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Giving up and getting lost in Hanoi: re-imagining transnational higher education with post-qualitative practices in a UK, Vietnam TNE partnership

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Abstract: In this paper we share the outcomes of a research capacity project between academics and doctoral students at four institutions in the UK and Vietnam. We problematize ‘common sense’ transference of pedagogical and research practices grounded in philosophical traditions that un/consciously privilege colonising ways of being and doing in transnational higher education partnerships (TNHE). We explore ethics, complexities and risks associated with working across borders in the context of global education markets in which import/export of higher education capitals have real ‘affects’ for HE cultures broadly and higher education workers specifically. We describe our experience of putting to work Lather’s modality of ‘getting lost’ (2007) and follow the contours of this concept (Mazzei, 2017) to disorientate ourselves with thinking from ‘the posts’ and mobilise fresh thinking about identities, professionalisms and pedagogies in the contexts of international partnerships opening up possibilities for messier, flatter, more ‘response-able’ (Barad, 2007) cross border entanglements.

Paper: Whilst development of transnational education higher education (TNHE) partnerships continue to be strategically important to universities across the globe, whether as ‘importers’ or ‘exporters’, little empirical work has been undertaken to map the landscape or understand cost/benefit in meaningful ways (Wilkins and Juusola 2018: 71). As such the field is dominated by mythological debates that focus on the meta dynamics of import/export relations and their impacts on stake-holders. In attempting a ground-clearing mapping of this research terrain Wilkins and Juusola (2018) identify and unpick five prevalent myths of TNHE: that TNHE acts as a form of neo-colonialism; the trend for establishing international branch campuses is decreasing; distance/online/MOOC programs will threaten other forms of TNHE; quality standards in TNHE are lower than at the home country campuses; the student experience and student satisfaction is lower in TNHE than at home country campuses. In so doing they argue for more nuanced accounts of TNHE that both pay attention to the complexity and hybridity that inevitably emerges from the fusing of diverse cultures and practices, and challenge the dominance of ‘home country’ perspectives (by which they tend to mean those of the exporting country which is inevitably economically developed and often western) in sense making about the nature and value propositions of TNHE.

In the Vietnamese context where we locate our conversation TNHE has been patterned and framed by *Đổi Mới* (Open Door policy) which marked a 'watershed moment' (Trinh, 2018) for Vietnam as it shifted "from a bureaucratically centralised planned economy to a multi-sector economy operating under a market mechanism with state management and a socialist orientation" (Dang, 2009: 10). Tracing the development of TNHE in Vietnam Trinh argues that whilst Vietnam has exercised some autonomy in the way TNHE has been shaped it is more often "featured as a receiver and importer of international education" (2018:73) and what Trinh calls "model borrowing" (ibid). As such Trinh suggests *Đổi Mới* "has continued to enter a new and complex form of imperialism from inner-circle countries through its internationalization policies" (ibid: 75) this is characterised, her research suggests, by the kinds of contentions that Wilkins and Juusola argue to be mythological. In this paper we do not intend to settle these debates but instead to draw attention to the ways in which they too are defined by the discourses of 'home country' higher education – quality, standards, parity of esteem, language hierarchies, global citizenship - which has the colonising effect of fixing discussion, and more importantly critique, within the dominant epistemological traditions that pattern and frame higher education within those countries, thereby closing down opportunities for generation of more grounded, contextualised HE cultures.

In this paper we respond to Wilkins and Juusola's call for more nuanced research by burrowing in to Trinh's concerns with "model borrowing" to explore whether working with concepts and strategies from 'the posts' to challenge and undo the certainties of imported higher education might offer new opportunities for re-imagining the making, being and doing of TNHE partnership. We draw on work undertaken as part of a two-year British Council funded project, Teaching and Learning Together (TLT). The project brought together academics and doctoral students from 4 university partners, one in the UK and three in Vietnam to explore practitioner educator development in the context of the need to prepare newly qualifying practitioners graduating from our programmes to respond to fast-changing, hyper complex futures. The project was undertaken in two phases. In phase one we undertook a cross partnership e-survey, the first of its kind in Vietnam, inviting respondents to share their experiences of and perspectives on their own learning and development as practitioner educators and in phase two we embarked on (post) qualitative work in each of our institutions. It is phase two of the project that we share in this paper.

Committed to the idea of post-colonial conversations about HE practice and identities we turned to 'the posts' to find modalities of research practice that forced us to remain self-conscious about the ontological and epistemological traces of colonial/colonising HE traditions and the privileging of particular forms of knowing, doing and being that pattern and frame research practice. This phase of our research was concerned with HE teachers' stories about their career trajectories, their concept making about professional learning and the value of post qualitative research methods in collaborative research across substantially contrasting social, cultural and economic settings. Drawing on ideas from post-qualitative research practices we read, talked, trans-linguaged, walked, and made together in a range of face to face and digitally mediated events that opened up conversations about methodology and generated a common body of shared empirical material about HE teachers 'becomings'. We "followed the contours" (after Mazzei 2017) of Brinkman's (2014) concept of

“abduction” and Maclure’s (2014) notion of “hot spots” to interact with our materials in ways that challenge more orthodox approaches to qualitative research that centre on the primacy of data and coding. “Abduction” suggests Brinkman “is a form of reasoning that is concerned with the relationship between a situation and inquiry. It is neither data-driven nor theory-driven, but breakdown-driven...it occurs in situations of breakdown, surprise, bewilderment, or wonder” (Brinkman, 2014: 724). This approach encouraged us to relinquish the certainties, the ‘giving up’ in our title, of orthodox qualitative research traditions and disorientate ourselves, getting purposefully lost (after Lather 2013), in ways that foregrounded the socio-cultural and linguistic diversity of our research partnership. In this paper we share the outcomes, on-goings and provocations of our work and the significance for HE workforce development both in Vietnam and the UK. We conclude by foregrounding the social justice and ethical dimensions of working in international teaching and research relationships and the centrality of ‘*staying with the trouble*’ (Haraway, 2016) to ‘*response-able*’ (2007) partnership building.

Brinkmann, Svend (2014) ‘Doing without data’ *Qualitative Inquiry* 20(6) 720–725

Haraway, D. J. (2016) *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Durham: Duke University Press

Lather, P. (2007) *Getting Lost: Feminist Efforts towards a Double(d) Science*. New York: State University of New York

Maclure, M (2014) *Researching beyond representation*

Mazzei, L. (2017) ‘Following the Contour of Concepts Toward a Minor Inquiry’ *Qualitative Inquiry* 2017, Vol. 23(9) 675–685