

2017-01-02

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Magne, PJ

<http://hdl.handle.net/10026.1/12253>

Practice and Evidence of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education.

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Pedagogies across borders: perspectives from teaching staff and students engaged with transnational programmes in Hong Kong

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Abstract

While there is a continuing growth in the demand for transnational programmes, the pedagogy of transnational education (TNE) remains largely under-researched. In an attempt to understand the nature of the transnational classroom and the implications for the provider of TNE, this paper explores the experiences of staff and students on programmes provided by a UK university in Hong Kong. Findings suggest that the transnational classroom is a complex and demanding environment as it entails multiple contexts, cultures, participants, roles and modes of delivery. This study proposes a range of strategies that aim to develop a shared vision on partnership and course design to enhance the teaching and learning experience.

Keywords: transnational education; learning approaches; transnational curriculum; transnational pedagogies; transnational students.

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Introduction

Transnational education (TNE) is a “dynamic, vibrant sector of higher education internationalisation” (British Council & DAAD 2015). During the past decade, the scale of TNE has greatly expanded, resulting in a rapidly changing and highly competitive environment for the providers of TNE (Doorbar & Bateman, 2008). This unprecedented growth (ibid) is accompanied by an increasing body of research into quality assurance and regulations, management of transnational programmes, and government regulation of trade in education services (Castle & Kelly, 2004; Kosmutzky & Putty 2015; QAAHE, 2006; Ziguras, 2007). However, the review of literature suggests that there is relatively little research into pedagogy of transnational programmes (Debowski, 2005; Dunn & Wallace, 2006) and the little that exists tends to focus exclusively on the voices of either students *or* lecturers. Consequently, there is a pressing need to undertake a holistic examination of the distinctive nature of transnational pedagogies (Dunn & Wallace, 2006). Therefore, this paper brings together the perspectives of different stakeholders of TNE to illuminate the complexities of this type of education.

For this study, we use the term of transnational education to denote any provision made by a university for “the learners [who] are located in a country different from the one where the awarding institution is based” (UNESCO & CoE 2001, p. 3). As the growth of TNE activities around the globe proliferate so too do the methods used to delivery TNE. Under most definitions of TNE, delivery can take the form of branch campuses, franchise/partnership, joint degrees validations or anything inbetween (British Council 2013). The TNE case study examined in this paper falls within the franchise/partnership mode, the most common form of TNE (Healey, 2013).

This paper starts with a review of existing literature on teaching and learning in TNE and proceeds with a brief discussion of the methods and data analysis instruments used to collect and analyse the research data. Finally, the paper describes participants’ experiences in the transnational classroom, highlighting a range of recommendations. These recommendations are drawn from the examination of one case study using multiple data points. Therefore this study cannot be generalizable to the myriad of TNE structures and the range of cultures these structures operate within. Rather, the underlying purpose of this research is to illuminate to the key stakeholders of TNE the

possible challenges and solutions that might aid in the practice of this complex phenomena.

Literature review

Transnational teaching is increasingly viewed as a complex site of intercultural engagement (Leask, 2008), which is deemed to be distinct from what and how one teaches in home universities (Debowski, 2005). The review of the existing literature suggested that the transnational teaching often occurs in short intensive intervals, covering large units of curriculum (Gribble & Ziguras, 2003) with students regarded as passive, rote learners, lacking in autonomy, and unfamiliar with academic culture of exporting universities (Hoare, 2006). Many studies (Debowski, 2008; Gribble & Ziguras, 2003; Leask, 2004) concur with the view that the intensive nature of the transnational classroom requires staff to display a distinctive set of skills and expertise in structuring and delivering these sessions to meet the intended learning outcomes. Academics have thus to work with students who tend to bring an entirely different set of characteristics, learning needs and expectations. Typically, this group have a much higher percentage of students with family and work commitments (Debowski, 2008) leading, in some cases, to students failing to complete their course work on time (Chapman & Pyvis, 2006) and/or limiting their ability to reflect on their academic performance or acquisition of knowledge (Gribble & Ziguras, 2003). These personal circumstances are also believed to generate a strong desire for simplified learning processes, which contradicts the expectations of academia to engage with broader reading, research and exploration (op cit).

Added to students' personal circumstances is the presence of cultural stereotypes that suggest transnational students are often academically deficient and in need of correction (Brydon & Liddell, 2011). Asian students, who form a large group of transnational students, tend to be conceptualised in negative terms based on their perceived preference for rote and surface learning, passivity, excessive reliance on authority, and their lack of critical thinking skills, and understanding of academic scholarship (Biggs, 1990). However, the growing body of research (Egege & Kutieleh, 2008; Hoare, 2006) warns against these unfounded stereotypical ascriptions. Brydon & Liddell (2011) argue that culture is not static and individuals may belong to multiple sub-

cultures. In addition, the Western learning models and measures used to examine the characteristics of Asian learners may not be valid in non-Western education contexts (Eaves, 2011). It is thought, for instance, that the reproductive learning process of Asian students includes a 'deep learning' element (Biggs, 1990) that is not present in the Western concept of rote learning (*op cit*).

Another potential challenge teaching staff may experience in the transnational environment is the provision of curriculum (Dobos, 2011), which still sparks heated debates over the best practice to deliver TNE. One view advocates for fixed and unmediated curricula, imposing the standards matching those of the exporting universities (Debowski, 2008). It is thought that students deliberately engage with a Western degree because they wish to receive an insight into Western outlook and practices (Dunn & Wallace, 2006), expecting difference in what and how they are taught (Egege & Kutieleh, 2008). Yet, this approach is criticised to take form of a "cultural colonialism" that transfers Western theories and products indiscriminately to the transnational environment (Ziguras, 2008). Conversely, the other view argues for cultural inclusivity in the internationalised curriculum and more in-depth understanding of the partner institutions (Dunn & Wallace, 2006; Leask, 2004) and of intercultural perspectives on knowledge (Leask, 2008). From this perspective, transnational teaching is undoubtedly a complex site of intercultural engagement that requires teachers to display a set of personal qualities, cultural and disciplinary knowledge, language and teaching skills, policy and procedural knowledge to be able successfully to work in the transnational classroom (Dunn & Wallace, 2006; Leask, 2008). The current study aims to contribute to the literature on TNE with a particular focus on the nature of the transnational classroom in Hong Kong. By drawing together the perspectives of three stakeholders: the local tutors, UK-based tutors, and students; the article endeavours to provide a comprehensive account of the challenges and dilemmas different participants face on transnational programmes with the intent to enhance our understanding of TNE.

Methodology

This study focused on three undergraduate programmes offered by a UK university in Hong Kong, in which the face-to-face teaching is shared amongst twelve UK-based tutors and fifteen local tutors. Lecturers from the UK were responsible for the design of curriculum, teaching plans, assessment, and delivery of one third of the programme; whilst, local lecturers taught the remaining part. Local staff worked part-time, and many taught on other transnational and/or local programmes. The 18 month programmes entailed face-to-face delivery accompanied with access to supporting online resources available on the portal of the UK University. There were around 240 students enrolled at the time that this research project was conducted.

The study draws on phenomenology theory to explore the nature of transnational programmes from the perspectives of different stakeholders (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007). With the focus being on the participants' personal knowledge and assumptions taken at face value, this study aimed to celebrate individual views and interpretation of their lived experiences. A case study methodology was seen as most appropriate to investigate the research agenda as it retains "the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events" (Yin, 2003, p. 3). Single case studies have been a common research strategy used in a range of fields, including psychology, sociology, business studies, political science (Ghuri & Gronhaug, 2002) and education (Thomas, 2013).

The data triangulated from three units of analysis: UK-based staff, local staff, and students, aimed to portray "what it is like" to be engaged with a transnational course in Hong Kong; "to catch the close-up reality" of teaching and learning on these courses; and to present "thick description of participants' lived experiences of, thoughts about and feelings for [their] situation" (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007, p. 254). A total of twenty participants volunteered to participate in the interviews (UK-based tutors = 5, local staff = 8 and students = 7). The sample consisted of eight male and five female academics who had extensive experience of teaching in Higher Education. Student sample included five female and two male students who all were mature students, i.e. over twenty-one. To protect the anonymity of participants, pseudonyms were employed. The transcripts were fully transcribed and analysed by using NVivo software. Content analysis was employed to analyse the interview data, breaking down textual data into

small units and then rearranging them into categories that facilitated a better understanding of the research agenda (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). Ethical approval was obtained prior to the commencement of data collection.

Findings and Discussion

The complexity of the transnational programme

The findings confirmed the complexity of TNE that embodies a range of contexts, cultures, roles and modes of delivery. Similarly to other empirical studies (Debowski, 2008; Gribble & Ziguras, 2003), the teaching on these programmes occurred in intensive bursts over the weekends with large student groups. Many teaching materials were condensed to be delivered by using various teaching and learning practices with didactic transmission practices prevailing. Teaching in the transnational context was further marked by divergent opinions and experiences concerning curriculum and pedagogy. Teaching staff were divided about the extent to which curriculum should be accommodated when transferred from one educational system to another. One view, supported by most UK-based tutors and Honk Kong programme coordinators, was the design and transference of an unmediated UK curriculum to the transnational setting. As one participant stated:

It's our degree to be taken out there. It doesn't matter what the culture is, it doesn't matter where the country is, if they want [an exporting university's] degree and that is what they've signed up for, that is what they're going to be delivered (Neil, UK tutor).

Accordingly, the fundamental aim was to provide identical programmes as the awarding university to preserve its reputation. Even the issue around the incorporation of local examples and case studies in teaching stirred some disagreement with some programme coordinators who argued for a fixed curriculum which would preserve the values and standards of the exporting university "so by rights it should be less local content" (Simon, local tutor).

Conversely, many local tutors and one UK-based tutor advocated for the need to tailor curriculum to the culture and context as "not all the content is necessarily transnationally

transportable and certainly not all the assessments are” (Tracey, UK tutor). Eva, a local tutor, argued that in one module the knowledge could not always be transferred to the professional context in Hong Kong, and often generated dissatisfaction with students. This discordant conversation resonates in the literature on TNE. Whilst important arguments are expressed in favour of providing standardised programmes (Egege & Kutieleh, 2008; Chapman & Pyvis, 2006); increasing numbers of publications (Dunn & Wallace, 2006; Leask, 2004) advocate accommodating the curriculum and pedagogical approaches in the transnational environment by ‘tak[ing] into account the cultural and linguistic sensitivities of the receiving country’ (UNESCO & OECD, 2005, p. 14). Consistent with other empirical studies (e.g. Dunn & Wallace, 2006), some lecturers believed that optimal transnational teaching bridges cultural differences of the transnational curriculum to provide students with what they want from a foreign degree whilst respecting their cultural context.

Challenges in designing and transferring curriculum across borders

The design and transference of curriculum across borders appeared to be challenging for teaching staff. UK-based academics faced the difficult task of producing explicit and comprehensible teaching materials. As Ben (UK tutor) put it, “I couldn’t keep anything up my sleeve, I had to be expressive about exactly what those slides mean”. In contrast, local tutors were expected to religiously deliver the materials produced by their British counterparts without deviation. Any deviation from delivery was perceived by some UK-based staff as disruptive to teaching. Despite the appreciation expressed by a few local tutors about being given ready-made teaching materials, others experienced confusion when making sense of them. Maggie’s account embodies accurately the tensions some local tutors experienced in re-constructing the provided curriculum and negotiating their identity.

Most of us doesn’t like the notes provided by the others. If you really want to teach, if you are keen on teaching, you know what to say, you know what example you want to use.

(Maggie, local tutor)

Maggie went on to say that uncritical adherence to the materials was stifling and prevented the local tutor from being creative and teaching “the spirit of the

content". These tutors felt that they were denied the right to incorporate their voices and expertise into their teaching practice.

The transfer of assessment criteria and marking appeared to pose further problems. Some UK-based tutors reported instances when local tutors did not always apply the assessment criteria accordingly. As Kim (UK tutor) noted, the local tutor 'was sometimes giving quite high marks to studentsand I did push some of those marks down a bit'. To ensure consistency in assessment, Kim entered into conversation with her colleague to discuss the assessment criteria and marking system. These observations raise important questions about assessment practices as many UK-based tutors spoke of relying on local tutors to introduce students to the assessment criteria, expectations and examination techniques. If students are to succeed, they need to receive appropriate support with the assessment process.

Perspectives on the transfer of pedagogy across borders

Another divided opinion in this study was around transnational pedagogy. Teaching staff held contrasting perspectives on what constituted appropriate teaching in the transnational classroom and how receptive students were to active learning practices. Based on preconceived notions of students' cultural differences and preferences for learning approaches, many tutors perceived Hong Kong students as rote learners, reliant on authority (e.g. lecturers), assessment-oriented, unfamiliar with UK academia, displaying inhibited behaviours presumed to be caused by 'maintaining face' and the power dynamic specific to their native educational system. These assumptions coupled with the view that many transnational students worked full-time and had family commitments appeared to be critical to the choice of teaching models with many academics showing preference for didactic transmission practices. Five out of thirteen tutors displayed strong reservations about the feasibility of participatory practices in the Hong Kong context. They felt that participatory practices were bound to fail as students were not accustomed to active learning and would not be willing to participate. As a result, they used transmission models. Yet, eight tutors reported using sometimes participatory activities (e.g. presentations, group work around case studies, marking exercises, self-analysis questionnaire, multiple-choice exercises, and games) alongside transmission models. The research demonstrates that not only did students recognise

that they enjoyed most participatory activities but also they derived numerous benefits such as constructing new knowledge, networking, keeping motivated and alert to the teaching materials delivered in class. These results resonate the pedagogical principles that indicate that students engage with deeper learning when there are opportunities for greater engagement and for ownership of learning (Entwistle, 2000).

In the same vein, due to numerous reasons such as shortage of individualised support, intensive nature of the programme and students' perceived reticence and difficulty to complete extended pieces of writing, programme leaders agreed to discontinue the use of the thesis. Nevertheless, some students indicated that although they perceived writing a dissertation as a challenging task, they came to appreciate and value it. These students recognised the need to engage critically with the literature and valued the deeper level of learning that this type of writing entailed. This contradicts the assumptions that transnational students have a strong desire for streamlined and simplified learning processes. Contrary to this belief, some students in our study came to appreciate independent learning. They believed that their employers expected them to be resourceful and autonomous in their workplace where "no-one needs to teach you step by step, you have to do it by yourself" (Sylvie, student). Overall, most students felt that it was a "positive experience" to be confronted by different styles and perspectives, which gave them an edge over other graduates of the local programmes.

What we learnt from this is that misconstrued generalisations about students' cultural differences and preferences for learning approaches should not restrict the range of pedagogies in the transnational classroom. As this study showed, many transnational students were proactive, highly-motivated, and voiced a strong preference for being exposed to a high-quality teaching. Most important, they were able to modify their learning behaviours and appreciate the participatory activities. This echoes the findings of other research (Chapman & Pyvis, 2006; Egege & Kutieleh, 2008; Kennedy, 2002) that highlight the view that even where students found the approaches of learning novel and challenging, they learnt to adapt accordingly and appreciate the strengths of a more demanding and active learning experience. Clearly, many students are able to change and grow as a result of their cognitive capacities (Egege & Kutieleh, 2008) and of their exposure to novel forms of learning and educational encounters (Debowski, 2008). These findings call for revisiting the beliefs tutors held about transnational students. As suggested, the stereotypical generalisations of transnational students may magnify

cultural differences leading to vague educational objectives and teaching methodologies (Egege & Kutieleh, 2008). Consistent with the literature on learning approaches, our study suggests that teaching staff need to recognise learners as individuals with diverse needs, expectations and abilities, rather than as a homogenous group. Although mapping the cultural learning differences may be crucial, a “one size fits all” teaching style inhibits efficient and effective learning. It is apparent that these misconceptions may be overly reductionist (Eaves, 2011), and if they remain unchecked, can become barriers to effective communication and learning (Manathunga, 2011).

Challenges in transnational learning

Findings indicated that students encountered numerous issues while studying on the transnational programme. Students identified English proficiency as a key challenge to understanding learning materials and the accents of UK-based tutors. Whenever possible they switched to their native language when interacting with local tutors and demanded them to use Chinese for delivery. Added to this was the difficulty with academic study skills such as writing, search and research skills. In addition, many students struggled to use the digital learning environment of the exporting university. Further, most students noted that they felt uncomfortable expressing their own opinions and asking questions due to the large size of groups. Instead, they preferred to approach tutors during the break or after class. Finally, our study indicates that students as in other studies (Chapman & Pyvis, 2006; Debowski, 2008) felt that the support systems underpinning their learning experience offered only limited access to their teachers, study skills developers, other forms of specialist guidance, library facilities, and extra curricula activities. There were few individualised opportunities to seek feedback or other forms of assistance and services. Challenges for both teachers and learners were therefore abundant.

Implications for transnational education

This study proposes a range of recommendations that may enhance teaching and learning experiences on transnational programmes. The recommendations include

three broad areas: Re-thinking team dynamics and curriculum design; reviewing teaching approaches; support for students.

Rethinking the team dynamics and curriculum design

Our research found that there was an asymmetry in the division of power and control over the transnational curriculum. The UK staff designed the entire curriculum and associated assessment, while the local tutors were excluded from the design process and required simply to transfer the curriculum to the transnational classroom. Similarly to the literature on TNE, this study advocates for reconstruction and developing a “more symbiotic teaching team” (Dunn & Wallace, 2006, p. 362) with the inclusion of local staff as equal and valued members of the teaching group (Leask, 2004). Greater opportunity should be offered to incorporate the voice of the local tutors and their knowledge of the local context into the curriculum design. This action will evidently require important changes in power relationships, fostering equal and collegial relationships, and an improved level of communication between the teams.

This research also argues for the provision of professional development of pedagogical and cultural competence, which is indispensable to the choice of teaching strategies in transnational environments (Heffernan, Morrison, Basu, & Sweeney, 2010). As such, sharing experiences of teaching on transnational programmes and attending formal and informal briefings about pedagogies and learning cultures may be beneficial to developing awareness and skills pertinent to supporting transnational learners. Additionally, moderation of assessment, including marking exercises may help local tutors to enhance their understanding and accurate application of assessment criteria. Disagreement as to whether transnational programmes have to be identical in both contexts generated differing practices and some resistance towards active learning practices. For this reason, it is crucial that teaching teams and programme coordinators discuss and negotiate a shared vision and perspectives on curriculum to ensure that the student experience is not undermined. Thus, the process of re-thinking the team dynamics would require attention to the volume and quality of communication, shared vision and perspectives on the partnership.

Consequently, good practices identified by our research include:

- Regular communication using a number of modes, e.g. face-to-face, e-mail
- Good rapport and relationships based on trust, collegiality and equity
- Professional development support – formal and informal
- Shared perspectives and principles on transnational curriculum
- Input from local tutors in terms of the design of teaching materials
- Contextualisation of pedagogy and assessment where appropriate
- Discussion of moderation of assessment to reduce the variation in marking

Reviewing teaching approaches

This study suggested that there was a need to review the appropriate teaching models for the transnational setting. Contrary to the preconceived notions that transnational students are reluctant to engage with participatory activities, students highly valued opportunities such as group work and presentations. However, they were less willing and comfortable to engage with Q&A episodes in large groups. Teaching staff need to recognise that transnational students require on-going encouragement as they have to overcome a wide number of challenges such as the language barrier, class size, limited experience with the approach, and lack of knowledge.

There are a range of different teaching models that can be adopted in the TNE classroom; i.e. group work, flipped classroom techniques, small research projects, case studies; however, there are three important variables for the teaching staff to consider when embarking on unfamiliar (to the student) models. Firstly, consider the contextual relevance of the approach; secondly, be creative in its design and implementation; and finally, carefully plan your communications strategy, as whilst most students will appreciate the departure from the usual, because of the issues identified in this paper, clear culturally sensitive guidance needs to be administered.

In summary, good practices identified by our research in relation to teaching approaches include:

- Use of various teaching and learning practices

- On-going encouragement to embrace novel learning approaches
- Additional support with group and team work
- Learning opportunities which bridge theory and practice
- Use of culturally-sensitive wording for the design of classroom activities

Support for students

This study underscores the limited attention paid to the student support in the transnational setting. This is juxtaposed against the additional resource being dedicated to enhancing the 'Student Experience' at many universities in the UK. The QAA Quality Code (QAA: B10,06) states that the degree awarding body has ultimate responsibility for academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities, regardless of where these opportunities are delivered and who provides them. Therefore universities should take their responsibility to the broader TNE student experience seriously.

This is not to say that there were not examples of good practice identified in this study. Many local tutors tried to create additional opportunities to interact with students through out-of-school meetings and email communication. However, overall students felt that there was little individualised support.

Therefore, examples of good practices identified to provide a positive learning experience are:

- Induction day(s)
- In-session workshops on academic writing conventions and assessment criteria
- Provision of equitable on-going tutor feedback, individualised support, and good email communication
- Support with technology (e.g. use of online resources, university portal)
- Well-timed provision of text books and lecture notes
- Opportunities to feedback comments, suggestions and complaints through student bodies/representatives

As part of our project, the key recommendations were shared with programme managers who used these to enhance the design of the transnational programmes. For instance, induction weeks were launched to provide students with guidance on the

facilities available and information on the programme, courses, and staff involved. Great attention was dedicated to fostering more equal and collaborative staff relationships to ensure the provision of an engaging curriculum sensitive to both educational systems.

Conclusions

This study presents an account of the challenges and dilemmas experienced by three stakeholder groups on the transnational programmes provided by a UK university in Hong Kong. Although the research findings may also be indicative of other educational partnerships, they give an in-depth insight into the nature of the transnational classroom with all its complexities, assumptions, and aspirations. We believe that the range of recommendations made in this study, and which are consistent with the existing literature, may enable transnational teaching staff to enhance teaching and learning environments. The overarching conclusion of this study states that the adaptation of transnational programmes should be multi-faceted and reciprocal in nature. Positive working relationships between the international education provider, local staff and students should offer great potential for developing a culturally-sensitive curriculum and pedagogy in the transnational classroom.

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