Crossing Borders: Voices from the Margins

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Abstract: In responding to contemporary geopolitical shifts, universities around the world are increasingly entangled in intersecting local, national, and global relations. Transnational students are using the "internationalization of higher education" to extend and deepen their capacity for thinking and acting globally, nationally and locally in order to enhance their education life chances. As universities in Australia are being integrated into the new global system of transnationalism in higher education, particularly with students from the Indian sub-continent, there is a need for re-strategizing in universities in the areas of curriculum and pedagogy to enable transnational learning communities and generate and sustain empowering knowledge networks. This paper will explore the impact of the "Crossing Borders" mentoring support program at the University of Western Sydney that aims to foster educative relationships and community engagement amongst and between Master of Teaching students. As a result of such an initiative, the School of Education at the University of Western Sydney is able to provide a welcoming and culturally diverse learning and social experience for Indian international students so that the problematic connections between university imaginings of the "internationalization of higher education" and transnational students' uses of international education to enhance their life opportunities as global/national/local citizens, workers/employers and learners are blurred.

Key words: literacy, service learning, transnationalism, higher education

1. Introduction

Universities today are increasingly affected by the process of globalization. Hopper (2007, p. 180) believes that cultural globalization has presented us with a number of analytical challenges, which have been caused by the "unprecedented volume of cultural traffic and increased cultural mixing and developments". The complexity of such cultural developments needs to account for the degree to which forms of global connectivity impact upon national cultures (Hopper, 2007, p. 182). In regards to higher education, this suggests that as universities in Australia are being integrated into the new global system of transnationalism in higher education, particularly with students from the Indian sub-continent, there is a need for re-strategizing in universities in the areas of curriculum and pedagogy to enable transnational learning communities and generate and sustain empowering knowledge networks (Singh & Naidoo, 2010). Taking Appadurai's (1996, p. 33) notion of "global cultural flows" as a point of departure, it might be argued that the global/national/local movements of transnational students (and academics), and their imaginings about moving, constitute a key feature of the current transitions in the practices of globalization. Appadurai (1996, p. 32) argues that the main problem of today's global interaction is the tension

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between cultural uniformity and cultural variation and transnational students experience this tension since they are using the "internationalization of higher education" to acquire skills geared towards a knowledge economy.

Australia is increasingly becoming a popular destination for international students particularly from Asian countries. This is attributed to the geographical proximity to Asian countries, language, reputation and flexibility of study and work arrangements (Singh & Naidoo, 2010). As Portes (1998, p. 2) points out, the concept [Transnationalism] "may actually perform double duty as part of the theoretical arsenal with which we approach the world system structures, but also as an element in a less developed enterprise, namely the analysis of the everyday networks and patterns of social relationships that emerge in and around those structures." Giddens (1999 cited in Leask, 2008, p. 11) considers internationalization to be "a positive response to globalization which stimulates nations to interact and enrich each other with fresh cultural insights and exchanges", so that the internationalization of higher education can stimulate both students and academics to gain a critical perspective of the world. This can assist international students to develop their "dialogic imagination….which corresponds to the coexistence of rival ways of life in the individual experience… to compare, reflect, criticize, understand and combine contradictory certainties" (Beck, 2002, p. 18).

Students' active involvement and their sense of belonging at university has been claimed as the most effective factor in their learning; as their engagement with the academic environment seems to translate in "a range of outcomes including persistence, satisfaction, achievement and academic success" (Krause et al., 2005, p. 1). Universities need to reconceptualise "pedagogy to include systematic notions of teaching and learning in international contexts and with international students and curricula" (Hellstén & Reid, 2008, p. 1). Over the past decade or so, Australian universities have made some important developments towards the internationalization of higher education for example internationalizing to facilitate understanding of other cultures and to support further expansion of Australia's trade. However, by far the most important development in the internationalization of higher education has been the expansion in enrolments of fee-paying international students (Harman & Nolan, 2002).

The University of Western Sydney's International Framework document for 2009–2013 states (Ingleson, 2009, p. 1)

> A research led university serving local, regional and international communities at the beginning of the twenty-first century must be international in its scope and outlook. For a young university like UWS internationalization is in its early stage of development. UWS is unique in the extent of its student and staff diversity. UWS students originate from around 170 different national backgrounds. Some are international students — there are about 4,000 international students in a total student population of about 35,000. Nearly half of the Australian students are from non English-speaking backgrounds — the children of migrants to Australia. About ten percent of students are Muslims — again mainly the children of migrants from the Middle East and Southeast Asia. This diversity is a wonderful asset. Internationalization at UWS must seek to build on this cultural, linguistic, religious and ethnic diversity.

The above excerpt is indicative of Knight's (1999, p. 14) concept of globalization "as the flow of technology, economy and knowledge, people, values, ideas … across borders", pointing out that globalization "affects each country in a different way due to a nation's individual history, traditions, culture and priorities". Knight saw internationalization of higher education as being "one of the ways that a country responds to the impact of globalization yet, at the same time, respects the individuality of the nation" (Knight, 1999, p. 14). Such an emphasis on the development of human potential, irrespective of race or ethnic diversity, and the relationship

between quality and education and the role of the university as an institution in bringing about transformation represents a body of knowledge that emerges from a critical social science that is based on quality and engaged and engaging leadership. With such knowledge, higher institutions like universities will be able to reconstruct and dignify the learning and teaching experiences of the university community and it would be possible then for those who are traditionally voiceless, for example, international students, to acquire teaching and learning that will allow them to critically examine the role society has played in their own self-formation.

The international framework document of the University of Western Sydney is a truly critical view that goes beyond the acquisition of knowledge to seek a way forward to a more open and equitable arrangement through increased participation of excluded groups, such as international students and teachers, in the policy-making, practice-determining process. Each student arrives in Australia with his or her own different and particular transnational educational histories, as well as pre-formed identities as transnational workers/employers, global/national/local citizens and worldly learners and these identities are being impacted by their enrolment in the Masters of Teaching program at the School of Education at the University of Western Sydney, Australia.

The paper examines the implications of an academic service learning program "Crossing Borders" on transnationalism and the internationalization of higher education. For individuals coming into Australia from other cultural and linguistic backgrounds, education arguably plays an especially significant part in the negotiation and construction of their understandings of Australian culture and identity. Spooner-Lane, Tangen & Campbell (2009) argue that the student-centred approach is vital for effective teaching in Australian schools and international students need to learn quickly about Australian educational culture. Transnational students are encouraged to disregard standards and norms developed in their home country and adopt those of the host country. This process is clearly complex since cultural norms and beliefs are embedded into the student and thus putting these aside is difficult. Cruickshank, Newell & Cole (2003, p. 246) argue that "problems in adjusting to different teaching/learning styles or to the Australian tertiary system have often been wrongly ascribed to 'language problems'". They continue to argue that "the most effective model for international students was one which was centred on content-based units, but which included support courses, individual mentoring/tutoring and self-directed learning" (Cruickshank et al., 2003, p. 245). An issue of great concern for these international pre-service teachers is anxiety over their lack of understanding of cultural differences between Australian schools and schools in their home country — with related student behaviour management issues (Campbell & Uusimaki, 2006, p. 7).

Han (2006, Abstract, p. xi) argues that teacher educators in her study "had difficulties identifying the character of the English language difficulties experienced by World English Speaking student-teachers and limited capacity to design targeted interventions". As a result, cultural differences exist in the student-lecturer relationship (Singh & Naidoo, 2010). Transnational students tend to be more reluctant to question the opinions of a lecturer as this is a position of authority. Students coming from cultures where study is very much teacher-led may find the transition to an academic environment, with a strong emphasis on independent learning, difficult. Han points out that "'WES' students were struggling to employ the student-centred approach (progressive pedagogy) in their teaching practice… the concept of "being an Australian teacher" had posed a real "challenge" to the pre-service teachers. She believes that the current curriculum, teaching and assessment practices in teacher education in Australia have hindered NESB student-teachers' retention and caused NESB student teachers a number of problems in becoming "Australian" teachers (Han, 2006, pp. 289–290).

González, Andrade, Civil, & Moll (2001, p. 116), believe that to teach students from a diverse background,

academics need to be able to "make sense of their (students') everyday lives" to find evidence of their achievements and to give them an opportunity to make use of their capabilities. Teachers dispelling their own ignorance while dispelling their students' ignorance can become "transformative intellectuals' rather than remain mere "classroom technicians employed to pass on a body of knowledge" (Giroux cited in Pennycook, 1994, p. 299). Language and prior experience of another education culture have been considered to be the two main reasons hindering WES students' adjustment in Western academic culture (Robertson et al., 2000; Biggs, 2003). This "disjunction between two different cultural and educational traditions" (Ballard & Clanchy, 1997, p. 5) has contributed to the sense of anxiety felt by Indian international students studying in Australia. Smart, Volet & Ang (2000, p. 9) conclude that Australian and international students mix relatively uneasily and infrequently on Australian campuses. Their report indicates that there are two parallel streams of students proceeding through university — the Australian and the international — within close proximity but, in the majority of cases, with little or only superficial contact and interaction. Further, Romm, Patterson & Hill (1991) concluded from in-depth interviews with international students that the lack of social interaction with domestic students was a major source of dissatisfaction for international students.

International students reported great difficulty in communicating and/or establishing any meaningful relations with local students. It has also been pointed out that many WES students combine "the conventions valued by the academy" with "their native discourses" (Canagarajah, 2002, p. 37) thus presenting a discourse that may be unacceptable. According to Canagarajah (2002, p. 41), students need both language skills as well as the socio-cultural context of learning to be able to engage with the academy. Academic support programs like "Crossing Borders" for international students have been seen as a way forward (Sawir, 2005; Prescott & Hellstén, 2005).

2. Crossing Borders

This paper will provide the research community with knowledge derived from a professional experience (academic service learning) strand undertaken in the Masters of Teaching (Secondary) at the University of Western Sydney (UWS). The University of Western Sydney and in particular the School of Education at the Penrith Campus has adopted a conceptual framework for pre-service teachers that includes a commitment to teaching for social and cultural diversity, to prepare teachers to work with students from diverse racial, ethnic, social class and language backgrounds. Developing a learning climate that encourages awareness and appreciation for those with various cultural backgrounds is an important role of the teacher education program at UWS and to meet this need, the School of Education introduced an alternative or community engagement practicum. The service based practicum program comprises sixty hours of community engagement that give pre-service Master of Teaching students the opportunity to develop their understanding of the individual needs of students they meet and the chance to work alongside and learn from the expertise of mentors. This program also emphasizes reflective practice — reflection facilitates the connection between practice and theory and fosters critical self-reflection so that pre-service teachers gain a range of different perspectives on international students and educational issues. Noddings (1984, p. 72) says:

> The primary aim of every educational institution and of every educational effort must be the maintenance and enhancement of caring. It functions as an end means, and criterion for judging suggested means. We cannot separate means and ends in education because the desired result is part of the process and the process carries with it the notion of persons undergoing it becoming somehow "better".

The Crossing Borders Program is a project of engagement through academic service learning which aims to provide (online and off-line) peer-mentoring to overseas trained pre-service students in order to facilitate academic transition. Local students volunteer to mentor overseas trained students, particularly those from the Indian sub-continent. The peer-mentor is an equal with just a little more experience than the mentee. Although some commentators point to the importance of matching mentors for commonalities, other research says that as relationships develop unanticipated coincidences often strengthen rapport (Cox, 2005). The success of such scenarios appears to depend on putting time and effort into developing the relationship, the reliability of mentor and mentee to adhere to agreed appointments, the flexibility of the program and whether or not participation is actually meeting the needs of the mentee (Boyle, 2005; Conway, 2005).

The program consists of structured social activities; English conversation; helping newcomers find their way around Sydney; learning about aspects of Australian history and culture; clarifying expectations in the Australian higher education system and giving academic literacy guidance where appropriate. The program is intended to support the development of critical thinking skills; raise self awareness and understanding of others; provide opportunities for refining a wide range of interpersonal skills; help define the elements of effective group interactions; and encourage transnational students to reflect on aspects of their own culture and those of others. Novera (2004, p. 475) claims that further benefits of international education are that it helps in the development of university involvement with the Asian nations and also provides the opportunity for cross-cultural experiences for domestic students. He goes on to say that while academic success may heighten a student's confidence, social and cultural adjustment can be important factors which lead to this academic success (Novera, 2004, p. 475) and provide them with the "confidence to tap their own linguistic and discursive resources and further develop them" Canagarajah (1999, p. 190).

Social capital, including programs like peer-mentoring, plays a particularly important role in helping transnational students navigate the complexities of university life. One peer tutor commented that:

> Overall, this opportunity has helped me to appreciate and understand what mentoring should be about — building respectful relationships and friendships….. the rapport that my mentee and I have is one that I consider to be at an equal level of status, we are ultimately two intellectuals who are sharing similarities and differences in regards to our knowledge acquisition, cultural experiences and concepts in the context of the course and beyond.

Developing greater levels of social capital may also help transnational students to counteract the influence of a hostile campus climate and provide access to academic information and opportunities within institutions of higher education. Another peer tutor said that she shared with her mentee personal experiences of starting high-school in mid Year 7 in Australia and although:

> I could speak and write English well, I experienced disorientation adjusting to the "Australian colloquialism" used by teachers and "slang" used by students. I had to train myself to distinguish the language of the text from the language of instruction. This interaction was very enriching as we discovered that we had a lot of things in common and that we could also learn a lot from each other.

The strength and utility of these relationships may depend upon students' own orientations, as students with higher levels of academic performance and more life experiences generally derive greater rewards from their social networks. In the context of our study, the connections that transnational students might cultivate with institutional agents may increase the chances that they would learn about unique opportunities and similar

experiences.

> Suzan: My mentee has transformed from a quiet person to a person "with voice". This has and will be a positive growth for her as a teacher. Having a familiar face on campus and someone to discuss both personal and academic issues meant a growth in understanding the different ways of approaching things in a different country.

> I have developed a friendship with my mentee and I believe that this has been a two-way mutually beneficial experience. I have been able to prepare her for the practical and expanded her concept of the practical by sharing with her my own experiences, challenges and breakthroughs. She has found this insight to be helpful to her in the prac. I have found my mentee to be a very intellectual and self-resourceful person therefore; I was able to acquire a different perspective as we discussed several topics. It was nice to provide feedback, advice, suggestions and also be listened to and realize that someone else is going through similar challenges and hardships.

Similarly, mentees may draw upon their peers for access to information and opportunities especially if they are unable to rely on family for support. Furthermore, the strength of the relationship can affect the scope of the resources gained through the relationship. This continues to highlight the need for students to be both academically and socially integrated in the university environment. Mentors believed that while the "Crossing Borders" program set out as an academic literacy project that seeks a goal in academic writing development, concomitant outcomes included the empowering of international students to be active participants within mainstream curriculum; providing a space where the international students feel comfortable communicating ideas, asking questions and seeking reassurance; and the overwhelming opinion of the mentors was that the program enabled international students to take greater control of their own learning, to realize success in doing and submitting assessments, and to feel more a part of the learning environment. The approach is critical in that all involved are engaged in open and symmetrical forms of communication. Villegas & Lucas (2002, p. 21) believed that to:

> successfully move beyond the fragmented and cursory treatment of diversity that currently prevails, teacher educators must first articulate a vision of teaching and learning within the diverse society we have become…… this…process requires that teacher educators critically examine the curriculum and revise it as needed to make issues of diversity central rather than peripheral.

To date, almost two hundred pre-service teachers made up of mentors and mentees have completed the "Crossing Borders" program. Mentees have an opportunity to practice their literacy skills in a collaborative environment with guidance and feedback from peer mentors. Given that the group participants are all enrolled in the education course, the groups can be tailored somewhat to draw on the specific substantive doctrines taught in that course. The central component of the academic support is a weekly seminar group session organized in conjunction with the UWS Learning Skills Unit. The online reflective journals, some of which is expressed above, show nuances of the complex personal and cultural identities of mentees who felt marginalized between two cultures, who struggled with an oppositional bicultural identity, or simultaneously negotiating two cultures with different peer groups. So "Crossing Borders" was considered essential for the acculturation and adjustment of transnational students. The peer mentoring empowers the transnational pre-service teacher and leads to a greater likelihood of academic success at the university while at the same time encouraging social integration.

3. Conclusion

In an internationalized context, however, there is "a need for the collective global teaching and learning community to identify new pedagogies that engage with the new and future world where assumed old academic traditions may no longer prove effective" (Hellstén & Reid, 2008, p. 2). Hence, an "engagement with international students' knowledge, their knowledge producing capacities and knowledge networks" is required "to internationalise pedagogical structures" (Singh & Shreshtha, 2008, p. 65). The role this engagement can play in an internationalized higher education context is crucial especially to ensure that education disseminated at Western universities does not remain "'pure' of any knowledge that the globalisation of education might confer" (Singh, 2002, p. 223).

The past neglect of traditionally voiceless students, in particular, would place tremendous pressures on teachers, and the function of programs like "Crossing Borders" provides effective opportunities for pre-service teachers to develop effective strategies for teaching in an international arena. Seeking to disrupt notions of self by stepping outside the centre and trying to see life from the margins may serve as "a starting point for developing understanding and insights into taken-for-granted beliefs about culture and class" (Allard & Santoro, 2004, p. 14) and challenging deficit thinking. Reflection on teaching begins with identifying the assumptions and beliefs we take for granted, but it must not stop there. It needs to go further and involve engaging in particular learning processes (instrumental, communicative and emancipatory) that will either lead to a new validation or rejection of our assumptions (Kreber, 2004, pp. 43–44).

Positioned as "external observers", mentors were able to witness how mainstream knowledge is limited in its capacity to support international students, both in terms of structure as well as in terms of material and human resources. Mentors were provided with the opportunity to understand the difficulties, frustrations and disadvantage experienced by Indian international students within "the system", while reinforcing what they would need to do in their future pedagogical practices to endeavour to make a difference to the learning of students from diverse cultural backgrounds. But at the same time, they learnt to "work with difference in ways that acknowledge cultural and class values and beliefs without essentialising identities or stereotyping groups" (Allard & Santoro, 2004, p. 14).

Evaluations of the Crossing Borders program found that both mentors and mentees rate the program as very worthwhile. According to the evaluations, the small group mentoring provides the basis for interaction and peer support between the Anglo-Australian student and the Indian international student thereby supporting the academic literacy development of these students, informal contexts for discussing the social requirements of the university settings and also transformative experiences for all in the School of Education to gain and construct more sophisticated understandings of appropriate pedagogies for teaching international students. The "Crossing Borders" program provides useful information about the international students' progress in mastering new forms of linguistic codes, in improving their social skills and abilities, and assessing what difference this makes to the international student's participation in university life. As a result of "Crossing Borders", the School of Education at the University of Western Sydney is able to provide a welcoming and culturally diverse learning and social experience for Indian international students so that the problematic connections between university imaginings of the "internationalization of higher education" and transnational students' uses of international education to enhance their life opportunities as global/national/local citizens, workers/employers and learners are blurred. The mentoring program stimulates nations like India and Australia to interact and enrich each other with fresh cultural

insights and exchanges that stimulate both students and academics to engage in classroom practice that enhances their own understanding and perspective of the world.

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