Who learns from international education?
Intellectual colonialism or nurturing diversity in teaching and learning

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Introduction
Emphasis in the past decade on recruitment of international students to the UK, collaborative partnerships with overseas institutions, and the globalisation and commodification of education have all raised issues with respect to student experience and the tutorial role. Adult educators both in the UK and overseas who find themselves in an ‘ethnoculturally diverse’ (Guo and Jamal, 2006, p127) context are required to respond to its challenges. Guo and Jamal (2006, p128) analyse how this can be constructed as a ‘difference as deficit model’ and the implications of this. For example, the ‘deficits’ of international students studying UK courses (identified as including English language, academic writing, critical thinking and independent learning) have been investigated by various researchers (Chan 1999, Wu 2006, Hyland et al 2008). This ‘deficit’ discourse is reflected in the range of study skills books for international students that have been published recently e.g. Reinders (2008), Bailey (2011), Burnapp (2009), McMillan & Weyers (2010). While these may have value for international students, any possible ‘deficits’ (perceived or real) or differences in the professional practices of teachers of these students have not been similarly scrutinised. But Badley (2000), investigating the proficiencies required of international university teachers, did focus on the need for such teachers to be ‘globally competent’ and adopt an ‘ethnographic stance’, thus raising the need for reviewing pedagogical practices in international education.

This study explores the professional reflections and perceptions of an experienced team of tutors who have been teaching in China as part of an established collaborative partnership over a number of years. The partnership between a UK and Chinese government university provides a one year top-up bachelor degree, taught by UK based tutors who travel to China. It is delivered in English and assessed and quality assured according to British standards. Over the years, this provision has necessitated accommodation and adjustment by tutors and students to facilitate effective learning and teaching. Tutors working independently and collaboratively have been confronted with challenges that require them to consider ‘differences’ or ‘deficits’ creatively in order to capitalise on the diversity of students.
This paper explores through questionnaire and focus group interviews the experiences of these tutors as they seek to create an inclusive learning and teaching environment. It analyses, how their discourse challenges notions of intellectual colonialism through creative professionalism and constructive pedagogical practice and how we all have something to learn from collaborative international experience.

**Literature Review**

Whether the model of international education is transnational education (offshore) (Smith, 2009) as in this paper, or teaching international students in the UK, the expanding globalisation of education demands that we reflect upon embedded beliefs about teaching and learning. Rather than being value neutral, the notion that teachers carry ‘unexamined assumptions that are often part of the mainstream cultural knowledge’ (Guo and Jamal, 2006, p128) or operate from ‘implicit or explicit beliefs and values about education’ (HEA, 2011) raises issues that challenge teachers in HE. As reflective practitioners there is a need for us to review what we teach, how we teach and how we assess, and, in doing so, to subject our own values and beliefs to a level of scrutiny which makes us less vulnerable to accusations of ‘cultural imperialism’ (Ryan, 2000) or ‘intellectual imperialism’ (Badley, 2000).

This re-evaluation of teaching processes and their underpinning values and beliefs is reflected in current research and publications. Teaching International Students is a PMI2 (Prime Minister’s Initiative) project being conducted by the HEA (HE Academy) and the UKCISA (UK Council for International Student Affairs). They state their research aims to shift the focus from ‘problematising international students’ to examining the teaching and learning context to see how it can fit the needs of learners (HEA, 2011). This moves away from any ‘deficits’ of international students and instead focuses on the cultural diversity they bring to UK universities. Reflecting a similar approach, Trahar (2011, p17) promotes a ‘diversimilarity paradigm’ which emphasises cultural diversity and similarities, rather than ‘teaching as assimilation’ which aims at inculcating international students into a Western model of academic discourse. In such a context the international student experience would be perceived as a bonus rather than a deficit, a source of cultural enrichment rather than classroom conflict.

Nevertheless, the academic challenges experienced by international students adjusting to UK HE have highlighted ‘deficits’ as outlined above. A ‘bridge’ to assimilate international students into UK university expectations has often required attendance at pre-sessional language classes and/or academic skills programmes. These may be part of university strategies to ‘assimilate’ students and resolve academic ‘deficits’, but Hyland et al (2008, p25) stress what students need is ‘content and language integrated learning’. For international students the ‘language issue’ is complex and not just a matter of vocabulary, but also the academic writing skills to apply language within a critical and integrated argument. Such ‘assimilation’ courses highlight the ‘deficits’ of students despite, as Trahar (2011,
points out, teaching practices in HE ‘rarely (being) subjected to such scrutiny’. This raises questions not only about the form and content of additional courses, but also the approach and professional responsibilities of those teaching international students.

Robson (2006) identifies three aspects of a professional: knowledge, autonomy and responsibility, noting that in post compulsory education there is still a lingering assumption that if ‘I know my subject, I can, by definition, teach it to others’ (ibid, p14). Badley (2000, p245) goes further and says that it is often the case that university lecturers are ‘notoriously unreflective about their own approaches to teaching and learning’ and have inherited a model of education where ‘experts’ transmit a ‘non-negotiable curriculum of concepts and facts’ and neglect the learning strategies of students. While this was not observable in the study being conducted as part of this paper, it does raise questions about whether teachers of international students are adapting their teaching (curriculum, pedagogy and assessment) to take into account the changing circumstances in universities. Many UK universities have policies for expanding international recruitment, as well as widening participation of home students. Consequently, it is a strategic time to reflect on and review professional practices in order to critique the inclusivity of learning environments and to develop what Trahar (2011) refers to as ‘cultural capability’.

International students who come to the UK, or in the current case study, study a UK course overseas, may experience a culture shock when they first start their studies. In terms of Mezirow’s phases of transformative learning it could be regarded as a ‘disorienting dilemma’ (Kitchenham, 2008) that requires them to re-evaluate past experiences and beliefs about learning and ‘transform’ and ‘assimilate in accordance with our definition of what constitutes a good student’ (Bamford, 2008, p7). Teaching international students could similarly be viewed as a ‘disorienting dilemma’ for tutors. Smith (2009, p114) goes further and asserts that transnational teaching ‘encourages content, process and premise reflection that can ultimately transform teaching practice’. Ideally this would mean that professional practices took cognisance of the needs of students and the cultural context of their learning environment. That change would not be an end product but perhaps a step towards developing pedagogical practices that are more inclusive and creating of cultural capability, both for teachers and students.

As indicated, the case study in this research is part of a collaborative partnership between a UK and Chinese university. Values that still underpin Chinese education include tutorial authority, preservation of harmony, a respect for wisdom and knowledge, the preservation of ‘face’ and an historical focus on the collective, rather than the individual (Chan 1999). Even though globalisation may have affected some of these traditional learner characteristics, teachers of Chinese students still need to appreciate their significance. Although student-centred learning is common in the ‘Western classroom’, Chan (1999, p298) warns ‘the participative approaches
… cause a problem for Chinese learners’. Such student-centred approaches often include group work and collaborative projects which Hyland et al (2008, p27) warn, especially when formally assessed, need to be approached thoughtfully, confidently and clearly by teachers of international students. Furthermore, Chan (1999, p301) points out that Chinese students are often reticent in group discussions because they behave according to the ‘social expectations for their roles’ and seek to identify a group leader. Teachers of Chinese students can facilitate group discussions by clear organisation of roles and explanation of expectations. Therefore to apply inclusive pedagogical practices, teachers of such students need to be aware of these ‘cultural scripts’.

Other strategies that are recommended for international students include providing: an overall context at the start of a session which makes connections with previous knowledge and experience to facilitate deeper learning (Ryan, 2000, p24), summaries of discussion (Arkoudis, nd), simple outlines, definitions, concept maps and other such aids to comprehension (Badley, 2000), building rapport with students (Bamford 2008) and the provision of unambiguous instructions and time for students to think about topics under discussion (Chan, 1999). Bamford (2008, p3) goes on to say that ‘rapport is seen as one of the most effective learning and teaching techniques for international students’. The list above includes just a few examples of ‘tips’ listed in the aforementioned publications. While not doubting the value of any of the strategies identified, to what extent does such a list once again reinforce the notion of difference as deficit for international students? Might not such examples simply illustrate good educational practices for delivering inclusive teaching and learning?

With this in mind, and in order to stimulate a reflective professional discussion, we conducted a small research project with international tutors who teach our undergraduate degree in China.

**Research Methodology**

It is perhaps necessary to indicate at this stage that the authors of this paper have some responsibility for the programme under review. Despite this, or perhaps because of it, we sought to conduct and report the research in an objective manner. The undergraduate top-up course has been taught in the partner institution for over 6 years and most of the tutors involved in this research have been teaching on the programme throughout that time. They therefore have significant experience of teaching Chinese students and have also had opportunities through shared developmental sessions to reflect and examine their pedagogical approaches.

Case study strategy applying an interpretivist paradigm was chosen as we wanted to research the situation through the eyes of participants (Cohen et al, 2000). Therefore a qualitative approach was also selected as it gave flexibility to explore the views and ideas of tutors regarding their professional roles when teaching in China. Triangulation was applied through using questionnaires and focus group meetings.
with the team of tutors. Open questions were included on the questionnaire in order to generate in-depth information and to allow tutors to express themselves freely. Also, following Kumar's (2005) advice, we felt this strategy would be suitable in order to minimise any influence of investigator bias.

We were ‘moderators’ during focus group meetings, but sought to create a ‘permissive atmosphere for the expression of personal and conflicting viewpoints’ (Kvale and Brinkman, 2009, p150). As indicated, the team is quite established and members are confident in their own professional capabilities and in their relations with each other and the moderators. With this awareness, we felt this choice of method would enhance the validity of the study and provide an open forum for sharing views. We thought that the established and trusting relationships would benefit the research and not hinder expression of different opinions. But as Kvale and Brinkman (2009, p150) indicate, a focus group can lead to lively interaction that can make interview transcripts somewhat chaotic. That was in fact our experience, but recordings were transcribed and findings triangulated with data from questionnaires.

Findings
The team includes twelve tutors. All have several years experience of teaching overseas. Collectively they have taught in China, Middle East, Africa, North and South America and in Europe. They also include one tutor from Africa and two from China. All became teachers on this programme because they were keen on transnational teaching. The findings below reflect data from both the focus groups and questionnaires.

**Adjustments to teaching and learning strategies?**
Language, culture and pedagogy, and the inter-relationships between these, were key factors that tutors considered in their teaching. Adjustments included:

- speaking at a slower pace,
- emphasising local context during teaching,
- using exemplars related to China,
- developing language appropriate teaching materials, but with challenging ideas to extend thinking and learning,
- varying classroom layout (one tutor commented that s/he had not appreciated how important the layout of furniture was until s/he taught abroad as it affected the learning environment and thus opportunities for student communication),
- avoidance of idioms/metaphors/jargon,
- distribution of papers before teaching so students could prepare in advance and check technical language where necessary, and
- using groups to allow students to share ideas and ‘peer teach’.
In regard to teaching and learning strategies, tutors had a lively discussion about student language during group activities – Chinese or English. One expressed a firm view that students should be allowed to discuss in their first language so they could scaffold new concepts onto their existing understanding and vocabulary. But plenary feedback from groups was to be in English. During the focus group, some tutors said that the initial level of English of the students was a barrier to learning, while others commented that these barriers were the same as those experienced by UK students. One said ‘this dual language situation is only a more clear variation of what is integral to any teaching situation’. In terms of language, one tutor also said that on reflection s/he considered that the steady global ‘march of English’ could be considered linguistic colonisation.

Other teaching strategies included a tutor doing a mini needs analysis at the start of a module in order to find out from students how they learned and what their previous experiences had taught them about the learning situation. The tutor then adjusted his/her teaching to meet those needs. Several tutors commented on ‘personalising the teaching materials’ for the specific group of students and making expectations explicit to guide students in their learning, along with not making assumptions about students understanding of tutor expectations. One said that s/he ‘would normally adapt (his/her) teaching to give more instruction and guidance while attempting to make learners more independent and confident’. S/he went on to say that ‘cultural differences in expectations about what a teacher should do always come up … It is, and remains, a difficult one that I constantly think about’.

While these findings indicate that tutors have made adjustments and considered the cultural context of their learners, they also reflect that the tutors remain ‘critical thinkers’ regarding their pedagogical practices.

Cultural & professional issues when working in an international context?
The reluctance of students to ask questions and the issue of ‘not losing face’ or ‘exposing’ oneself in front of a large group were raised. Tutors said that groups were more effective means for enabling students to ask and seek answers during class activities. As one tutor commented ‘We come from an individualistic society, whereas China is much more collective and one of the ways of getting ideas across is to use that which comes out of their society, to work together, or to work as groups’. This point is also raised by Trahar (2011, p28) who questions whether ‘cultural traditions of individualism which place the individual firmly at the centre of teaching and learning’ are suitable for more ‘collectivist cultures’.

Plagiarism is an issue about which the team has had professional discussions on many previous occasions. During the focus group what is deemed to be cheating was discussed and one tutor questioned whether it was just a reflection of an inability to convert the ideas of others into clear writing in a second language. The group also explored the cultural issue of students challenging ‘experts’ and critically evaluating or re-explaining their ideas. As Chan (1999, p298) says ‘education (in
China) today still focuses on the acquisition of a vast store of knowledge through rote memorisation, at the expense of creativity’. Therefore expecting students to adopt critical thinking strategies, and to challenge the views of teachers, can create academic discomfort for Chinese learners. While this might lead to a ‘transformation’ of their academic thinking strategies, it does require sensitive ‘nurturing’ by tutors.

Other cultural issues raised by tutors included:

- appreciating Chinese culture,
- ensuring the learning of students has an ‘anchor’ within their own culture,
- respect for age and for the teacher,
- being mindful of what might cause offence, and
- local differences in perceptions about male/female relationships, including those between students and tutors.

Professional issues that the tutors paid particular attention to were:

- establishing good working relations so students could feel at ease to talk about ‘worries or problems’,
- being flexible and establishing good communications so they could pick up on ‘subtle changes’ in the classroom and thus respond accordingly, and
- being relaxed, friendly and approachable.

Thus there is evidence that tutors in this case study are applying many of the ‘tips’ for teachers of international students previously identified. Thus they are in fact exercising their professional autonomy and responsibility while adjusting their knowledge to provide a more inclusive teaching and learning environment.

**Conclusion: So who learns from international education?**

UK HE institutions, tutors, home students and international students can all learn from international education. There are significant benefits to be gained through developing the ‘cultural capability’ of all constituents. In fact, ‘cultural capability’ could be considered an employability skill in our globalised community. Remaining reflective and flexible practitioners is essential to creating a culturally enriched learning environment that focuses on the benefits, (not deficits), that are inherent in teaching culturally diverse international students.

This paper has focused on a small study of tutors of international students, and the research evidence also suggests that everyone can learn from international education. The conclusions of tutors were that international education: broadens professional horizons, creates open-mindedness, generates personal understanding and develops abilities to think rationally and with compassion towards others. In congruence with Trahar (2011, p17), their professional practices when teaching international students sought not ‘to contain cultural difference’ but to celebrate it.
HE needs teachers who are reflective and sufficiently confident to scrutinise any ‘differences’ or ‘deficits’ in their professional practices. As one of the tutors in this study commented, the internationalisation of HE means we are teaching in ‘a world closer together in time and space, sharing similar and comparable aspirations about the value of education and transforming lives’. If the outcome of that process is to provide opportunities to maximise the learning of all involved, we need to adopt culturally inclusive practices. We need to question whether our practices could be construed as ‘intellectual colonialism’, or whether they are part of cross-cultural communications. With time and self-awareness one of the tutors in this study said s/he hoped s/he had moved towards the cross-cultural communication end of the spectrum. While international education can be construed as a ‘disorienting dilemma’ for tutors, with creative and constructive pedagogical practices it can also lead to a truly transformative approach that, in terms of Mezirow’s model (Kitchenham, 2008), builds internationally competent and self-confidence teachers.

Reference List:


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