Teaching and learning: the international higher education landscape
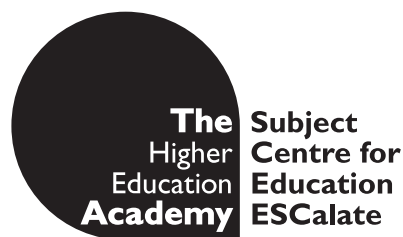
some theories and working practices

Dr Sheila Trahar

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This discussion paper is written in two parts. Part One provides an overview of the international higher education context in the UK: it explores theoretical frameworks of learning and teaching in a range of cultures, drawing on relevant research to illustrate some of the difficulties that can be encountered by both students and academics in this complex environment. Part Two challenges some myths and stereotypes and offers some practical suggestions of how to facilitate successful intercultural learning in increasingly complex contexts.

Contents

Introduction

The increasing numbers of international students on our campuses provide rich opportunities for engaging in the kind of intercultural dialogue through which we might learn more about cultural diversity. It is, however, a truism that global convergence and encounters with cultural difference lead to greater intercultural competence and understanding. Maintaining tolerance to each other in higher education contexts that are increasingly culturally diverse demands more time, energy and patience from *all* of the participants – academics and students.

This discussion paper on working in an international higher education environment has been written in order to encourage academic staff to reflect on those dimensions of working with cultural diversity that are often uncomfortable and contentious. As academics, we are 'core players in the process' (Teekens, 2000: 26) of building an environment within which intercultural learning can flourish. Most academics would baulk at the suggestion that their attitude or behaviour might, in any way, be discriminatory. Such a suggestion is not only provocative but also it does not fit with the liberal values traditionally embraced by higher education. Unfortunately though this can mean that it is difficult to initiate reasoned debate (Back, 2004) about the complexities of the multicultural higher education environment and the opportunities for increased understanding can, therefore, remain subordinated discourses (Koehne, 2006).

The intention in this discussion paper is to provoke critical reflection on learning and teaching practices that are often unexamined for their cultural embeddedness. By remaining unexamined, 'they can create particularly painful dilemmas for students from differing backgrounds, of differing turns of mind whose identities and loyalties are cast as liabilities from which they should liberate themselves' (Minnich, 2005: 161). Such apparent cultural inviolability (Turner & Robson, 2006) of pedagogical approaches can communicate a neocolonialist, imperialist attitude, 'the possible shoring up of Eurocentric moves in supposedly progressive fields of scholarship where one should least expect to find these' (Brah, 1996: 220). It is important to remember, though, as you read this discussion paper, that it is not the cultural specificities themselves that can be problematic but 'the meaning attributed to them, and how this meaning is played out…that marks whether or not specificity emerges as a basis of social division' (ibid: 235).

Academic staff in British universities are still 'predominantly white…UK born' (De Vita & Case, 2003: 394). This in itself does not imply a lack of sensitivity to diversity, but does seem to mean that very few challenges are made to our 'established norms and pedagogic practices' (ibid) in order to perhaps consider and create different learning and teaching approaches. In addition, there are, of course, increasing numbers of staff who were not educated in the UK and so are familiar with academic traditions that differ from those prevalent in the local context. This discussion paper is intended to encourage reflection on cultural diversity and its impact in the higher education environment for *all* of the participants – academics and students. It is hoped that it will be of interest to you, whatever your cultural background, educational experience or academic tradition.

Part One

Who are 'international students'?

'International students' are no more a homogeneous group than any other group of people. Terms such as 'international students', 'EU students', and 'home students' reflect fee status but are often used to differentiate between the groups in ways that can be pejorative. Similar terminology is used throughout this publication for ease of description but is not intended to suggest homogenisation. It is important, therefore, to take a moment to reflect on the people who are behind the labels.

International students are those students who have moved to another country to study full-time (Biggs, 2003); UK visa regulations make it virtually impossible for an international student to study part-time. In the UK, students from other European Union (EU) countries are treated as home students for fee purposes. International students are therefore domiciled outside of the EU, but students from the latter, who will rarely have English as their first language, are often also spoken of as international students. Language fluency is thus a common way of differentiating between groups of students – the reference to 'non-native/native speakers' in Part Two, is an example of such differentiation.

The UK context

In the UK, research into the impact of cultural diversity in higher education has tended to focus on the experiences of British black and ethnic minority (BME) undergraduate students (see for example Modood & Shiner, 1994; Modood & Ackland, 1998) and on the attitudes held towards such students by academic staff (Clegg, Parr & Wan, 2003). Clearly such work is important and valuable, but when we speak of 'international students', we are not referring to BME students. As I stated earlier, the term is used to identify students who are domiciled outside of the UK and who, usually, do not have English as their first language. In education departments, although there are some non-UK students training to be teachers[1], the majority of international students will be taught postgraduates and research postgraduates. They are, therefore, highly educated, professionally experienced people from many different countries, often learning in a language that is not their first. They bring with them rich and diverse educational traditions and professional experience – and thus different complexities from BME undergraduates.

Clegg, Parr & Wan (2003) suggest that one reason for the lack of work that examines the meaning of cultural difference in higher education in the UK is that universities have only recently experienced greater ethnic diversity, yet 60 years ago, international students made up 10.4 per cent of students in UK universities (Biggs, 2003). It is the cultural background of those students that has changed with many now originating from Africa, the Middle and Far East (McNamara & Harris, 1997; Biggs, 2003) in contrast to the Anglo-Celtic countries of the Commonwealth such as Australia and New Zealand. The latter students, along with those from the USA and Canada are, of course, also international students, but they tend to be perceived somewhat differently as English is usually their first language.

International students in the UK

In April 2006, Tony Blair announced the second phase of his Prime Minister's Initiative (PMI). The first phase, launched in 1999, met its target to increase the numbers of international students in the UK by 50,000 by 2004/5. In this second phase more than £27 million is to be invested over the next two years by the government, the British Council[2], the education sector and businesses to attract more foreign students. The target aimed for is in excess of 100,000 in the next five years. In 2004/5, 40 per cent of all taught postgraduates in the UK were international students[3]. International students contribute more than £10 billion annually to the UK economy. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that government and organisational policy, along with that of many other countries in the Western world, leans towards aggressive international marketing in an environment that is increasingly competitive. International students tend to favour English-speaking countries for study. The traditional destinations have been the UK, USA, Australia, Canada and New Zealand but several mainland European countries also recruit international students. In these countries, tuition may be free, in English, and qualifications that are recognised world wide available under the Bologna Agreement (Clark, 2006). In addition, some countries, for example China, are discouraging students from studying abroad by developing and expanding their own programmes, some of which are delivered by foreign providers (Clark, 2006). The United International College in Zhuhai is a recent, joint venture between Beijing Normal University and Hong Kong Baptist University that offers all of its programmes in English as a way of encouraging Chinese students to study in their own country. The 'market' is therefore increasingly competitive. Given the importance of international students to the UK economy and that UK universities

are now so dependent on their fee income, it is clear that the UK wants to remain a major player in the international education market. Unfortunately, this 'trade in educational services' (Koehne, 2006: 254), can be the dominant discourse in the international education field. This discussion paper focuses on celebrating the presence of international students on our campuses. Their experiences add much to developing awareness of different practices, certainly in education, and encourage us to reflect on what we do and why we do it. Given this celebratory dimension, we have to look at why international students come here, the experiences they have while they are here and how we can all maximise and benefit from the opportunities for intercultural learning.

What is meant by the internationalisation of higher education?

Internationalisation and globalisation are terms that are often used interchangeably, yet they are 'different but dynamically linked concepts' (OECD, 1999: 14), inadequately understood, defying simple explanation (Sanderson, 2004). Given the 'centrality of higher education institutions in the globalized world… the relationships between globalization and higher education seem to be acuter, perplexing and open to multiple and divergent accounts' (Vaira, 2004: 484). The OECD (1999) defines 'the internationalisation of higher education' as the integration of an international/intercultural dimension into all of the activities of a university, including the teaching, research and service functions. In the UK, however, the meaning of the internationalisation of higher education tends to be conflated with international students. The ways in which such students can 'internationalise' the experience of British students and staff and benefit UK higher education, other than by contributing fee income, have not been widely

articulated (Merrick, 2000). There can be a vast gulf between the marketing strategies promoting the opportunities for mutual understanding offered by the fresh and enriching perspectives of international students (British Council, 2003) and the lived experiences of academics and the student community (Turner & Robson, 2006). Often 'the opportunities offered by a diverse educational context are not self-evident and self-fulfilling in terms of…intercultural competence' (Otten, 2003: 13). A third dimension of internationalisation and globalisation, that of 'Internationalisation at Home' (Teekens, 2006) is extended to the term 'cosmopolitanism' (Caglar, 2006: 39), which includes the 'perspective of the local' (ibid: 40).

UK universities

Most UK universities would define themselves as international institutions. A traditional view of the university is that it has always been a 'universal' institution and that in the age of European empires, and of imperial science, it became one of society's most international organisations (Teichler, 2004). Most universities are not ancient institutions, however, but creations of the nation state, dependent (to a greater or lesser extent) on national governments for their budgets and, in the post-colonial world, often expected to be concerned primarily with nation building (Scott, 1998). If universities are funded to serve their own national purposes, can they be defined as international? Clinging to a rhetoric of internationalism, in the face of the relentless and encroaching power of the nation state (Scott, 1998), they are both national and international (Halliday, 1999).

The Western university can be seen as a colonising institution (Cary, 2004) especially in its subtle treatment of those who do not belong to its dominant culture. 'The institutionalisation of power favours the dominant group, local students, and labels

international students as the "Other"' (Hellmundt & Fox, 2003: 34). Reductions in public funding, however, together with the continuing pressure to develop and maintain high research ratings, generate pressure to compete for the higher fee income from international students. Unfortunately, the additional resources needed to sustain quality in teaching and in student support services are often lacking. 'The degree of tolerance to otherness and different styles can dwindle quickly when teaching and learning demand more time, energy and patience' (Otten, 2003: 14) and when the perception is that there is inadequate infrastructural support. International students can then be scapegoated as a source of increased pressure by some academics who can be reduced to marginalising and infantilising them (Devos, 2003).

The 'real life' experience of cultural diversity is without doubt the most involving form of learning. On the other hand the contact-hypothesis (intercultural learning will occur automatically whenever people meet long and intensely enough) has been proved to be wrong in many cases. The personal experience of an intercultural encounter does not automatically initiate intercultural learning (Otten, 2000: 15).

As an academic, I believe that I am a core player in the process of encouraging greater tolerance. I say that not to proselytise about my own importance and influence but to acknowledge an ethical responsibility, as a member of the host culture, to foster intercultural communication and learning. One of the key aims of PMI Phase 2 is to 'ensure the quality of the student experience' (Clark, 2006: 80) but we cannot assume that intercultural learning will just happen. Finding ways to involve local students and staff 'in the internationalisation process in order to

create more sensitivity and awareness for the various opportunities for personal development afforded by internationalisation' (Otten, 2000: 15) is, therefore, crucial. 'Before we can recognise the "Other", we have to know ourselves well. This requires a position of ethics, not just being bystanders of external developments' (Stromquist, 2002: 93).

Making sense of 'culture'

The concept of the teacher as researcher is credited to Stenhouse (1981). His differentiation between research on education and research in education contributed much to the development of action research and case study research in educational settings. Examples of university teachers researching their own practice are, however, rare. It is even rarer to find practitioner researchers reflecting critically on the impact of diversity on their practice and indeed on themselves (Brunner, 2006).

Much educational research…has little impact in the classroom in terms of teaching and learning – either because the issues researched are too broad or that they are too theoretical. The solution is that teachers themselves, the practitioners, become the researchers. They can do this by systematically reflecting on what goes on in the classroom and, to raise these reflections to the level of objectivity, to subject them to the critical scrutiny of others. Out of such reflections, though unique to individual researchers, can come "insightful accounts of processes which go beyond the particular story itself" (Pring, 1999: 6)

So how can the university teacher as researcher make sense of 'culture' in ways that can have impact in the classroom?

In 1999, when I began teaching on the University of Bristol's Graduate School of Education Master of Education (MEd) Counselling in Education programme, I had a wealth of experience as an adult learner and educator, gained from working mainly with 'non-traditional' students – part-time, mature students, combining study with work and family responsibilities. It was, however, extremely rare for me to work with students who were culturally different from me and who did not have English as their first language. My first encounter with international, postgraduate students caused me some considerable discomfort (Trahar, 2002a, 2002b, 2006). I realised that, by providing a session on rational-emotive behaviour therapy (REBT), an approach to counselling developed by Albert Ellis, a white, male North American, I might be perceived as being 'pseudo-etic' (Biggs, 2001: 293). Subsequently, I questioned the relevance of REBT, and indeed, counselling, which is itself a culturally embedded practice, for many people in the MEd group.

The experience of working with international students led me to embark on my doctoral research, a narrative inquiry into the experiences of postgraduate students studying in the Graduate School of Education (GSoE) Bristol. As a practitioner researcher, one of the purposes of the study was to interrogate my own assumptions and beliefs and to explore ways in which I might transfer unknowingly (Crossley, 1984, 2000) my own attitudes and practices of teaching and learning, when working with people with very different traditions and values.

Culture – 'everyone seems to know what the word means in a vague sort of way, but no one is quite sure as to its precise meaning' (Laungani, 1999: 35). In order to illuminate the discussion in this publication, I need to ascribe some meaning to the word. I find two definitions, 'culture is…the sum of stories we tell ourselves about who we are and want to be, individually and collectively' (Maxwell, 2001: 1), and 'the knowledge people use to generate and interpret social behaviour' (Ryen, 2000: 221), valuable in understanding interactions in my research and practice. They should be borne in mind by the reader.

One of the advantages of becoming more familiar with academic traditions in different cultures is that I have been challenged to interrogate my own and also to recognise the importance of maintaining a balance between idiographic and nomothetic perspectives. A danger in focusing on the differences of *other* groups is that the dominant group can avoid an interrogation of its own culture. By foregrounding that very visible difference *between* groups, the differences *within* groups are obscured, resulting in homogenising terms such as 'international students' or 'The Chinese Learner' (Watkins & Biggs, 1996) or the 'home students'. As Hongyu, a Chinese student said, ''There are as many differences between Chinese people as there are between white people.'' It is not that *either* each person must be treated as unconnected to his or her cultural group, or that assumptions should be made about individuals based on knowledge of the characteristics of their cultural group. It is that *both* can be used judiciously in order to effect greater understanding.

Some cultural influences on learning and teaching

The majority of international students in UK education departments are mature, adult postgraduate learners. Very few of those on initial teacher training courses are from outside the UK, although occasionally they come from other EU countries.

This section offers an overview of dominant adult learning theories in order to illustrate how such theories are informed by concepts that are culturally embedded, drawing on 'truths' from one culture 'usually male, white and Western-European' (Amstutz, 1999: 19) to generalise across all cultures. It will also offer a brief overview of ways in which learning is conceptualised in some 'other' cultures.

It may be impractical to seek familiarity with the pedagogical traditions of every student and to 'teach' to all individual cultural preferences (Biggs, 2001, 2003) yet:

> *An understanding of culturally distinct values may promote* learning *from ways unlike one's own, and…differences* between *cultures may highlight important but previously unrecognised differences* within *cultures* (Tweed & Lehman, 2002: 90, my emphases).

It was not until I began to work with people from cultures other than my own that I began to question, at a deeper philosophical level, what I did and why I did it. Until then, it had seemed sufficient to be able to be explicit and transparent about the theoretical ideas I used in designing my teaching sessions.

I became conscious, however, that there might be a lack of sensitivity to diversity in my approach, wary that this might be symptomatic of an underlying cultural imperialism:

> *Few academics are…closet essentialists, or Platonists…but sound as if they are when one questions the founding definitions and assumptions that…they may not even be aware of holding…they can create particularly painful dilemmas for students from differing backgrounds, of differing turns of mind whose identities and loyalties are cast as liabilities from which they should liberate themselves* (Minnich, 2005: 161).

I was concerned that I might, albeit inadvertently, be implying that students needed to 'liberate themselves' from their 'identities and loyalties' by continuing with pedagogical practices that were unexamined for their cultural influences (McCoy, 2000).

> *The underlying epistemological and pedagogical values beneath routine practices remained both implicit and culturally inviolate…people…remained indelibly linked to a locally articulated knowledge tradition fixed in its socio-historic context.* (Turner & Robson, 2006: 26)

I did not want my values to be 'implicit', nor did I want the label 'culturally inviolate' to be attached to me. In addition, I became aware of the dangers of 'false universalism' of 'adopting…practices across cultures without recognising the distinctive historical and cultural dimensions' (Phuong-Mai, Terlouw & Pilot, 2006: 4).

I was familiar with the principles that supported my own pedagogical practice but, by gaining insight into the ways in which learning and teaching are conceptualised in a diverse range of cultures, I was alerted to the cultural situatedness of those principles (Amstutz, 1999; Tweed & Lehman, 2002). I found texts such as The Chinese Learner (Watkins & Biggs, 1996), Teaching the Chinese Learner (Watkins & Biggs, 2001) and The Psychology of Adult Learning in Africa (Fasokun, Katahoire & Oduaran, 2005) valuable in providing insights into philosophies and conceptualisations of learning that hold significant sway for many of the people with whom we work. But they can also be seductive, alluring us into believing that all behaviours, responses, interactions are a direct result of those perspectives and influences; they need to be used judiciously.

Robin Alexander in his comprehensive study of primary education, *Culture and Pedagogy* (2000) distinguishes between those teachers in Russia, India and France who sought convergence in their pupils' understanding and progress, and those in the US and England who encouraged divergence. It is tempting to use such conclusions to infer simplistic, essentialised differences between individualist and collectivist societies. In our globalised, networked age we can move within and between the innumerable cultures that affect every society; our identities as learners are as shifting, changing and as permeable as other identities (Sarup, 1996; Edwards & Usher, 2000; Fox, 2006). Yet such distinctions between cultures can be helpful in highlighting a critical difference in underlying values; the importance of the group in collectivist cultures and the importance of individual freedom and self-fulfilment in those that lean more towards individualism. They can be useful when reflecting on learning and teaching in international education.

'I shall not teach him, only ask him, and he shall share the enquiry with me' (Socrates 469 –399 B.C.E.).

When writing about philosophical concepts and their cultural and historical origins, it is sometimes easy to forget that Western philosophy owes much to earlier, non-European forms of knowledge (Bernal, 1997); all ideas develop from and build on previous ones. There can be a danger, however, especially when globalisation is both viewed and experienced as Westernised homogenisation caused by uni-directional cultural flows from the 'West' to the 'Rest' (Rizvi, 2004), of slipping into a 'West is Best' philosophy. It is my intention here to encourage reflection on some philosophical concepts that inform pedagogy, so that, perhaps, choices can be made about developing more culturally synergistic approaches.

Socrates is considered by many to be the father of Western philosophy (Tweed & Lehman, 2002, 2003). He alleged that learning, and thus knowledge, progressed through his own and others' questioning of held beliefs, hence the term 'Socratic questioning'. This is a term used to explain a pedagogical practice that can be privileged in UK adult education, that of posing questions or problems to students, and encouraging them to construct responses from their interactions with each other (Watkins, 2000). Such a practice relies heavily on the learners' willingness and ability to interact with each other in a purposeful way. It positions the lecturer not so much as an expert, but as someone who needs expertise to facilitate an intrapersonal learning process. Each person must find the 'truth' within her/himself. 'In the ideal learning context, truth is neither presented by authority figures nor socially negotiated. Rather it is found by the self' (Tweed & Lehman, 2002: 91).

Socratic philosophy has been embedded into a rationale for learning through activity and discussion favoured by those such as Rogers (1994); Knowles (1990) and reflected vividly by Kolb (1984, 1999) in his experiential learning cycle. It emphasises the importance of the teacher/lecturer creating a classroom atmosphere within which such learning can progress. S/he is regarded as a resource, rather than an expert whose role it is to transmit knowledge and 'truth' (Knowles, 1990; Rogers, 1994). Those who favour these approaches to learning are often critical of more formal learning, (such as the traditional lecture in higher education) and rote learning, believing that such practices constitute a 'surface' rather than a 'deep' approach (Marton & Saljo, 1984). Experiential learning, 'deep learning', is thus seen to be preferable. My own teaching and learning practices are grounded firmly in Knowles' (1990) principles of adult learning, acknowledge Freire's (1972) concept of teaching and learning as two internally-related processes and Mezirow's (1991) notion of perspective transformation. Knowles' (1990) principles are student-centred, drawing on humanistic philosophy, owing much to the work of Carl Rogers (1951, 1994). They advocate that learning is most effective when each person feels valued and respected for what s/he brings to the learning environment and is supported in their development as an autonomous learner. Such principles are located in a Western view of the world, within an individualist culture where individual fulfilment is paramount. I now question the relevance of these ideas when working with students who come from rather more collectivist cultures. In these cultures, more emphasis is placed on group rather than individual good, and success may involve significant others, the family, peers, society as a whole (Salili, 2001).

'Honour the hierarchy first, your vision of the truth second' (Bond, 1991: 83)

Several writers (including Hofstede, 1980, 1986; Volet, 1999; Watkins, 2000; Kember, 2001; Kennedy, 2002; Ng, Murphy & Jenkins, 2002) conclude that in Chinese cultures, for example, there is a high level of collectivism, a strong sense of belonging to a social group, and a preference for working together in groups to solve problems.

There is strong pressure to conform and act in the interests of the group. Compromise, moderation and the maintenance of harmonious relationships are encouraged, individualism and self-assertion discouraged (Kennedy, 2002: 431).

Such conclusions do not sit easily with the more common stereotype of the 'Chinese learner' as passive, reticent and reluctant to participate in group discussion (Kember & Gow, 1991; Turner & Acker, 2002.).

A closer examination of Confucian philosophy on learning reveals some similarities with the Socratic approach. Confucius employed dialogical methods, was informal in his relationships with students and also anticipated that they would be transformed as an outcome of the knowledge they acquired. One of the differences that has had the most influence on my own approach is that Confucian philosophy encourages questioning and discussion but *after* the learner has focused on understanding and acquiring concepts (Pratt, Kelly & Wong, 1999; Watkins, 2000). Here is another challenge to the stereotype of the

'Chinese learner' as shy and reluctant to participate in discussion. This apparent 'reluctance to participate' is often assumed to be due to language difficulties or to a lack of understanding of the non-verbal cues that are an intrinsic part of communication (Jones, 1999). It may not be reluctance to participate at all, but a belief that learning does not occur *through* discussion but by discussion following acquisition of 'knowledge'. Silence, rather than an indicator of a lack of engagement in the process of learning, or of passive learning, regarded pejoratively by many Western academics (Webb, 1996; Jones, 1999; Teekens, 2000; Brookfield, 2005), is thus an active process, socially positive and beneficial to higher levels of thinking and to deepening understanding.

'When an elder dies in Africa, it is a library that burns'
(West African Proverb, Ki-Zerbo, 1990)

Most of the research conducted in multicultural groups in higher education leans predominantly towards a comparison of one group with another, usually students from the Confucian heritage cultures (CHC) of South East Asia, with local students. The groups that I work with do not only comprise CHC and home students. I work with students from Africa and from the Middle East as well as those from other parts of Europe.

In Africa, truth is conceptualised differently from Socratic philosophy. Magical understanding and interpretation of the truth is widely accepted and connected to the ways in which people 'know'. Here, learning is an active process that must have some immediate practical application and is often accompanied by music and dancing. Knowledge is transmitted orally from one generation to another and by practical example; learning through experience, therefore, predominates. The importance of oral traditions in Africa means that different

knowledges are transmitted in a variety of oral ways – such as poetry, storytelling, folklore and riddles (Fasokun, Katahoire & Oduaran, 2005). African people learn something through trial and error, by doing it repeatedly. Rote learning is therefore an important learning strategy in a context where memory is highly developed and where there may be few books and other resources. The importance of interpersonal relationships between teacher and students is emphasised together with the former's responsibility for minimising the anxiety in the learner; facilitators are not the only ones with knowledge (ibid).

I work with several students from countries such as Malaysia, Saudi Arabia, Dubai and Lebanon and have learned that their religion, Islam, and the ways in which knowledge is conceptualised, are inseparable. Two particularly pertinent Islamic principles are those of *ummatism* (the concept of Islamic community and nations) and tawhid (God as the One and Absolute being and the only source of truth and knowledge). The former is especially related to *values* – holding that, 'no value… is merely personal, pertinent to the individual alone' (Al Faruqi & Nasseef, 1981 cited Al Zeera, 2001: 63), and the latter is reflected in the Muslim obligation to bring unity and harmony to their lives through *tawhid*. Muslims do not subscribe to either/or schools of thought but are trained to be one whole integrated self and to extend this concept into society, by learning to tolerate and accept differences rather than assimilating them in pursuit of homogeneity. In conversation with Muslim students, however, I have encountered interesting and provocative examples of divergent views. One student from Saudi Arabia told me about his attraction to the person-centred principles of Carl Rogers (1951, 1967) but added that, no matter how much he might feel he empathised with another person who had come to him for help, he would be unable to advise them against his religious beliefs.

He believed Rogers' (1951) emphasis on the development of the internal 'locus of evaluation' to be contradictory to the Muslim tradition of looking outside of oneself – to the community – for direction (*ummatism*). In contrast, for another student, an Ismaeli Muslim, the similarities between the principles of her faith and those of humanistic philosophy had drawn her to student-centred practices as a teacher.
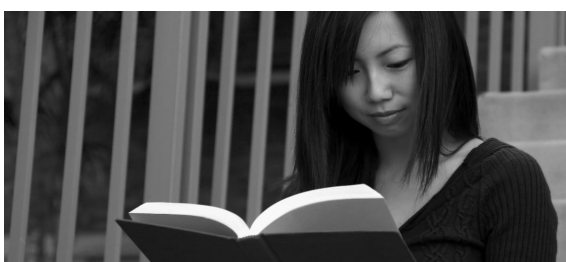
It is important to be reminded then that there can be as many differences within cultures as between them but, in examining some of the concepts prevalent in cultural traditions different from my own, I have moved from a liberal humanist position towards a more critical postmodern approach to adult learning theory, where the relationship between the individual and society is both recognised and celebrated. This 'continual working tension between the similarities and differences of individuals, of cultures and of learners' (Flannery, 1995: 155) needs to include considerations of the socialisation of people and an understanding of the institutions in which learning often takes place together with their relationships to individuals and cultures. Seeking to move from 'teaching as assimilation… a kind of colonial phase' (Biggs, 2003: 123-125), towards a diversimilarity paradigm that emphasises 'the appreciation of cultural diversity and cultural similarities' (Ofori-Dankwa & Lane, 2000: 497), I have made some significant changes to my practice based on what was emerging through my research. Making these changes has raised other questions that in turn have been explored, resulting in more changes. I expect this iterative process to continue indefinitely. Such iteration undoubtedly makes 'research in teaching and learning more complex and less generalisable' (Malcolm and Zukas, 2001: 39), but my experiences may cause others to think about some of these issues. Those described in Part Two may 'ring a bell' (Pring, 1999: 10), for you, too.

Part Two

This section focuses on the learning and teaching environment and on some of the complexities of experiences of students and academics. It uses two case studies and comments that have been made to me by students and academics during the course of my doctoral research. The case studies are based on conversations with students but the names have been changed to maintain anonymity. The practical suggestions are derived from the iterative process of my own praxis and have been evaluated positively by students. I continue to refine them in the light of other experiences.

Rosie's story

"I am a part-time, British student. I have a family and work part-time. Doing this masters degree is a major commitment for me and I am determined to get the most out of it. I have to juggle childcare, paid work and other responsibilities and, as I live some distance away, I like to make the best use of my time on the day that I am at the university by spending most of it in the library. The course that I am doing this term requires students to work together on small tasks between classes as preparation for the teaching session. I have some experience as an adult educator and I can see the value in these strategies and what the lecturer is trying to achieve. I find the discussions with my fellow students intensely frustrating, however. First of all, they cannot pronounce words correctly and, if they can't pronounce the words, how can they begin to understand the concepts? Secondly, most of them are full-time students and therefore have so much more time than me to read and prepare. This is an interesting course and I would dearly love to do more reading than I do, but I don't have the time. I make every effort to go to their meetings – the others are very considerate and hold them on the one day that I can be there. Thirdly, I am very uncomfortable with the way that they seem to defer to me much of the time. Somewhat to my shame, I have realised that it is much quicker if I suggest a way of doing a presentation, and then I can get back to the library. I am paying a lot of money for this course and don't see why everything should be slowed down sometimes for the foreign students. I am enjoying the course, I like the way that the lecturer works, can see that she is seeking to be inclusive and I find the reading stimulating but – do we really have to spend time going over it at the beginning of every session?"

Language barriers

"The native speakers speak too quickly and use words that I can't understand."
"I have to slow down my pace of speaking and avoid jargon or local references. The international students always want me to be the spokesperson."

Some version of the above comments will be familiar to anyone who works in an environment where there are people who are speaking English as their first language and those who are speaking it as their second, or even third or fourth language. What is more iniquitous, however, is that language fluency and intellectual ability are often conflated in people's minds (Prescott & Hellsten, 2005). Rosie's story contains such perceptions as well as several other implications and inferences. You can read the case study from Rosie's perspective, the lecturer's perspective and the perspective of the 'foreign student'.

The lecturer

"I have sensed Rosie's frustration and irritation in the class and I was therefore concerned but not surprised when I received an email requesting a meeting with me. In this meeting, she told me that she felt there were too many foreign students in the class, and that they seemed to have very little professional experience as, whenever they were called upon to offer their perspectives, they remained silent. She was also very critical of their English pronunciation, seeming sceptical that if they were unable to pronounce words that they would be able to understand concepts. I really enjoy working with the international students. They stimulate me to question and critique my own way of doing things and have experiences that are very different. I am, however, aware that many of them are sensitive about their spoken English and are less familiar with the discursive, experiential approaches that I favour. Rosie also expressed her frustrations with what she called 'going over the reading' at the beginning of each session. I try to do this by inviting students to discuss the main points and to consider their relevance in their own contexts. Thus, yes, they are 'going over the reading' but in ways that allow divergent views and experiences to emerge. I then summarise the main points of the discussion. I accept that this might be frustrating for her but I do it at the request of other students who value a clear summary that gathers together the key issues."

Ying

"I am an English teacher from Beijing. I am a full-time student. I have two small children and thus have flouted the one child policy in China! The children are cared for by my mother, who lives with us in Beijing. I miss them and my husband very much. Most weeks, the lecturer gives us a small task to do between the classes and divides us into groups to do it. I enjoy doing these tasks. I know I can be quite a lazy student and having this focus really helps to ensure that I do the reading necessary and discuss it with my classmates. The teaching sessions are very short and there are not as many of them as I am used to from my undergraduate experience in China and so I like meeting classmates more regularly. Also, the lecturer encourages us to use very creative ways to present our findings – such as drama. One week, a group of us used the metaphor of 'five treasures tea' to show the principles of an integrative approach to counselling. We brought along the teas, blended them, brewed 'the five treasures tea' and served it to our classmates. These classes seemed very strange at first and seemed more like playing but I have started to really enjoy them. Unfortunately, the British students are not very welcoming. It is not that they are unfriendly; more that they make it clear that they seem to prefer not to be with us. I invite the British students to join us for our discussions and, even though my classmates have said to me "Why do you keep asking them to join us? They will never come" I persist in trying. I would like to get to know them as after all, another reason I chose the UK was to learn more about British culture. In fact, one of the reasons I came here was to speak English much of the time and I was annoyed when, at the first class, the professor said that we could speak in our own language if we liked to begin with. I do not want to speak in Chinese – I want to speak in English!"

Assumptions, perceptions, practicalities

Rosie is assuming that the 'foreign students' do not participate in discussions because they have little experience to draw on. There can be several reasons for this 'apparent reluctance to participate' as I indicated in Part One. It is often assumed to be due to language difficulties or to a lack of understanding of the non-verbal cues that are an intrinsic part of communication (Jones, 1999). But it may not be reluctance to participate at all, rather a belief that learning does not occur *through* discussion but by discussion following acquisition of 'knowledge'. Silence is thus an active process, socially positive and beneficial to higher levels of thinking and to deepening understanding. It is clear when we read Ying's perspective that she has a lot of professional experience. What is important is to find a range of different ways of encouraging and supporting her to share this experience with others.

Encouraging students whose first language is not English to speak together in the first session if they choose to do so enables them to become familiar with the discursive activities that can be threatening for those for whom such interaction is unfamiliar. Clearly though, as Ying says, this has to be balanced with recognition that one of the reasons international students give for choosing to study in the UK is to speak and improve their English. Ensuring that, as far as possible, there is always a first language English speaker in each small group helps to develop other students' confidence to speak in English. It is vital to be careful in one's own use of language and to provide opportunities for students to express any difficulties in understanding after the class (face-to-face or via email) if they do not feel brave enough to speak in front of others. At the same time, it is important to be mindful of research (Jones, 2001; Hellsten & Prescott, 2004) that suggests that lecturers who are first language English speakers often lower their level of language use in order to ensure that their students' learning is not adversely affected. Some students can perceive this practice as contrary to their expectations of improving their English proficiency and can feel marginalised and diminished. It needs to be balanced, therefore, with encouraging them to become familiar with more complex uses of language through judiciously chosen set texts that employ a range of writing styles.

Reading

It can be unhelpful to issue a directive to read a number of articles without specifying a rationale for asking students to do so. Difficulties with language and unfamiliarity with concepts, can present enormous obstacles for many students. I now devise a list of questions, designed to guide them through the reading, so that they are more able to grasp the salient points. Several students have told me that it can take half a day to read one article. I have felt guilty at provoking such levels of anxiety, believing that it was my responsibility to find more effective ways to help them read and understand. I shared this dilemma in conversation with a Taiwanese student, inviting suggestions on how to improve this practice. Her reply was that she saw this as her responsibility. She had chosen to come to the UK and therefore she needed to find a way to read the article. She added that reading it before the session gave her 'some knowledge 'and helped her to feel more confident in the class and in the discussion (Cortazzi & Jin, 1997). She liked the discussion. She would have liked 'more classes', to have more discussion. As Ying indicated

earlier, many non-UK postgraduate students are both surprised and disappointed by what they regard as relatively few contact hours in masters degrees (Gil & Katsara, 1999). Setting small group activities between each session encourages more contact between students, enables them to feel sufficiently prepared for the following meeting and to feel more confident to express opinions. Such activities reduce feelings of homesickness to which many students are very understandably prone (Volet & Ang, 1998) and enable intercultural understandings to develop. Lee's story below provides more examples of some of the strategies that can be used.

Lee

Lee, a Chinese student, came to see me for a tutorial. He was worried because, in most of his classes, British students were in the majority and it seemed to him that they dominated the sessions. The lecturer, also British, spoke very quickly, used lots of words that he did not recognise and seemed to ignore those students who did not have English as their first language. Lee's frustration was exacerbated because, when he read the handouts and recommended readings after each session, he realised that he was, in fact, very familiar with many of the concepts. He had a lot of relevant experience in China that he felt might be interesting to others but it seemed as though alternatives to the UK perspective were not welcome.

Lee's dilemma reflects that of many non-UK students who are seeking a more reciprocal dialogue with local academics and students so that the value of the many different realities and knowledges is recognised.

There is resistance to this endlessly speaking of the West as experts and as the ones with important knowledge, and a desire for reciprocal dialogue, for the recognition of other knowledges and experiences is expressed (Koehne, 2006: 255).

Lee is an experienced teacher in China and a very intelligent, articulate and committed postgraduate student. Fortunately, he was sufficiently confident to speak to the lecturer and to ask her if she could speak a little more slowly. He also asked her if she would give the key readings for each session beforehand or place them on the VLE (Virtual Learning Environment) Blackboard so that he could read them in his own time and thus feel more confident to participate in discussions. The lecturer made every effort to do this. The real breakthrough came, however, when students were giving feedback in a plenary session after having had discussions in small groups. A British student in Lee's group said that, in their group discussion, Lee had made some very interesting points that were very unusual and completely different from her own experience. She felt that others in the larger group would be interested to hear them. She then invited Lee to speak – which he did _ and from then onwards, having been invited to express his opinion, he found it easy to continue. It might be inferred that Lee was 'honouring the hierarchy (of the group), putting that before his "vision of the truth"' (Bond, 1991: 83). By inviting Lee to speak, his British colleague was recognising and valuing 'other knowledge and experience' (Koehne, 2006: 255), thus she opened up a rich, reciprocal dialogue from which many of the other students and the lecturer gained new knowledge.

"The international students see me as an expert. They rely on me to tell them what to do and what to read" *(a lecturer).*

I have resisted essentialised notions of asymmetrical relationships between students and teachers, but acknowledge that such relationships are conceptualised in diverse ways in different cultures (Ho, 2001; Carroll & Ryan, 2005; Prescott & Hellsten, 2005). I accept that I am perceived by many students as an expert and as a person with authority. Rather than seeking to dismantle such perceptions, I try and respect them. I do have authority and expertise and have learnt that it is important for me to recognise my authority. It is familiar to many of the people with whom I work, and, thus can lessen their anxiety when we first meet. I have, however, sought to achieve a balance between 'telling' students what to read and recognising that being faced with an extensive reading list or several articles without any direction can be overwhelming for them. Highlighting those texts that are highly recommended and providing copies of essential reading can be extremely helpful and begin to diminish anxieties.

"Why are we sitting in a circle?"

There is an old joke, "How do you recognise an adult educator at a party? She's the one moving the chairs into a circle". The circle is 'so sacred and reified in adult education as to be an unchallengeable sign of practitioners' democratic purity and learner centeredness' (Brookfield, 2005: 131). If you favour a discursive, experiential learning and teaching approach, then you may prefer seating to be arranged, as I do, without tables, so that group members can see each other's faces and can move easily into smaller groups for discussion and activities. Chairs with small writing tables attached eliminate the need for tables altogether and are common in many departments. Student-centred principles, many of which I continue to value, place the learner at the centre of the process and the lecturer as a facilitator, rather than a director, of that process. It is important to recognise, however, that there may be a 'more troubling and ambivalent reality…beneath the circle's democratic veneer' (Brookfield, 2005: 131). It has the potential to be painful and humiliating for those students who are conscious of their visible difference, of their linguistic ability, their accent or more simply are not expecting such an arrangement. Rearranging the chairs into a circle may not 'do away with power… [but] displace it and reconfigure it in different ways' (Usher & Edwards, 1994: 91). One solution is to explain to students the rationale for your arrangement, letting them know that if they prefer to use a table for note taking, there are tables in the room that they can use. Encouraging them to express any anxieties they may have by inviting a brief discussion of the environment at the beginning of the first meeting can also be useful. It follows principles of effective group dynamics by recognising the importance of the 'forming' stage (Tuckman, 1965) of the group. I explain my rationale for using discursive and experiential activities but strive to show awareness and sensitivity to other learning paradigms, drawing on teaching strategies from those paradigms to complement my own.

"I tell students to email me if they want a tutorial, but they rarely do. They're all adults and therefore they can't expect me to be chasing them" *(a lecturer).*

The notion of the personal tutor, if not unique to British higher education, is not so prevalent in many other educational systems. Many students have told me that they do not really understand the role of the personal tutor, nor what they can reasonably expect from the relationship with their tutor. Many institutions have a set of guidelines that govern personal tutoring and it is useful to point students in their direction and/or take all opportunities to explain the role – websites, handbooks, and orientation activities. The relationship between students and academics is, as I indicated earlier, conceptualised differently in different cultures and this can be confusing for students. Generally speaking, in the UK we tend to favour informal relationships, use of given names, and yet can seem to shun much contact outside of the classroom. For many students, this is quite the opposite of their previous experiences and, indeed, very different from how they would treat their own students. Several students have commented to me, somewhat sardonically, that they have taken courses with academics who claim to espouse a learner-centred approach in the classroom but, immediately the session is finished, they leave the room and are reluctant to engage in any further discussion. In such situations, students can be left feeling that there are few opportunities to ask questions that they would prefer not to ask in front of others. Given the approach of this paper with its emphasis on *not* making assumptions about others based on our own values and beliefs, I am reluctant to generalise. There is however, significant research that has been conducted on the teacher/student relationship, particularly in the Confucian-heritage cultures (see for example Jin & Cortazzi, 1998; Ho, 2001). Becoming familiar with such studies can illuminate why and how the teacher/student relationship in the UK can be confusing for some non-UK students. The relatively few hours of classroom contact time, our emphasis on personal responsibility for learning and the development of the autonomous learner are all practices that are informed by particular philosophies about effective learning that are informed by some of those conceptualisations that I summarised earlier. Once more, I am not suggesting that they are problematic, that is not the purpose of this publication, but we do need to be aware that, if this is our approach, it may be confusing for many students. At the very least, we can explain it to them but we can also articulate our awareness that it may be unfamiliar and that we are making efforts to embed different approaches into our own.

Here are some practical things to do with regard to tutorials:

■ Explain the role of the personal tutor.

■ Email students to remind them to come and see you.

■ Take a list of tutorial times along to the session and get them to sign up.

Be aware that students may drop in to see you unannounced, as is standard practice in many cultures. It is important, in my view, to give them a few minutes there and then and to agree a longer meeting when you have more time. In the UK, we make appointments to see people – a tradition that is not so prevalent in many other cultures. I can illustrate how I became aware of our passion for making appointments with a lighthearted anecdote.

A Taiwanese student asked me where I got my hair cut. She and her friends were travelling to hairdressers in London because they believed that

there weren't any in Bristol who would be able to cut their Asian hair. I have very straight hair and they liked my haircut. Quite innocently, I told them and recommended my stylist. On my next visit to the hairdresser, she told me that six Taiwanese women had turned up, wanting their hair to be cut by her. They had not made an appointment and expected people to be available. It had not occurred to me to tell them that they would have to make an appointment! I had assumed that our local custom of making appointments would be one with which they were familiar. It is such experiences that have helped me to become more careful about making assumptions about practices in other cultures. On a more serious note, one MEd student conducted research into Taiwanese students' use of the Student Counselling Service. One of the reasons given for their very low usage of the Service was the appointments system, which they found off-putting. One recommendation of this study was that the counselling service initiate a drop-in system in order to attract more international students.

"Their writing is descriptive rather than critical and they don't understand the concept of plagiarism"
(a lecturer).

The ability to think critically is considered to be an essential dimension of a university education. I am not suggesting that we abandon critical thinking, On the contrary, I am very much in favour of students developing their capacity to evaluate concepts that are mainly Western in origin and to consider their relevance in their own local contexts, cultural and professional. I do believe, however, that we need to think about what critical thinking means. As a

practice, it is as embedded in certain cultural codes as the other learning and teaching practices discussed in this paper. Critical thinking is about being able to apply theory to practice in a logical and cohesive way but it also derives from the Marxist traditions of examining historical and social 'realities' to uncover hidden forms of domination and exploitation (Vandermensbrugghe, 2004). I am not suggesting that we refrain from this academic practice but I am proposing that we do not assume it as universal and do not use it as a benchmark against which other practices are judged and found to be inferior. Critical thinking is a practice favoured in cultures where there is an emphasis on individual conflict and dissension rather than consensus and individual thought, where individuals are valued over community (Fox, 1994). In cultures where traditional knowledge is highly respected, the capacity to criticise and question is less important in the learning process. For example, a student from Taiwan once told me that she had trouble understanding why she needed to use words of her own when the words of the scholar she was 'quoting' seemed so much 'better' than any English words that she could use. It is also important to remember that 'critical thinking' is not unproblematic for local students who have the advantage of insider knowledge of context and language. Many of them also need to be supported to develop their ability to 'think critically'.

"We can't have an in depth discussion when there are international students in the group. They slow everything down"
(a British student).

Intercultural communication is complex enough but is rendered even more complex by the number of cultures represented. It cannot be assumed that because people look similar and share apparently similar cultural backgrounds that they will share assumptions, beliefs and values, nor can it be assumed that intercultural communication will just happen (Otten, 2000). Egege & Kutlieh (2004) highlight the difficulties many academics encounter in understanding and working effectively with different cultural paradigms, yet working effectively within a different cultural paradigm is expected of international students. Local students are also expected to understand what may be very different traditions. By being explicit about the diversity that is in the room and acknowledging that we may *all* experience difficulties and frustrations, people can be encouraged to learn, through dialogue, about their differences and similarities.

"And good teaching involves ethnography too," I add. "Over time you try to work your way through the barriers of unfamiliarity, distance, and difference toward a spirit of collaboration, understanding and openness to experience and participation. When we learn how to open ourselves to ourselves and to each other, we find it easier to drop some of our resistance to different ideas. I like to think of this as working towards ethnographic consciousness in the classroom that is personal, intimate and empathic" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000: 760).

Personal, intimate, empathic. Three words that characterise effective intercultural encounters, three words that can help us to be core players in the process of fostering sensitive learning and teaching in a multicultural higher education landscape.

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