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Exploring teaching and learning cultures in transnational pedagogical development cooperation

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Research Domains

International contexts and perspectives (ICP)

Abstract

This qualitative study explores teaching and learning cultures in the context of a community-oriented pedagogical development process initiated during Finnish–Palestinian transnational cooperation. Data include focus group interviews and texts produced during a pedagogical training programme with Palestinian university instructors. The study applies poststructuralist discourse analysis to examine teaching and learning cultures as constructed by discourses in and around the Palestinian university. Five discourses of teaching and learning were identified: disciplinary differences, traditional and modern education, improving education, sociocultural and religious context, and political and economic circumstances. The findings show that teaching and learning cultures are fragmented and constructed by the contrasting discourses in and around the institution. As it introduces additional alternative discourses into the institutional meaning-making, transnational collaboration entails a process of hybridisation of (foreign and local) perspectives. Transnational collaborators need to enable discursive transformation and create space for diverse ways of understanding and practising teaching and learning.

Full paper

Introduction

Pedagogical perspectives cross national and institutional boundaries through an increasing variety of internationalisation activities of higher education institutions (HEIs). Transnational education (TNE), or internationalisation abroad, has particularly proliferated recently: from mobility of people, programmes, and providers to complex modalities such as branch campuses and education hubs (Knight, 2012). TNE is generally seen as beneficial for HEIs widening the opportunities for intercultural exchange, economic development, and modernisation of higher education (HE) systems (De Wit, 2010; Korhonen & Alenius, 2018). However, TNE programs have been criticised as profit-seeking endeavours of HEIs in developed countries providing education in developing countries (Djerasimovic, 2014). The economic rationale of TNE raises concerns about equal opportunities and access to education resulting with unequal power distribution between the “producers” and “consumers” of TNE (Pyvis, 2011).

TNE has been particularly prominent in the recent Finnish HE policy guidelines (e.g. Education Finland, 2018) referring to TNE as “education export”. This puts the Finnish HEIs in the ‘providing’ end of the transnational power-dynamics. More research is needed to better understand what happens when two pedagogical traditions meet in an “education export” programme and how these encounters change (institutional) teaching and learning cultures. The paper addresses these questions by exploring a case of Finnish-Palestinian TNE cooperation.

Finnish-Palestinian TNE (Holubek et al., 2022)

This qualitative study explored teaching and learning cultures in the context of a pedagogical development process initiated during transnational cooperation between a Palestinian university and a Finnish university. The goal of the cooperation was to strengthen student-centred teaching approaches at the Palestinian university by initiating a community-oriented development process at the institution level. The Palestinian institution is one of the seven universities in the Gaza Strip that operate in a challenging context due to the regional political and economic instability, increasing demand for HE and lack of resources.

The study aims to enhance our understanding of cultural changes

engendered by transnational pedagogical development cooperation. Predominantly organised and researched as part of institutional efforts to enhance education quality, pedagogical development has been under-researched in the context of transnational cooperation (Kosmützky & Putty, 2016). Pedagogical development organised through TNE created a space of dynamic intercultural encounters drawing on differences and similarities in teaching and learning cultures in and around the Palestinian institution as well as between the Palestinian and Finnish institutions.

Two research questions guided the study: What discourses of teaching and learning are identified among the Palestinian university instructors? How do discourses among university instructors construct teaching and learning cultures in this Palestinian university in the context of a transnational pedagogical development process?

Conceptualising teaching and learning cultures as one analytical aspect of institutional cultures, the study draws on the fragmentation perspective (Martin, 1992) and anthropological approach (Alvesson, 2002; Trowler, 2008) to institutional culture. Characterised by ambiguity, pluralism, and contradictions, culture is constructed and enacted through community's meaning-making processes. Thus, teaching and learning cultures are discursive meaning-making processes that guide the ways in which educational processes are understood and organised at an institution.

Poststructuralist discourse analysis gives the onto-methodological framing of this study. Discourses not only represent, but actively construct society at different levels, including institutional cultures (Berti, 2017; Foucault, 2002). Poststructuralist discourse analysis allows the researcher to explore the text in relation to discourses constituted through a variety of discursive constructions and subject positions (Baxter, 2002). In other words, the study identified discourses that Palestinian instructors drew on when they spoke or wrote about teaching and learning.

Two datasets (collected in 2017—2018) were analysed: (a) four focus group interviews with 18 Palestinian instructors, and (b) written assignments produced during the transnational pedagogical training with 16 Palestinian university instructors. The study participants represented teaching staff of all faculties, career levels, and genders.

Five discourses of teaching and learning were identified: (a) discourse of disciplinary differences, (b) discourse of traditional and modern education, (c) discourse of improving education, (d) discourse of the sociocultural and religious context, and (e) discourse of the political and economic circumstances.

Hybridised perspectives

The findings show that teaching and learning cultures are fragmented and constructed by the contrasting discourses in and around HEIs. As it introduces additional alternative discourses into the institutional meaning-making, transnational collaboration entails a process of hybridisation of (foreign and local) perspectives (reflected in discourses b and c). TNE needs to enable discursive transformation towards overcoming the polarised provider-receiver understanding of transnational interaction thus creating space for diverse ways of understanding and practising teaching and learning. Ongoing research in different country-contexts aims to provide further theoretical elaboration of TNE's cultural aspects.

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