

Internationalization of higher education – Teaching challenges in an international, multicultural classroom

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Abstract: The internationalization of higher education has intensified dramatically over the last fifteen years creating far reaching opportunities but also threats and limitations in respect with teaching practices. In this paper, problems related with the internationalization of higher education are discussed. More specifically, drawing upon the existing literature on the topic the discussion revolves around problems which may arise in a classroom due to different teaching and learning cultures as well as preconceived cultural traits.

From a teaching perspective it is important to discuss how the familiarity of a student with a teaching tradition can create obstacles in an international classroom and what solutions can be provided. In this respect, the potential challenges from internationalization but more importantly so the potential solutions to these challenges are clearly outlined and discussed with the aim of providing a reference point for teachers that want to draw upon this issue.

Key words: internationalization of higher education, multi-cultural classroom, teaching practices, culture

Introduction

In a period of increasing technological changes and intense globalization trends it would be unnatural not to trace changes in higher education. By the onset of the twenty first century, the internationalization of higher education has intensified dramatically creating far reaching opportunities but also threats and limitations in respect with teaching practices. Altbach (2007:290) argues that “the international activities of universities dramatically expanded in volume, scope, and complexity during the past two decades”. What is interesting is that the internationalization of higher education is manifested not only through the increasing number of students studying abroad but also by the emergence of international branch campuses where the inversed situation is observed with many faculty members (teachers and lecturers) coming from “abroad” (Gopal, 2011). In this paper, problems related with the internationalization of higher education are discussed. More specifically, drawing upon the existing literature on the topic the discussion revolves around problems which may arise in a classroom due to different teaching and learning cultures as well as preconceived cultural traits.

Based on data from UNESCO, during the period 2000-2012 university enrollment of internationally mobile students¹ has almost doubled rising from 2 million to more than 4 million students. Additionally, it is estimated that these international students represent approximately 2% of all tertiary enrolments globally.

When looking at the regional variation of international students enrollments, the top destination countries are the United States and the United Kingdom accounting for approximately 30% in total enrolments in 2012 (UNESCO, 2015). More importantly, based on UNESCO, the main countries of origin are China, India, S. Korea and Germany. In fact, Asian students account for 53% of all students that study abroad (OECD, 2013). Based on this information it becomes almost self-evident that the internationalization in higher education will inevitably create teaching problems related with language barriers, different teaching cultures and different learning styles.

Knight (1999: 16 cited in Gopal, 2011) regards the internationalization of higher education as “the process of integrating an international/intercultural dimension into the teaching, research and service functions of the institution”. In this short paper, the main focus will be placed on those teaching functions which can be applied in international and intercultural classroom environments.

The aim of the current paper is to discuss these bottlenecks which may arise in a classroom primarily due to students’ attachment with specific teaching cultures and learning styles and to a lesser extend discuss problems related with language barriers. From a teaching perspective it is important to discuss how the familiarity of a student with a teaching tradition can create obstacles in an international classroom and what solutions can be provided. Entwisle (2009) refers to the differences between students coming from southern countries in Europe and those coming from Northern countries while a similar dichotomy is portrayed in pedagogics literature between students coming from Eastern (South East Asian) countries and Western countries (Chalmers and Volet, 2006).

¹ International students are considered those who cross a national border to study and are not residents or citizens of the destination country

Teaching challenges in a multicultural classroom

Table 1 Summary of Socratic Versus Confucian Traditions

	Western/Socratic	Eastern/Confucian
Culture (Hofstede)	Low power distance (Individualist)	High power distance (Collectivist)
Attitude to knowledge	Extending/Speculative transforming	Conserving/ Reproducing
Academic approach	Divergent	Convergent
Learning styles for success	Deep Strategic?	Surface Rote/Superficial Strategic?

Source: Kingston and Forland, 2008:207

A basis for the discussion on challenges by the internationalization of the classroom is provided in Table 1. In pedagogics literature, such a (simplistic) dichotomy between Western and Eastern teaching cultures is the most common one. Table 1, is found in Kingston and Forland (2008) and serves as an illustration of the over simplistic comparison between Western and Eastern teaching traditions. As the authors stress, much of the pedagogics research during the 1980s and 1990s was based on this kind of dichotomy when trying to describe the students' different learning cultures. Having as a starting point two distinct philosophical traditions, this deterministic approach created different expectations between students from Western and Eastern countries.

As regards students that come from S. East Asian countries and study in Western Universities, Chalmers and Volet (1997) identify different conceptions which characterize them. In particular, it is commonly conceived that they tend to employ more often rote learning and memorization practices, their interaction in the classroom is relatively limited, they do not open up to form groups with native students and that they do not develop much of a critical thinking and analysis. Chalmers and Volet (1997) regard these traits as misconceptions and based on the case of S. East Asian students in Australia, argue that they are actually false. Many researchers in pedagogics literature regard these attributes as misconceptions rather than reality and stress that in terms of performance, international students, and specifically students from S. East Asian countries tend to perform as well as the native ones (Biggs, 2003; Chalmers and Volet, 1997; Kingston and Forland, 2008).

Although it is debated whether the different cultures are actually a "problem" or a deficit in students' performance, their mere existence can potentially pose challenges in teaching practices. As argued by Gabb (2006:363), "the social dynamics of mixed cultural groups are by definition different from those that are monocultural". The different learning and teaching styles foreign students are attached with can potentially create problems when it comes to teaching. It is thus worth discussing these issues and noting potential solutions. To put it simply, although it is ambiguous whether the factor of cultural background is overestimated (Leung, 2006, Tatar, 2005) or underestimated (Biggs, 2003), I think that the mere possibility of having an effect in teaching makes it worth discussing. Nevertheless, I consider it important to stress that attributing specific characteristics to certain students' ethnicities serves mainly the creation of stereotypes and distracts the attention from the potential challenges which can arise in an international classroom and can be based solely on multiculturalism itself.

Which are the potential challenges?

After having provided a brief discussion on the extent by which cultural differences matter in an international teaching environment, it is important to refer more specifically to the relevant problems which exist and can affect teaching partly disregarding any ethnical aspects of it.

Thus, turning to the discussion of the particular teaching problems related with the internationalization of the classroom, Griffiths et al. (2005: 276) use the term “learning shock” in order to refer “to experiences of acute frustration, confusion and anxiety experienced by some students... [that] find themselves exposed to unfamiliar learning and teaching methods, bombarded by unexpected and disorienting cues and subjected to ambiguous and conflicting expectations”. Although to a great extent this shock is dependent on the individual student, a multicultural teaching and learning environment can definitely have a significant effect.

Accordingly, Crose (2011) when referring to the internationalization of the classroom identifies three main challenges related with *language barriers, different learning styles and the preconceived cultural traits*. Altogether, these realities pose significant limitations to teaching and lecturing practices while they also affect the assessment methods which can be used in a classroom. At the same time however, Gopal (2011) stresses the fact that many faculty members are not sufficiently prepared to confront the challenges which may arise in an international and intercultural classroom. Although her case is mainly referring to transnational teaching, the challenges are equally applicable when talking about transnational studying. The reason is that there is a similar cross-cultural environment. As it is argued, the lecturers and teachers have only a basic training based on the different learning styles which they might be confronted with but more importantly they are not well prepared for negotiating with other cultures (Gopal, 2011).

Turning to more specific challenges, one of the main problems with teaching in an international classroom can be *limited participation*. International students may have a different perception of the lecture practice and thus react differently in a more “open” classroom environment of for instance a western classroom. They may think that it is not necessary to disrupt the lecture in order to ask questions as they deem the teacher's ideas and perceptions as authoritative and respectful (Chalmers and Volet, 1997; Crose, 2011). Another reason for limited participation could be a limited command of language which may discourage students from expressing themselves publicly. Even more so if the foreign students are a minority in the classroom.

Other problems are related with *plagiarism* as international students may find it difficult to adjust quickly into new assessment realities where the writing of essays is central and plagiarism is given special attention. Kingston and Forland (2008) case study has found that Asian students in a London university regarded plagiarism rules in the UK stricter than in their own countries. However, it needs to be mentioned that their statements support the stereotypical misconception, which sees plagiarism as part of the Confucian tradition. The truth is that the students also considered plagiarism as a disapproved practice in their home countries but that it was not penalized so strongly.

Another problem with which a teacher or lecturer may be confronted with concerns the *formation of groups* in an intercultural classroom. I consider this to be an important challenge which undermines the ultimate goal and objective of an international classroom which is to promote interactive knowledge through a multicultural setting. It is generally believed that students who share similar cultural and educational backgrounds will tend to form groups together avoiding an interaction with native ones (Chalmers and Volet, 1997, Arkoudis, 2006).

Overall, these more specific problems, if not taken under consideration and treated properly, can affect the motivation and self-image of the international student and hinder hers/his academic

success. The lack of participation in the classroom or the formation of groups with always the same people that share similar cultural traits can foster the emergence of stereotypes among the students and thus an unwillingness to open up and interact with the “others”. It is thus important that the students do not feel isolated from their local peers and the host culture (Kingston and Forland, 2008).

What are potential solutions to these challenges?

After the brief presentation of some challenges which can arise in an international classroom it is worth discussing what can be done to address them. Gopal (2011) provides an extensive discussion on the three core elements which can facilitate the acquisition of “intercultural competence” for a teacher or lecturer. These are based on Deardorff’s process model of intercultural competence and center on *attitudes, knowledge and comprehension and skills*. As mentioned previously, Gopal’s research mainly refers to transnational faculty members, meaning lecturers and teachers that teach in a country other than their own, rather than teaching transnational students. However, except that the suggestions are equally applicable in both contexts I also consider them relevant on a personal level since I will be teaching in a country (Sweden) other than my own.

Starting with *attitudes*, it mainly refers to the recognition from the teacher that she/he operates in a multicultural classroom. In this respect it is important to show respect and value other cultures but also self-reflect on hers/his motivations for teaching. As regards *knowledge and comprehension*, Gopal (2011) refers to the possibility in which faculty members receive some kind of cultural mentoring in order to become acquainted with potential cultural differences. Cultural self-awareness, some knowledge of how gender roles are viewed in different cultures and improving ones language skills are deemed as important. Finally, *skills* mainly refer to the individual’s ability to self-reflect on her/his role in the classroom and choosing between being a lecturer or a teacher. Also, it refers to communication skills and specifically ones capacity to “negotiate different cultures” by entering into a meaningful dialog which overcomes misconceptions and fosters the building of collective meaning. An important step towards this aim is being an active listener (watch and rephrase when necessary).

Turning to more specific solutions from what has been argued thus far, it is evident that the internationalization of higher education implies a level of uncertainty regarding the level of understanding achieved between teacher/lecturer and students. It is the same kind in uncertainty that leads to the “learning shock” that Griffiths et al. (2005) describe. For this reason, one basic solutions to this problem could be achieved through what Gabb (2006:363) calls a “getting to know” strategy. Early on, from the first seminar, the students and the teacher should be allowed to present themselves. Additionally, the lecturer could pose some introductory exploratory questions in order to assess the students previous knowledge on the topic/theme to be lectured and in this way “break the ice” within the group of students.

Faculty members can also play a central role in the *formation of groups* in a way forcing collaboration between students that may not necessarily share similar educational and cultural backgrounds. As proposed by Arkoudis (2006) it is important that you spend some time thinking about the composition of the groups. Small groups that consider the composition balance between local and foreigner students with clearly defined tasks that expect every person to participate in the group work can remedy the problem. Nevertheless, it should be kept in mind that even these practices are not deterministically effective as again a lot depends on the individual student’s motivations and conceptions or misconceptions of hers/his peers. On that note, Griffiths et al. (2005:287) study has found that one of the most commonly perceived causes for a student’s “learning shock” has been due to working in syndicate groups and especially groups dominated by “assertive native-speakers”.

In order to foster *classroom participation*, a special focus can be placed on the teaching language (Chalmers and Volet, 1997). For instance, when it comes to the use of English and the active participation in the classroom, the teacher/ lecturer should let the students know that the use of correct language is not an aim in itself. It is rather more important that she/he feels relaxed and confident to express herself/himself and engage in the classroom as this is valued and appreciated more highly.

Finally, as argued by Orell (2006), *feedback to learning* is considered very important for the advancement of the student's learning. From the study by Kingston and Forland (2008) it was observed that international students needed to have more detailed feedback and one suggestion was getting it in a written form. Although time consuming, it is an effort which might help students relocate themselves in the new cultural-teaching environment they operate and possibly provide them with answers on whether they are referencing and drafting their papers properly. After all, the empirical investigation by Orell (2006) has observed that teachers do not always achieve what they think that they are achieving, making the need for more constructive feedback strategies even more imperative. Additionally, it is important that the teacher or lecturer is aware of any *support facilities* in the institution which are primarily directed towards international students. Problems related with plagiarism or the correct use of English language are usually addressed by these centers so the students need to be aware of them and know the ways they can assist them. These support facilities may also assist international students with psychological distress that they may experience. Gabb (2006) argues that although international students may perform equally well as the local students, they do not experience the same levels of stress and frustration. Due to societal, teaching and learning cultural differences they need to spend more energy into adapting into the new reality.

Conclusion and discussion

To conclude, I trust that efforts to combat teaching discrepancies that arise from the internationalization of the classroom should have as a starting point the building of good teaching practices that address all and should not target specific international students – a strategy which would reinforce stereotypes and any isolation feelings (Pygmalion effect).

The aim of a teacher/lecturer that acts in an international setting needs to promote intercultural learning. She/he should aim towards a “synergy of educational cultures” (Kingston and Forland, 2008) where the expectations of international students (shaped by their different cultures and philosophies) are matched by the local institution's academic rules and cultural norms. When studying abroad, especially for a short period of time, students should not be expected to replace their cultures with those in the hosting country. On the contrary, the purpose is to familiarize with the new culture and through a process of adaptation and synthesis, manage to acquire the necessary knowledge.

As regards the future prospects of the internationalization of the classroom and teaching, a recent study by Bedenlier and Zawacki-Richter (2015) discusses the impacts from the internationalization of higher education on faculty members. There are some interesting notes which provide an insight into the future opportunities and challenges in teaching.

According to the study, probably one of the most positive developments will continue to be the expansion of different perspectives in teaching and the expanding “opportunities for personal development”, both driven by an increasingly diversified student audience. Teachers are more and more inclined to adopt new teaching styles and methods and rethink their approaches to teaching while there is an increased need to acquire a second language other than English (Bedenlier and Zawacki-Richter, 2015). On the other hand, future challenges from the internationalization of higher

education might arise in the future from what Bedenlier and Zawacki-Richter (2015:13) call the “Anglo-American hegemony of perspectives and structures” or in other words an increasing specialization to particular teaching styles and cultures which contradict tendencies of “heterogeneity and pluralization”. These forces are usually coupled with increasing competition within the academic community which may hamper cooperative - knowledge spreading efforts.

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