Exploring intercultural transitions in the internationalised classroom: the role of the formal curriculum.

Background

Processes of globalisation continue to generate new networks, connectivities and interactions that cut across spatial boundaries (Fairclough, 2006). This paper aims to further understanding of new roles and identities as they surface in the experience of student interaction in contexts of internationalising higher education. The paper suggests that transitionary experience can enable students to engage with the complexities inherent in cultural and linguistic identities and how students envision the trajectory of transition during their studies. Here the focus is on the influence of the formal curriculum on students' engagement with the complexity of cultural identity.

As globalisation advances, deeper understandings of intercultural interaction have become even more significant. With the commensurate advancement of technology has come a development in *'the multiplicity of communications channels and media'* and an *'increasing salience of cultural and linguistic diversity'* (The New London Group 1996, p. 60). Young people and learners are involved in many more divergent communities in contemporary life including work teams, professional groups, voluntary organisations, neighbourhood groups and social groups and these may be local and physically co-located or dispersed, virtual and global (Cope and Kalantzis, 2000). It is more common in a technologically enhanced world that individuals may belong to multiple life worlds made accessible to them by electronic communication and the internet. The increase in the variety and range of these groups means a much more salient and active interface with other social, linguistic and cultural groups. This paper argues that these developments need to be reflected in future university learning contexts and that students' transitions to a complex understanding of culture and identity will be a crucial element of higher education. This requires learning experiences that are powerful and transformative, developing a critical capacity where a learner interrogates the interests behind a meaning or action and their own processes of thinking (Kalantzis and Cope, 2005). This sort of process enables both a cultural self-knowledge and the furthering of disciplinary knowledge.

Methodology

The paper draws on a three year cycle of data from a module on intercultural communication, part of a Masters degree in Design. The module focuses on enabling students to develop an in-depth understanding of intercultural interaction and how it might apply to professional contexts in Design, particularly in distributed or online Design teams. The module centres on a core text that aims to promote a complex understanding of intercultural communication through three concepts: representation, otherisation and identity. Students work in allocated groups to post interactive reflective accounts of their engagement with the ideas of the core text on an online

learning platform and also to produce a visual representation of the process of engaging in intercultural group work through the medium of a comic that the group creates. Students' online reflections and their own visual representations of the process of working in intercultural groups using comic strips show how the experience of 'being taught' intercultural communication can act as a catalyst which enables them to reflect on their past histories and narratives and then move beyond a concept of culture as defined by their own national boundaries.

Across the three years of data represented in this project the sample group ranges from 60 to 72 in number and consists of 95% international students from a wide range of national, professional and socio-cultural backgrounds. The students post weekly accounts of their engagement with the theory and draw in their past experiences and the process they have observed during their intercultural group work on the module. The paper draws on the online reflections and the visual representations to chart the students' transitions towards a deeper understanding of culture and interaction.

By including these virtual and socially constructed narratives of experience, this paper is drawing on the methodology of autoethnography and attempting to present complex pictures of lived experience. It is hoped that the visual and written accounts will reflect the flow of thoughts and meanings of student transition towards intercultural understandings and communicate them with some immediacy. Trahar notes that autoethnography is congruent and suitable as a means of exploring development 'across cultures'. This approach to research, however, cannot be 'parcelled up into neat little chunks, each phase done and stored away' but represents a 'shifting, moving, interacting complexity' (Trahar, 2011, p.38). However, the bounded nature of this study in the online forum and within the formal curriculum provides a microcosm of the development of intercultural understanding as part of a discipline.

Emerging issues

The paper presents student trajectories amongst complex concepts of representation, otherisation and identity as being affected by 'teaching', the discipline (in this case of Design) and the medium of English as a Lingua Franca. As students struggle with the movable, fluid and negotiable concepts of culture and intercultural communication, the medium of English proves to be a factor which both inhibits and enables students to move towards a complex understanding. The online accounts demonstrate that students are in transition with their understanding of both the linguistic and cultural meanings of the concepts and at the same time they are engaging with experiential learning about intercultural communication through their group work with their peers. Through interaction with the text, the group work and the surfacing of their past experiences, students move towards a different understanding of culture, one that is linked to the development of their critical thinking, a skill crucial in their understanding of their discipline. One student notes:

> '*The best thing I found personally from the book was it kept causing me to reflect upon my past experiences. I hope this helps me to avoid repeating the subjective thinking that I used to have*'.

The requirement to write weekly online postings sparks reflections on past stories and these developing narratives provide an insight into student transitions towards complex learning. This approach to developing intercultural understanding as part of a discipline has implications for integrating this sort of learning into the curriculum across the university.

References

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