

Teaching in the Global Academy: Challenges and Critiques

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Globalization, most sociologists agree, is not a new phenomenon. Its phase in the late 20th century and early 21st century, however, is recognized now as one of the more transformative periods in human history—what Anthony Giddens (2011) has characterized as a “runaway world.” In the last few decades, there has scarcely been a domain of human activity untouched by these forces—economic systems, mass media and communication, cultural flows, the movement of people. A global site as intensive as any has of course been our universities; indeed, it is these “runaway” forces that have been responsible for so many of the changes witnessed on our campuses in recent decades. They are evident, for example, in the considerably more diverse student cohorts who now participate in university education, along with the rich variety of languages and cultures they bring to their studies. Dramatic changes have also been seen in what is taught on programs, including the push within many disciplines to systematically “internationalize curricula.” Along with new content are radically new ways of delivering programs, as digital communications become more and more sophisticated at replicating—and also reconfiguring—the learning experiences of the traditional classroom. Finally, these forces have also brought about new types of collegial relationships as institutions and academics reach out across borders to connect and collaborate on a great variety of educational and research enterprises. Versions of these changes have been experienced in many parts of the world. In my home country, Australia, for example, such has been the scale of these developments that international education has emerged in recent times as one the nation’s largest export industries.

But while global forces have reshaped university education in all sorts of interesting and dynamic ways, it is not to say that there are not issues and challenges associated with these developments. Frederic Jameson (2000) has suggested that globalization is in many respects a euphemism for “anglocization.” The dominance of the anglosphere, according to this view, has meant that global capital—whether this be of an economic, cultural or educational kind—is unavoidably spread in highly uneven ways. Within higher education, this raises issues of power, privilege and potential inequity in the ways that different cultural groups engage with their studies, and in the rewards and successes they get to enjoy. Arguably, nowhere is this more evident than on the less-than-level playing field where first and second language students must compete in the assessment and evaluation of their academic abilities. So, while global forces have provided students with unprecedented access to what were once largely exclusive and culturally homogenous institutions, the view of many is that considerable work still needs to be done to address these “asymmetries” and to truly value the diversity that is now such a part of our institutions (Rizvi, 2000). A related critique is the view that globalization, in tandem with its ideological bedfellow neo-liberalism, has led sadly to an increasing commodification of higher education, so that students, especially our

international students, are valued nowadays, it seems, as much for their capacity to contribute to institutional coffers, as their ability to contribute to the intellectual and social life of our communities.

Thus, in such developments, one detects a permanent tension within academia about the consequences and putative benefits of the globalizing of our institutions. On the one hand, there is much excitement about the opportunities and possibilities it brings, but on the other, a permanent critical concern about these processes, especially the way they position our students and impact upon their study and life experiences. Many of these issues are addressed—both directly and indirectly—in the impressive collection of articles and reports that make up the current volume of *Double Helix*.

The opening article, entitled “Bridging the Divide: Integrating Composition and Second Language Writing Approaches to Transfer,” by Mary McCall is a review piece that provides a very thoughtful summary of research in these two parallel areas—first-language (L1) composition research and Second Language Writing (SLW) research. The focus of the review is the different understandings that have emerged in these fields regarding the transfer of language and writing skills to new contexts of knowledge. The motivation for McCall’s work is the observation that these two strands have proceeded in “more or less separate directions,” and that there is a strong need, she believes, for the more dominant paradigm of L1 composition research to better connect with the understandings provided by SLW. She points to a number of rich areas peculiar to the latter field, including contrastive rhetoric, translingualism, and the role of “identity” in the development of student writing. This integration is necessary not only for the additional insights provided about composition processes generally, but also because there is a need, she suggests, to more fully address and to value “the learning experiences of different types of students within the increasingly globalized university.” The article concludes with a number of recommendations both for future research and for pedagogy. These include the need to better understand (and also to facilitate) the transition experiences of second-language writers moving from university to work contexts, and also to consider how a focus on “standard” L1 Englishes in the university works to disadvantage students by “failing to recognize the increasing role of multiple Englishes and languages more generally” in our increasingly global communities.

A key area of linguistic disadvantage identified by Esther Breuer in her article “Effects of Planning and Language on Constructing Patterns of Meaning” is in the domain of international academic publishing. As she notes, even though many journals proclaim an interest in receiving contributions from researchers from diverse backgrounds (and insist that manuscripts from second-language [L2] authors do not necessarily have to meet L1 levels of English), the experience of many second language writers is that their work is often rejected on the basis of “non-standard” grammar and genre. The purpose of her study was to explore pedagogical methods that may better facilitate L2 writing processes, and ultimately enable greater publishing success for non-Anglophone researchers. The study exposed a group of L1 German students to a range of differentiated writing processes and writing tasks in both German and English to discover which afforded the better writing outcomes. The notable result was that different writing processes used in each language seemed to elicit different outcomes, particularly in the quality of the ideas produced. Thus a “free-writing” approach to essay planning worked well for students operating in their first language (German), but less so in English. The

message to take from this is that, as teachers, we need to be careful about applying too readily L1 pedagogies to L2 contexts, a point also suggested by McCall in her paper.

Issues of communication and interaction across cultures is the concern of Robert Engle and Andrew Delohery in their article “Cultural Intelligence’s Impact on Cross-Cultural Problem-Solving Performance.” They begin by noting that in an increasingly globalized world, the ability of individuals to negotiate issues and conflicts in culturally-diverse environments is crucial nowadays in much professional activity. They explore this idea through the construct of “cultural intelligence” (CQ), an attribute proposed relatively recently in the psychology literature. In their empirical study, they investigated how much students’ possession of this quality, as determined by an established measure, correlated with their ability to analyze and develop solutions to a cross-culturally related problem situation. While performance on this task could be attributed in part to CQ factors, another factor identified was simply the level of education of participants. The implications the authors draw from this is that curricula would benefit from the integration of forms of cross-cultural training. Equally important, however, is the need generally to encourage high standards of education, including the development of the broad critical thinking abilities that are necessarily entailed in this.

The remaining papers in the volume are reports from the field. The first of these, entitled “A Cross-Cultural Collaboration Between U.S. and Kazakhstani Students,” by Sarah Summers and Brett Craig, is a very specific instance of the type of cross-cultural education advocated by the writers of the previous paper. The paper is an account of a most interesting transnational program the two authors developed, involving STEM-discipline students from these two countries working together via digital technologies on a range of collaborative communication-based tasks. These tasks seemed particularly well-devised; one was a Photo Story, where students exchanged a selection of photos that “best represented them and their values”; another was a Media Analysis task involving comparison of how a particular international event was reported in the media of both countries; the final task was a reflective activity requiring students to give an account of the intercultural experiences they had been engaged in. The learning appeared to be particularly rich, with students interrogating and challenging cultural stereotypes, gaining an appreciation of the variable perspectives that different cultures bring to global events, and also negotiating the many practical challenges created by the situation of having to collaborate intensively at a distance. In their work, the authors identify an element of critical thinking they see as being particularly relevant to intercultural contexts, namely an ability “to suspend judgment in favor of first exploring and understanding.” The program, as described, seemed a most effective way of fostering such an outlook.

The final report, “Utilizing Critical Writing Exercises to Foster Critical Thinking Skills in Diverse First-Year Undergraduate Students and Prepare Them for Life Outside University,” by Sandra Abegglen, Tom Burns, and Sandra Sinfield, also draws strongly on the equity concerns that arise out of our increasingly culturally diverse classrooms. The authors note that while critical thinking is a fundamental aim of our educational processes, the strictures and prescriptions of these modes of thinking often serve only to silence the voices of students from non-traditional and culturally diverse backgrounds, or “to eradicate the diversity of the diverse,” as the authors describe it. Employing a Freirean framework in their teaching, the authors describe a range of interesting critical

writing exercises they have used aimed at strongly valuing students' emerging but tentative academic voices. These include setting "free writing" exercises—intended to "remove the unconsciously internalised academic censor"—or allowing students to express ideas outside the traditional genres of academic study, including 3D artefacts, animations, and poetry. The authors also suggest that to foster a genuine criticality, lecturers also need to "open up their own practice to critique." There is the suggestion in the authors' account that this was happening within their own program, with some students initially skeptical about some of the methods used. It seems, however, that over the course of the program, students were won over to these ideas. In this way, the article effectively raises the dilemma faced by many of us in our teaching nowadays—how to reconcile the diverse needs of our students with the often exacting requirements of study within the disciplines.

Postscript

I write this editorial at what feels like a quite dramatic moment in world affairs—as American citizens go to the polls to elect a new president. While, where I sit in Melbourne, the world of U.S. electioneering can seem arcane and remote, there is no doubt that this particular election has gripped people throughout the global community, indeed seemingly unlike any other that has gone before. This is for a variety of reasons, but one that certainly stands out is the way that the contest has brought to the surface a very different set of attitudes towards the globalist era—what can be characterized as a strongly emergent "nationalist" orientation towards the world. Versions of this new type of thinking have been evident arguably on both sides of the U.S. campaign; and contagion-like, such thinking is fast entering public discourses in a growing number of countries and jurisdictions around the world. In Australia, for example, we have seen issues about borders become an all-consuming—and also highly divisive—motif in the nation's political debate.

It is difficult to know how enduring this new mood will be and how much it will reshape our societies and our cultures. One feels, however, whatever the outlook, that our universities—whose missions are tied to the values of inclusiveness and critique—will have an important role to play in both engaging and questioning this new nationalist spirit. It is a reassuring thing that such themes are strongly affirmed—and also explored in such engaging ways—in this issue of *Double Helix*.

References

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