THE CIRCUIT OF CULTURE AS A GENERATIVE TOOL OF CONTEMPORARY ANALYSIS: EXAMINING THE CONSTRUCTION OF AN EDUCATION COMMODITY

Annabelle M Leve
Monash University, Clayton

Abstract

Contemporary studies in the field of education cannot afford to neglect the ever present interrelationships between power and politics, economics and consumption, representation and identity. In studying a recent cultural phenomenon in government schools, it became clear that a methodological tool that made sense of these interlinked processes was required.

The Circuit of Culture (the Circuit) was refined as a tool of cultural analysis by British cultural theorists in the late 1990s. This paper will provide a brief history of the Circuit, some of its applications and critique, and an overview of the way the Circuit has been utilised to explore a topical cultural phenomenon involving the commodification of international student programs in Australian government schools (Leve, 2011). This study draws on the Circuit to open the way for an exploration of the multiple interrelated processes involved in the construction and management of an education commodity.

The Circuit emphasizes the moments of production, representation, consumption, regulation and identity, and the interrelated articulations of these moments. It is found to be a useful and flexible tool for exploring the contemporary significance of, and possibilities for, the increasingly complex multiple modes and relationships of each of these significant moments in the construction and maintenance of an education commodity.

Introduction

The Circuit of Culture (the Circuit) was created as a tool of cultural analysis, initially by members of the British Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS), and later developed as a conceptual basis to the 1997 Culture, Media & Identities series (Sage & Open University). This article will provide a brief history of the Circuit of Culture from its beginnings in the CCCS through to its later use and development. Reference is made to a number of interdisciplinary studies that have critiqued the Circuit or made explicit use of this tool of analysis. The Circuit's application and usefulness are examined through reference to a recent study that draws on the Circuit to explore a topical cultural phenomenon, international (full fee paying) student programs in Australian state schools (Leve, 2011a). An assessment will be made of how this tool has been utilized and made contextually relevant as a tool of analysis that opens the way for an exploration of the multiple interrelated processes involved in the construction and management of a cultural phenomenon. The Circuit of Culture emphasizes the moments of production, representation, consumption, regulation and identity, and the interrelated articulations of these moments, and is considered for its contemporary significance and possibilities for considering the increasingly complex multiple modes of each of these mutable moments.

Stuart Hall and his colleagues' work with the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) in Birmingham UK between 1968 -1979 and with the Open University until his retirement in 1997 provides the theoretical resources and techniques that will be introduced and reviewed in this paper. The latter period of Hall's published work (as Culture, Media and Identities series (1997) editor and writer with the Open University) is published in a form that is introductory, accessible and inspiring, as well as clearly articulating many aspects of his earlier work which taken together makes it a valuable ongoing source of inspiration for researchers interested in the construction and management of cultural phenomena, commoditisation and meaning making.

Hall's constructivist conceptualisation of 'meaning' remains a contested one. Cultural politics and power depend on promulgation of particular shared meanings, as does, I have argued, the international

education market (Leve, 2011b). The circulation of stable and plausible meanings, or constructions of the 'truth', help to regulate and control; to ensure identity and un/belonging; consumption and appropriation patterns provide values for and point towards preferred meanings. In terms of the construction and maintenance of a commodity, account needs to be taken of the interrelated acts of intention, interpretation, consumption and desire, consumers and producers, wanters and wanted, customer and product, management and legality, laws and lawmakers, price and competition – the ongoing processes of commoditisation. This production and circulation of meaning can then be further examined through asking the following questions:

> How is meaning actually produced? Which meanings are shared within society, and by which groups? What other, counter meanings are circulating? What meanings are contested? How does the struggle between different sets of meanings reflect the play of power and the resistance to power in society?
>
> (du Gay et al., 1997: 12)

As a way of addressing these questions, the Circuit of Culture was developed which diagrammatically represents the processes through which meanings are made and shared within and between cultures[i].

The Circuit of Culture – Origins & Rationales

Hall's encoding/decoding model, developed during his time at the British Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) and first published in 1973[ii] is said to have been a precursor to later circuit models developed by cultural theorists. Encoding/decoding as a primarily semiological device denotes the beginnings of an important historical shift from the more common linear conception of message and exchange to introducing a complex structure of relations through the interlinking processes of articulation and discursive elements of production. A number of theorists and Hall himself (Johnson, 1986; Pillai, 1992; Wren-Lewis, 1983; Morley and Chen, 1996) have highlighted conceptual deficiencies and inadequate terminological distinctions and clarifications within this earlier model which serve to inform later more comprehensively theorized models and their related concepts.

During the 1980s, Richard Johnson[iii] proposed an embryonic model of the cultural circuit as a heuristic or illustrative guide to approaching analysis of cultural processes from different aspects. Johnson points out that there may be many interpretations of complex cultural processes, but '[w]hat if they are all false or incomplete, liable to mislead, in that they are only partial, and therefore cannot grasp the process as a whole?' (Johnson, 1986: 46). He proposes that these academic divisions or perspectives may also relate to different social positions and viewpoints from which different aspects of cultural circuits acquire the greatest salience. His model could be seen to highlight lived experience in favour of social structure which 'preserved the impact of material conditions on textual production' (Taylor et al., 2002: 608). Johnson concludes his article with the suggestion that these disciplinary divisions could in fact be utilized as a source of new and effective political alliances.
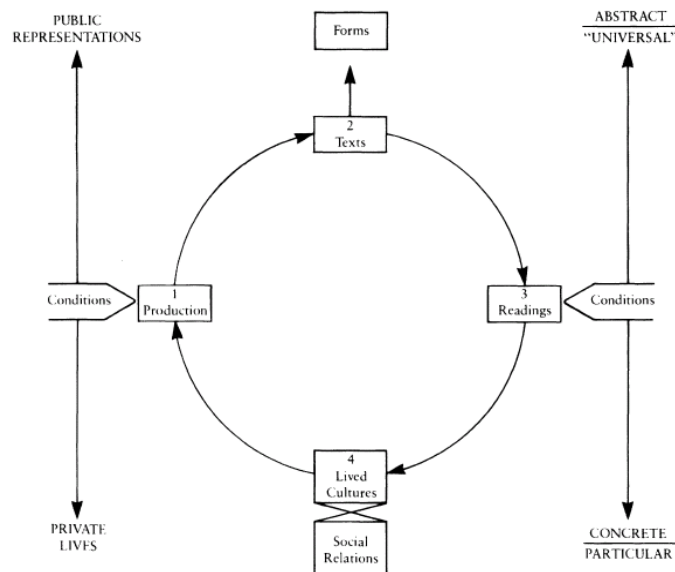
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***Figure 1:* Embryonic version of the Circuit of Culture** (Johnson, 1986:46)

This earlier version of the cultural circuit (*Figure 1*) is concerned with addressing what Johnson perceived as a neglect of the 'private' - the choices made by consumers and the basis of those choices, or 'modes of reception', so that processes of production tended to be the dominant focus. Instead, Johnson's circuit included a move from the 'private' (ideas for, conceptualisation of ...) to the 'public' (production of...) to consumption/reading, 'back again to the private, the particular and concrete' (Johnson, 1986: 49).

The aim of cultural studies requires refocussing argues Johnson, particularly versions that centre the 'text' as an object of study. This entails having analytical aims to elucidate 'the social life of subjective [or cultural] forms at each moment of their circulation, including their textual embodiments' (1986:62). The importance of context is then highlighted for its role in the determination of meaning(s), transformations and salience of these forms, including the contexts of immediate situations, as well as the larger historical context or conjuncture.

The existence of real theoretical incompatibilities between approaches and the already overambitious nature of many research projects are claimed as some of the inadequacies of simply combining approaches to overcome the analytical limitations described above. Johnson suggests instead that 'it may be more transformative to rethink each moment in the light of the others, importing objects and methods of study usually developed in relation to one moment into the next. The moments, though separable, are not in fact discrete' (Johnson, 1986:74). This notion of the importance of the interrelationships between various moments within the circuit (Figure 1) forms the basis of a comprehensive and rigorous approach to the analysis of cultural forms and processes as represented in the later model of the Circuit of Culture.
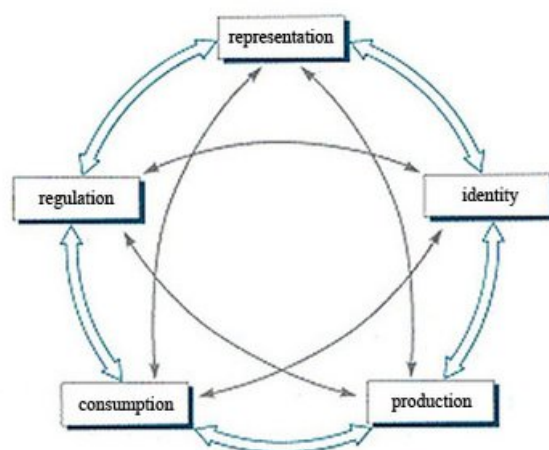
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Figure 2: **The Circuit of Culture** (Hall, 1997c:1)

This later model (*Figure 2*), developed by the Open University cultural studies team for their Culture, Media and Identities series of publications[iv], adapts the basic idea of the articulation of levels of practice to the question of economy and cultural meaning which is produced and embedded at each level of the cultural circuit. The Circuit of Culture (1997) simplifies the structure of the original (1986) by excluding the public/private and abstract/concrete dichotomies, incorporating *conditions* within the circuit as *regulation*, and highlighting the interconnections that link each of the five elements to the others.

1. Texts/forms/**representation**
2. Readings/**consumption**
3. **Production** (construction)
4. Conditions/**regulation**
5. Lived cultures/social relations/**identity**

The five interrelated processes implicated in the production and circulation of meaning through language thereby form a useful framework to consider cultural meanings of commodities holistically.

A number of commentators (e.g. Negus, 1997; Mackay, 1997; Fine, 2002) critique the determination of culture as suggested by the Circuit of Culture, and instead privilege the circular journey of the commodity itself, rather than culture. As a structure the Circuit of Culture can undoubtedly be usefully employed and adapted for an in depth study of culture, however there are no 'neat fits' and the beliefs and activities of consumers cannot be determined through analysis of the artefacts or behaviours themselves. Fine comments on the lack of criticism directed towards the Circuit model, pointing out the arbitrary nature of the five nodal points and lack of progression in answering questions raised by Johnson such as those concerning causation across nodes (Fine, 2002).

Ben Fine, an economic theorist, continues his critique of the cultural circuit suggesting it is 'little more than metaphor, an organized recognition of the different sites at which culture is generated and mutually determined' (Fine, 2002:107). He argues that what is being represented is the (real or material) circulation of commodities which are invested with a cultural content.

> As the commodity moves through its sopv, so it picks up and transforms culture along the way. This offers the opportunity to examine cultural content in a piecemeal fashion, with more or less acknowledgement of the interrelationship between the various participating moments – what contribution has been made by advertising, marketing, design, retailing or whatever.
>
> (Fine, 2002:106).

The linking of commodities as a part of this circuit, which impacts on culture through each of the five

processes is an important consideration for the study as described below.

The study on which this paper is based (Leve, 2011) aims to 'articulate' certain processes in order to better understand a particular contemporary phenomenon. Articulation in this sense is the

> process of connecting disparate elements together to form a temporary unity [...] a linkage which is not necessary, determined or absolute and essential for all time; rather it is a linkage whose conditions of existence or emergence need to be located in the contingencies of circumstance.

> (du Gay et al., 1997: 3; Hall, 1996).

Articulation can also be said to refer to the five interrelated processes that make up the Circuit of Culture. My articulation concerns the representation of a constructed commodity that has evolved out of the market based approach to international education, the signified meaning of which is 'fixed' through processes of commodification, notably through marketing and advocatory texts.

The broader cultural context of this study is that of a conservatively governed and neoliberally inclined culture which has facilitated the processes in which education has become a valued commodity that can be traded internationally, and it is therefore clear that each element represented in the Circuit of Culture is worthy of further comprehensive study. The processes of neoliberalism (see Davies and Bansel, 2007) contribute to shared understandings, one of which is a large-scale shift concerning education as a commodity, able to be promoted and sold in a particular marketplace. Commodification, as one of the processes supported through neoliberalism, uses representation to create and maintain particular shared understandings relating to identity, production, consumption and regulation, as proposed by the Circuit of Culture.

Articulating the Moments

The benefit of using this model of culture as a study guide is readily apparent. Paul Du Gay's comment that this is the circuit 'through which any analysis of a cultural text or artefact must pass if it is to be adequately studied' (du Gay et al., 1997: 3) seems like sound advice; if these 'moments', and the interconnections between them, are considered then all of the major viewpoints into the construction of a cultural phenomenon appear to be potentially addressed.

The 'phenomenon' to be better understood could be based around a single artefact such as Du Gay et al's study of the Sony Walkman (1997), or a dynamic service such as Napster (Taylor et al., 2002). Other examples include promotional campaigns designed to sell commercial products (Scherer and Jackson, 2008) or to change social action or behaviours (Brooks, 2010; Gould and Gould, 2003; Le Mare, 2007) or a collection of tourist brochures that are shown to utilize an archetype that results in the reproduction of a particular discourse (Norton, 1996). My study used freely available influential texts that included media reports, policy documents, transcripts of political speeches and parliamentary discussions, guidelines and advice, government reviews and reports, academic papers from a range of disciplines, and marketing and promotional texts. Other studies that draw from the Circuit of Culture use combinations of interviews, historical images, television advertisements and/or tools and objects that may be used in or associated with particular contexts (Soar, 2000; O'Reilly, 2005; Curtin, 2006; Burgess, 1990; Taylor et al., 2002). The 'taken-for-grantedness' of the phenomenon from which an artefact emerges can be destabilized and a holistic approach to analysis of the object of study can then, potentially, be made.

The 'moments' (also referred to as 'nodes') can be understood as points of notation within particular 'cultural processes', that is, articulated moments in the processes that construct meaning(s). The following overview of the nodes, or articulated moments of the Circuit of Culture[vi] is intended to initiate the process of analysis by aligning these moments with some of the constructive processes implicated in the development of the international student phenomenon, or commodity, being investigated in this study. Any one of the 'moments' can be chosen as a starting point; it doesn't matter where an analysis starts, as long as account is taken of the entire nexus, and it is observed that each

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moment relies upon the others for the cultural meaning to fully emerge.

Representation as Theoretical Construct

Stuart Hall's published work with the Open University cultural studies team in the 1990s constitutes a particularly useful understanding of representational practices that articulates particular ways of understanding how representation crucially constructs and is constructed by the world around us. He contrasts three theories of representation, the *reflective* (or *mimetic)* in which language reflects a meaning which already exists in the world, *intentional* in which language expresses the intended meaning of the producer, or *constructionist* in which meaning is constructed in and through language (Hall, 1997b: 15). Although the latter constructionist theory is key to Hall's theorising at that time, I maintain that each of these three theories of representation remains relevant to the study of cultural phenomena as commodity, as each has resonance in the practices of those invested in building, managing and maintaining the value of a commodity.

'Representation', in common usage, can be a description or depiction of something, or a symbol or substitute for something. A representation may 'be', or 'stand for' something else, just as in Saussurean semiotics, a sign is defined as 'anything that stands for something other than itself' (Gordon and Lubell, 1996: 17). Representations, as are signs, are used to *refer* to something that may or may not be real, or have the same form, or image, for you and me. Meanings are fluid; representation leading to effective communication relies on some kind of common understanding between you and me, of what something *is* and what something *is not.* Hall calls this common understanding 'conceptual maps', and makes the point that in sharing a roughly similar 'conceptual map', 'we are able to build up a shared culture of meanings and thus construct a social world which we inhabit together' (Hall, 1997b: 18). The system that leads to a conceptual map relies on classifying, making certain connections between ideas and things, abstract and concrete, together making up mental representations that stand for things in the world.

Hall attempts to subvert the notion of representation as simply a reflection or distortion of reality. In his view, understanding representation as a kind of distortion of 'reality' consequently makes any work on representation one of measuring the gap between what one might think of as the true meaning of an event or 'thing', and how it is presented through language. Although he concurs that a lot of good work does exactly this, Hall considers this notion of representation as too literal, one that assumes the existence of a 'true' representation, as opposed to a distorted one. Hall's alternative claim then, is that representation has a constitutive role, that is, it makes meaning whilst at the same time standing in for 'reality'; that reality does not exist outside the process of representation (Jhally, 1997).

These various ways of understanding 'representation' are critical and informative, enabling a far more insightful investigation of the processes in which it has a part. Representation has been connected with notions of a pre-existing 'reality', of being made to perform a particular function by producers and of fulfilling the role of both constructing and being constructed by language. The work of representation may be to highlight particular preferred meanings and/or subjugate others; to limit the potential meanings or to extend the possibilities of understanding. The meaning gleaned from a representation is never fixed, it is slippery, always shifting; and always caught up in a conglomerate of other possible meanings.

The creation of a textual representation involves the constitutive roles of many possibilities: producer, creator, actor, model, fund provider, instigator, consumer, onlooker, researcher, potential customer, passers-by. We are continually assailed by textual representations and the meanings they convey. The process of creating and attempting to fix a particular message or meaning to representations is integral to the work of those whose job it is to build and maintain the value of a commodity.

As this section has highlighted, representation is a complex phenomenon in itself. It plays many and varied roles in the constitution of understandings about phenomena. It is integrally connected with language, meaning and communication. Most importantly, it can be understood as a *process* through

which *things,* and hence *meanings,* are constituted. However, it should not be considered the only or even necessarily the main constituting process, as will be examined below.

Production

Du Gay (1997) argues that in 'late modern societies', the 'economic' and the 'cultural' are irrevocably 'hybrid' categories; that what we think of as purely 'economic' processes and practices are, in an important sense, 'cultural' phenomena. In order to produce an economically successful product, cultural meanings, norms and values are crucial factors requiring consideration. If we accept that 'culture' structures the ways people think, feel and act, it needs also to be considered that in effectively managing these cultural processes and hence, meanings, then success, efficiency and satisfaction can be the projected outcome. The 'cultural economy' then signifies a break with the more generally understood 'political economy' that tends to represent economic processes and practices as 'things in themselves' and which has the affect of objectifying the people involved and evacuating the cultural dimensions – the meanings and values these activities hold for those people.

My study assumes the existence of an international education marketplace. Where did it come from? What does this entity look like? How is it represented? What are its main components and how do they work? – It needs to be conceptualized and represented in order to be managed (entered). This requires a discourse (of the market) to deliberate and act upon it. Hence, the market itself can also be seen to be a cultural phenomenon because it works through language and representation. However, the specific phenomenon being investigated is the international education commodity that is produced in order to enter this 'marketplace'. The study traces a number of specific discourses which work through language and representation and which are used to 'deliberate and act upon' this commodity and its position in the international education marketplace.

The study also aims to avoid the separation between cultural and political economies through considering the economic production and management of international education. Through articulation with the other key moments of the cultural circuit, the production of the international education phenomenon as a marketable commodity does not simply begin with production and end with consumption – not a beginning and an end but a continual process of mutually constitutive 'meaning making and meaning taking' (Leve, 2011b).

In addressing an important theoretical aim of the study regarding the production of meaning, the Circuit of Culture suggests that meanings are produced at several different sites and circulated through several different processes and practices. Meaning making processes operating in any one site are always particularly dependent upon the meaning making processes and practices operating in other sites for their effect. Production and the dissemination of a 'product' occurs less as transmission by a discreet 'producer' but as circular continuous flow with many in and outputs, more like the model of an ongoing dialogue within and between all of the constructive processes.

Consumption

> With a cultural studies framework, consumption refers to more than the acquisition, use and divestment of goods and services. Consumption represents a site where power, ideology, gender, and social class circulate and shape one another. Consumption involves the study of particular moments, negotiations, representational formats, and rituals in the social life of a commodity. The consumption of cultural objects by consumers can empower, demean, disenfranchise, liberate, essentialise, and stereotype. Consumers are trapped within a hegemonic marketplace.
>
> (Denzin, 2001: 325)

Cultural studies rejects the dismissive notion of consumers as 'dupes', and of secondary importance to producers in the constitutive processes of cultural phenomena. Mackay (1997) highlights the potential for acknowledging positive pleasurable associations with consumption and its role in construction of identities; *we are what we consume, I shop therefore I am*. Consumers are understood to have an important active and creative role, not passive, not corrupting nor overly determined.

The act of 'producing' directly and logically implies the prospect of consumption and the existence of a consumer. In the context of this study the notion of 'consumer' is extended to include not only the client/customer/overseas student and/or their fee-payer/parent who is appropriating the commodity (an Australian education/lifestyle), but all of those whose understanding of what this commodity is – its identity – is formed through their acquisition (consumption) of meaning through certain representational practices. The student-consumer making choices such as which location to choose (appropriate) and those acquiring (appropriating) information about this commodity can all be considered active and creative consumers whose understanding of the cultural phenomenon (the international education commodity) is again mutually constitutive of the development of that phenomenon.

Consumption is not the end of a process, but the setting off on another – with increased understanding. Through considering further questions regarding reputation, value for money, available facilities, curriculum choices and infrastructure, these consumers will then actively build on their own preferred version of the commodity under examination, thereby producing something new – the 'work' of consumption, or any other of the circuit processes doesn't cease beyond the moment of its instigation or enactment.

Identification

Processes of identification in relation to international education in Australian schools refers to the ways that the phenomenon itself comes to mean and the related (i.e. articulated) positioning of participants - their actions, looks, ideas and behaviours and the position, authority and/or truthfulness these are understood to have. Consideration of the cultural politics that are so crucial to the 'success' of the international student programs necessarily leads to further questions of how certain identities are mobilized through their representation.

> Identities are discursive categories produced at the intersection of certain attributes, capacities, and forms of conduct at specific historical moments […] these activations are always strategic; identities are scripted and imposed by others as resources for a desired performance of self.
>
> (Taylor et al., 2002: 615)

Analysis of a range of possible identifications for the related constituents of international student programs can be undertaken through further examining the processes in which these come to carry certain meanings.   Particular forms of Identification in direct relation with each of the other interlinked processes is crucial to the type of work that particular texts encapsulate. The identification of particular discourses and their conditions also play a corresponding role in the production of meaning and identity (Woodward, 1997).

Regulation

The study considers the processes of 'regulation' in two interrelated forms.   Firstly, the formalized government policies and regulations pertaining to the international education industry in Australia. Secondly, the less formal and more abstract rendering of a particular pattern and order of signifying practices so that things (in this case, representations) relating to this industry appear to be 'regular' or 'natural'. Both forms of regulation are dynamic and contested (Thompson, 1997).

The international education marketplace mentioned above (under *Production*) is an important site in which to understand the notion of regulation and its broader political and social effects. Markets do not operate on their own but require setting up and policing, requiring other social and cultural conditions of existence which they themselves cannot provide (Hall, 1997a: 229). Deregulation and the proliferation of 'free market' policies as a key political shift to the reconstitution of education as the commodity traded in this marketplace (Marginson, 1986; Kenway, 1995) do not equate to the absence of regulatory structures (Megarrity, 2007).   Hall argues that markets themselves regulate and the shift is in fact between different modes of regulation - those of the market and those of the state.

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Along the lines of Hall's lamentations of the passing of the age of the state public institution associated with or governed by 'public' philosophy and the notion of 'freedom' of choice, economic deregulation in fact enforced the need to establish new regulatory bodies[vii] to make new regulations, ostensibly, to 'protect the consumer'. Official attempts to manage and implement regulatory changes have been 'variously accommodated, negotiated, and opposed by consumers' (Taylor et al., 2002: 624) and in the case of international education programs, by providers and a range of other stakeholders. This evolving process of de- and re-regulation that shifts responsibility and impacts crucially on identity (public/private, state/market etc) links irrevocably with neoliberal theory and the broader international education industry.

In terms of regulation of the 'international education industry' and its permutation in Australian state government schools, is the culture, or meaning of this entity determined through the economy, the market, the state, political or social power? Or, in Hall's terms, can this regulation of meaning be thought of in terms of a process of mutual determination-

> arising, say, from the articulation or linkage between culture and the economy, the state or the market, which implies a weaker sense of determination, each setting limits and exerting pressures on the other, but neither having the overwhelming determining force to define in detail the internal operations of the other?
>
> (Hall, 1997a: 228)

This question and its articulation with the others that arise through the interrelated nodes of the Circuit of Culture underlie the analysis of the international student phenomenon undertaken in Leve (2011a).

This section has demonstrated the analytical value of utilising the Circuit of Culture and its articulated nodes as a useful study guide and methodological tool in comprehensively addressing research questions relating to the complexities of this phenomenon. The articulation of criss-crossing interrelated processes align with the notion that there is no single discrete way of 'knowing' the international student phenomenon in Australian schools that would explain the range of different possible or implied meanings in any given context.

Central Arguments/findings

The contentions that were built up throughout the research text (Leve, 2011a) were informed by and built around the interrelated elements of the Circuit of Culture and correspondingly, can be envisaged as interconnected, circulating and never concluded. In terms of this research study, these interwoven contentions were found to relate to firstly, representation epitomising success; secondly, of a commodity produced and delimited by certain processes; and thirdly, of the particularities of the public school sector's participation within the larger internationalisation discourses. Hall and his associates' work was crucial to the methodology used to develop these understandings.

Critique of the cultural circuit, including the 'arbitrary nature of the five nodal points' and the determination of culture (Fine, 2002), did have some resonance during the process of analysis. I was often mentally 'ticking off' the nodes I had considered and my intended emphasis on representation meant that I had 'arbitrarily' placed it at the pinnacle of the structure. Clearly a circuit does not actually have a 'pinnacle', and the placement of, or emphasis on other nodes seemed at times to be quite random. Fine's argument that the circuit represents the (real or material) circulation of commodities which are invested with a cultural content (Fine, 2002: 106) seems reasonable although this 'circular journey' cannot really be predetermined. The management of the international education commodity as determined through this study can then be seen as a part of the government and industry's attempts to control this developmental 'journey', and the related transformation of understandings of the phenomenon.

When considering the (intended) audience of particular representations produced, the circuit model suggests we turn our attention to 'consumption'. However, there are a number of quite different 'consumers' implicated in the construction of this contemporary commoditized phenomenon. These

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are not confined to the student/client consumers of the end product, but the range of other agents, or stakeholders across the industry and broader community that impact on the particular message, or understanding that is considered in the production of these representations. Therefore any different text or artefact examined, in conjunction with each of the circuit elements, requires additional attention to the constructive role of intended audience(s).

Through his seminal works of the late twentieth century, Stuart Hall has consistently reminded his readers that there is never one stable, true meaning and his conceptualisations and examples of cultural analysis have, I contend, continuing resonance in a now widely accepted global culture of rapid and constant change.

The Circuit of Culture has proved useful as a conceptual tool for probing the complexities of cultural construction of meanings and reminding me to look beyond the surface – whether contemplating an image, a statement, a document or a theory. The elements of the revised Circuit reached beyond the production/consumption binary and allowed me to stop and consider moments in that process. Representations are produced and consumed but they are also affected by regulatory practices, identity and assumed meanings and connections with what is already known. The Circuit and its related cultural studies theoretical grounding allows for delving into all of the complexities, or alternatively, focussing on the complexities of only one or some of these processes.

This paper provides a demonstration and rationale of a methodological approach to consider the processes that contribute to the formulation of new and evolving cultural constructions of the 21st Century, guided by the work of cultural theorist Stuart Hall. Conceptualising the international student program in Australian state schools as a 'cultural phenomenon' the processes of its construction are discussed. The Circuit of Culture incorporates the interrelated elements of representation, production, identity, regulation and consumption as processes through which cultural phenomena may be analysed (du Gay, et al., 1997). To this I have added an emphasis on the range of actors that need to be considered as consumers within the various processes. Contemporary analysis of cultural production demands attention is paid to the various stakeholders within the realms of both production and consumption. This enhanced use of the circuit as an analytical tool has guided and allowed for a broad depth and range of analysis of the phenomenon, and one that does not end in any particular place – it could in fact be re-appropriated for a comparative exploration of other education sectors, or at any other historical moment. This approach would be appropriate for any collection of 'artefacts', or representative materials that contribute to or emerge from the processes of construction of any phenomenon under investigation.

Hall and his colleagues' work offers tools and techniques for a comprehensive study into phenomena that seem to have become normalized and established in our social and educational environments. The impacts and effects of these phenomena may be recognized, yet their origins and the processes of their construction remain largely unexamined.

Endnotes

[i] Hall briefly describes a number of alternative ways in which the concept of 'culture' is understood within the human and social sciences (Hall, 1997c:2) but his preferred use at this point in his work, in simple terms, refers to 'culture' as being about 'shared meanings'.

[ii] Earlier version 'Encoding and Decoding in Media Discourse' published as an occasional paper for the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham and later in an edited book Hall S. ([1973] 1980) Encoding/Decoding ['Encoding and Decoding in Television Discourse', 1973]. In: Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (ed) Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies, 1972-79. London: Hutchinson, 128-138.

iii Johnson took over Hall's directorship at CCCS in 1979 when Hall moved into a professorial position with the Open University.

iv This series of publications, published in 1997, includes Doing Cultural Studies: The Story of the Sony Walkman (du Gay, et al., 1997) which is a detailed example of 'a cultural study of a particular object'. The rest of the books, each edited by a different member of the main team, contain essays by a range of cultural studies practitioners. (du Gay, 1997; Hall, 1997d; Mackay, 1997; Thompson, 1997; Woodward, 1997). Each book introduces one of the five 'cultural processes' that make up the cultural circuit but also rely on the metaphor of the circuit as a continuing interrelated whole.

v 'sop' – something given or provided to pacify, or bribe – understood as contributing to a critical conceptualising of the Circuit as metaphor that attempts to constitute itself as significant.

vi This overview of the nodes, or moments of the cultural circuit is taken from the Culture, media and identities series of edited books published by Sage in association with the Open University, each of which draw from the same Circuit of Culture model. Series editor is Stuart Hall.

vii For example, the introduction and expansion of regulatory mechanisms such as the Education Services for Overseas Students (ESOS) Act and the National Code of Practice.

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