Learning beyond the Institution: A Cultural Capital Perspective on the International Student Experience (0270)

Ms. Laura Morosanu, Oxford Brookes University, UK

Abstract

Whilst internationalisation discourses have gained currency in UK higher education, evidence from students' accounts of their experience has cast some doubt on its actual functioning. In contrast to the predicted benefits of economic advantage and development of '(inter)cultural competences' lying at the core of the internationalisation agenda (see Bolsmann and Miller 2008, Otten 2003), a growing number of studies have documented international students' difficulties of adjustment to their host institutions (Caruana and Spurling 2007, Currie 2007, Ledwith and Seymour 2001, Volet and Ang 1998).

The dominant understanding of the international student experience, however, seems disproportionately focused on curriculum design, teaching methods, and staff-student interactions within the university milieu (see Caruana and Spurling 2007, Haigh 2008). The institutional context thus achieves prominence in current studies. Yet in many cases, studying is only part of the students' overseas experience, providing one, albeit significant, route to developing cultural competences. In contrast, we suggest that the value of overseas education is reflected not only by Western qualifications, but also (and perhaps more importantly) by 'a whole host of cultural, embodied traits conducive to employment success in a global economic arena' (Waters 2006, p. 181), which can also be acquired in various non-academic settings, such as informal socialisation or part-time employment. Indeed, we argue that the wider socio-cultural context is not simply a 'container' for the development of academic literacies and practices, but constitutes a fruitful site for the growth of cultural competences in itself. Focusing on the institutional context however obscures it from view.

Our paper addresses this omission by taking a broader perspective on the student experience, which encompasses non-academic alongside academic/institutionally-located spheres of participation. Whilst we support initiatives to adjust the curricula to promote a more positive – and transformative – student experience, we argue for an enquiry beyond the academic institutional confines. In particular, we suggest that Bourdieu's (1986) concept of cultural capital (and its embodied, institutionalised and objectified forms) provides a useful lens for grappling with students' wider experience overseas.

Bourdieu's theory has had an echo in the sociology of education particularly with respect to the performance of students from different class backgrounds (Grayson 2010, Sullivan 2001). Cultural capital has also been interpreted as 'highbrow culture' rather than general human skills, although scholars have increasingly expanded this 'narrow' focus (Lareau and Weininger 2003, p. 569) to include, for example, 'any values and dispositions that may predispose individuals to successful navigation of the educational system' (Grayson 2010, p. 5). With these caveats in mind, we suggest that international students form, in certain respects, another 'disadvantaged' category that may benefit from Bourdieu's analysis. Internationalisation debates are generally focused on the institutional pedagogic context, but international students, we argue, accumulate potentially valuable *embodied* cultural capital through a variety of academic *and non-academic-based* strategies and activities. These competences, be they language fluency, social or other skills, may then be 'converted' into institutional cultural capital (degrees) and economic returns (jobs and income) (see also Sin 2009).

Our discussion draws on an exploratory study of the international student experience based on audio-diaries collected over one semester in a British Business School during 2007. The spontaneous, unprompted nature of our data revealed three important sites for students' accumulation of cultural capital: academia, informal socialisation and the part-time job. Looking at these areas, we firstly examine students' more or less purposeful strategies to adjust to their host educational and socio-cultural environment, their overall positive experience, and desire to be 'successful'; secondly we explore the transformative potential of innovative or targeted academic activities designed to enable international students to act out 'provisional selves', allowing them to display academic competencies and identities in a safe environment (Ibarra 1999, Markus and Nurius 1986). We show the particular skills derived from the three different sites of engagement as well as the impact they have on academic attainment and future development. In doing so, and in contrast with the literature on students' difficulties and non-integration, we derive theoretical and policy implications from successful experiences, which contain but eventually overcome problems and uncertainties.

Our paper contributes to internationalisation debates in two ways. First, we aim to widen the scope and focus of these debates by revealing the crossing of boundaries between academic and non-academic contexts in which international students are engaged. Students' conscious attempts at maximising their cultural capital through participation in a multiplicity of activities in their host environment that are not strictly academic are a strong reminder that these constitute essential sites for understanding and improving their (learning) experience. Narrowing the focus only on the academic context and practices risks obliterating them from view, reproducing a compartmentalised view of learning as separated from the broader social context.

Second, using Bourdieu's theory to analyse international students' accumulation of cultural capital, we seek to contribute to debates on educational practice in a multicultural setting. Reviewing existing approaches, Warren (2005) identifies three main types of pedagogy: 'assimilative,' 'inclusive' and 'transformative'.

Whilst the 'assimilative' approach has lost its appeal due to its normative implications, we argue that for international students some form of assimilation may still occur and be beneficial, if understood as a partial, student-driven, rather than inflicted process. We suggest that, contrary to the old view of assimilation as forced compliance with dominant norms, the new - 'intransitive' - understanding of assimilation proposed by Brubaker (2001) provides interesting insights into the educational experience of international students, and is not incompatible with the 'transformative' approach.

Our findings thus highlight fruitful sites for the development of cultural competences that remain undervalued in internationalisation debates, such as informal socialisation and the external work environment. These constitute alternative pathways of learning which impact on academic achievement and students' broader career development. Furthermore, we indicate the transformative potential of innovative academic activities which give students space to act out 'provisional selves' and develop their identities in a safe arena.

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