

## **Global Connectedness in Higher Education: Student voices on the value of cross-cultural learning dialogue**

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### *Background and context for the study*

Globalised knowledge economy urges higher education institutions to move from internationalization to global dimensions with emphasis on learning and learners' perspectives. Higher education institutions are to prepare global citizens for the uncertain future, where people, work and all matters are more interconnected than ever before. Disciplinary boundaries, subject contents and local contexts no longer correspond to the needs of individuals, employers and societies (Crosling et al. 2014; Istance and Dummond 2010). Competences required in the globally connected world include understanding own values and attitudes, critically reflecting knowledge and information, analysing situations and perspectives, linking own views and local issues to broader global contexts, finding options, justifying choices and communicating (Bourn 2014; Scheunpflug 2011) and interacting with diverse peers (Denson and Bowman 2013).

The concept 'global citizenship' (Bourn 2014) has been introduced to guide contents and pedagogical principles to develop understanding of global issues and critical thinking. More research is needed, however, on how students perceive global issues in their higher education studies, relate themselves to the global contexts and what motivates students to engage in the global society. The changing and increasingly global contexts call for continuous questioning of internationalization's values, purposes, goals and means. The importance of international prestige and impact of ranking systems have been recently brought up as the adverse consequences of internationalization (IAU 2012; Taylor et al. 2013). In the midst of policy makers and university administrations drive to increase internationalization, Bourn (2010, p. 23) raises the question of how students perceive "their own role, learning priorities and engagement in society". This important question not only challenges researchers to engage students in the on-going dialogue around internationalisation, but also challenges researchers to recognise what constitutes a meaningful learning experience for students.

### *Theoretical framework and research questions*

Cognitive and socio-cultural educational research suggests that students construct meaningful learning, based on their previous knowledge and experiences, through internal dialogue (Novak & Gowin 1984; Novak 2002) and legitimate participation (Wenger, 1998, 2003). The learning dynamic emphasised in these theories foregrounds acculturation into existing practices. With regard to internationalisation the existing – or ideal - practices include the need to understand and value different perspectives, recognising the impact of globalisation on relations between people and communities around the world (Bourn, 2011). The complexity of this process is represented in Fink's (2013) taxonomy of significant learning experiences for guiding higher education teaching in which the need to engage with other, as well as the acquisition of knowledge and practical action, are presented as key components in significant learning experiences. In the midst of this complexity,

it is important to look more closely at learning dialogues with self and other (Renshaw, 2004) often associated with meaningful learning.

This study is based on an international 'Education For All' seminar in Finland in 2011. The participatory seminar was one of the practises to internationalize higher education and to increase knowledge concerning global issues in education. The theme of the seminar was Critical Issues and by design the seminar included formal talks as well as reported experiences and interactive formats that significantly differed from the day-to-day experiences of many participants. The student participants maintained learning logs used as the data in this study to answer the research questions:

1. what significant learning experiences are present in the learning logs?
2. what were the conducive learning contexts that supported the significant learning experiences?
3. what sense of global connectedness is present in the learning logs?

#### *Data analysis and research findings*

We applied a thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Russell and Vallade, 2010) in the initial analysis of the logs to identify expressions of significant learning, conducive learning activities and contexts, as well as the sense of global connectedness in the students' learning logs.

The thematic analysis of the significant learning experiences identified seven themes characterising various dimensions of significant learning experiences: 1. Recognising limitations of own understanding and possibilities to understand, 2. Being inspired by the example of others and prompted to think deeper, 3. Appreciation of learning through innovative interactional means, 4. Problematizing assumptions, 5. New understanding, 6. Recognising personal and shared responsibility, and 7. Comprehending that problems are contextual, yet sharing problems can support the realisation of the need to act and to participate. The findings with regard to conducive learning activities and contexts highlight the importance of using novel and varied means of engaging with others, as well as the need for space to reflect on what has been, what is and what could be. Across the learning journals, the students expressed how they experienced a sense of connectedness among each other and between the challenges in education in different contexts. They discussed their own role, responsibilities and possibilities to enhance education for all through their future work, in collaboration with others, thus highlighting the value of the learning through dialogic approaches. The global connectedness, according to the students, required a personal stance. The main outcome of the significant learning experiences evident in the journals was the understanding of the global EFA process, rather than a distant issue as one that required participation of all and which everyone can contribute to.

#### *Implications of the study*

The results emphasise the importance/ added value of diversity of students engaged in university level programmes in education. Students' significant learning experiences and conducive activities and contexts analysed in this study suggest that creating opportunities for global dialogue and knowledge generation in higher education can open up new perspectives to students in education

and increase their sense of global connectedness. Cross-cultural learning dialogue is a challenging, critical and thrilling endeavour – and can be deeply meaningful. More needs to be done, however, to better understand global connectedness and the kind of learning activities and contexts that enhance it.

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Please note that this is an extract from a longer text by the same authors.