularly the case for those who preferred styles of authority which they believed to be unusual in Singapore.
- There was a strong belief that shifts on such issues made you a different type of Singaporean rather than less Singaporean.
- Those who had been in Singapore longest subsequent to studying in Australia, expressed the least bifurcated attitudes on such issues. These interviewees suggested ways of operating in relation to their professions, education and family which seemed more fluid.

How students understand their education is a critical component of how we reflect on what we do as educators. This is particularly so in relation to overseas students because their experiences bring together diverse cultural understandings that move across national boundaries. Whilst moving across national boundaries is not unique to international students, unlike immigrant students for example, international students anticipate and 'shop for' an education with transnational application. This has the potential to provide a sharper focus regarding pedagogies suitable for new understandings of culture and identity.

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