Faculty’s Response to Globally Divergent Thinking in American College Classrooms: An Autoethnographic Reflection

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ABSTRACT

The paper is an autoethnographic reflection of my experiences as a graduate student in two Midwestern universities. I argue that although “internationalization at home” remains the only easily affordable route to bringing global knowledge to domestic students’ doorsteps, higher education institutions are not effectively exploiting the advantage of large international student population to speed up the internationalization of their curricula in the U.S. The paper offers suggestions for designing a globally responsive pedagogy which is paramount to “internationalization at home.”

According to the Association of International Educators (2012), there were about 764,495 foreign students enrolled in the U.S. institutions of higher learning in 2011-2012 academic year. These students and their dependents brought approximately $21.81 billion into the economy. Contrast the international student enrollment in the U.S. to 270,604 U.S. students who studied abroad for credit in 2009-2010 (International Institute of Education, 2011). As the U.S. higher education institutions experience this exponential increase in their international student population, their faculty is not doing enough to harness and leverage the former’s perspectives to the benefit of the domestic student population, who, in most cases, may never travel abroad to learn those perspectives (Harrison & Peacock, 2010; Teekens, 2007; Wachter, 2003). There is a lack of cross-cultural competencies in graduates of many college disciplines which is attributed to college faculty’s marginal ecumenical expertise (Boyle-Baise, 1996). Zeichner (1996) posits that “most of the academics who must be counted on to improve the preparation of teachers for diversity are as lacking in interracial and intercultural experiences as their students” (p. 138). As higher education’s interest for international education grows, it is important for faculty members to become more globally and culturally responsive in their pedagogy (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995). International students bring a wealth of knowledge pertaining to politics, science, technology, and social studies in a way that if well exploited, it could have a multiplier effect on their host country’s economy and livelihood (Ryan & Viete, 2009; Ladd & Ruby, 1999). Although they are coming to learn from us, we can also learn from them while they are enrolled in our classes. The overarching research question here is how do academics design and teach courses in a way that benefits both international and domestic students in terms of broadening their horizons and frames of reference?

Drawing from my personal experiences as a graduate student in two Midwestern universities, this paper foregrounds the importance of cross-cultural and global competence through globally responsive pedagogy. It is an autoethnographic reflection of my own experiences as an international graduate student and as an instructor of both international and domestic students in teacher education programs. Higher education, as it is often the case, is supposed to be a place where students acquire literacy skills that help them read the world better than people with no college education. Therefore, it needs to ensure that universities are producing well-rounded graduates who are ready for a globally competitive workforce.

SITUATION

Given that many faculty members remain unfamiliar with the literature pertaining to diversity and world cultures, they tend to evade or shun cross-cultural perspectives surreptitiously or highhandedly. After all, how can one expect them to utilize globally responsive pedagogy in their instructional practice when they are unfamiliar with the concept? In reference to cross-cultural incompetence of teachers, Howard (2006) concludes that they can’t teach what they don’t know. This paucity of knowledge about the concepts of culturally and globally responsive pedagogy has an adverse ramification on higher education faculty’s curricular and instructional designs. It, sometimes, leads to their propensity to emit deficit thinking about their international students’ academic abilities; thereby triggering adventent or inadvertent proclivity to assimilate and deculturalize them. When academics spar-
ingly draw from their international students to inform curriculum and instruction, the implicit message they are sending to the rest of the students is that the international students’ knowledge is invalid and deficient (Ryan, 2005). U.S. students already have enough of negative imagery about cultures that are not part of the American macro-culture. Not exposing them to global perspectives only further reinforces stereotypes about unfamiliar world cultures. A faculty’s disregard of the international students’ perspectives can only be to the detriment of the entire class given that reciprocal learning which is supposed to be endemic in college classrooms is short-circuited and teaching is relegated to one-dimensional way of knowing which is the instructor’s.

In the graduate schools, I used to be the only international student from my continent in each of my classes. I was, sometimes due to my accent, sometimes due to country, but never for the entire continent. Sometimes I was an extrovert in one class and an introvert in another irrespective of the class size. It all depended on professors’ choices of readings and attitudinal responses to my perspectives on issues being discussed. I had taught French and English in secondary schools in my country of birth for eight years prior to immigrating to the U.S.; and upon arrival, I was volunteering in my children’s school and was serving as a substitute teacher from time to time in a predominantly Latino public high school. So, I had a dual frame of reference to draw from in class discussions pertaining to curriculum and instruction. In classes where I thought my perspective was valued, I was very engaged in class discussions and my peers would miss me whenever I missed a class for a conference. On the contrary, some of my professors who were not culturally and globally responsive would remember me as a person of few words in their own classes. It is worth stating that in such a situation pedagogy is preceded by cultural de-capsulation. This explains why professors who are already versed with diversity issues are more likely going to be globally responsive than those who are not.

Making a case for globally responsive curriculum

With the digital revolution that sprang up in the latter half of the 20th century, the world is fast becoming a global village. There is a need for a revolution of human mentalities about cross-cultural knowledge in order to harness the socioeconomic benefits of a global village. Although there has been a spike in the study-abroad programs in Western universities, the scourge of cultural absolutism is impeding our ability to learn from other cultures. A ten-hour “tourist” study-abroad (with no intense pre- and post-conference) can English.

Gay (2010) defines culturally responsive teaching as the application of a given cultural knowledge of diverse students as well as their prior experiences to inform teaching. I will define globally responsive pedagogy as an approach to teaching that involves leveraging worldwide funds of knowledge to design instructional and curricular materials in a given curriculum. One important way to prepare students for an interconnected world is to help them understand how the world works and why it works that way by infusing a plethora of perspectives into the curriculum.

Understanding world Englishes

Given that the degree of English language proficiency of college students, especially graduate students, determines their academic success in the U.S. and most other English-speaking universities around the world (Litowtz, 1993), academics would need to be proficient in the World Englishes to facilitate cross-cultural communication. They would also need to be proficient in World Englishes in order not to grade international students down on their papers on the basis of lexical and grammatical differences emanating from British English, which may be significantly dissimilar to American English. It is worth noting that owing to the legacy of colonialism, British English remains the most authoritative Standard English used in many English-speaking countries outside the United States. Thus, it is very likely that, a good number of international students studying in the U.S. are more versed with British English than American English, even when they are coming from non-English-speaking countries. For academics to circumvent confusion and optimize communication, it is important for them to familiarize themselves with other world Englishes, especially the British English, which is still more widely used around the world than the American English. Here are some examples of lexical differences between the two standards:

**American English**

- Labor
- Learn (past tense)
- Pants
- Gas
- Sidewalk
- Truck
- Elevator

**British English**

- Labour
- Learnt (past tense)
- Trousers
- Petrol
- Pavement
- Windscreen
- Lorry
- Lift

The list is not exhaustive; it is a mere snapshot of a long list of lexical differences between British English and American English.

In addition to the examples in the foregoing table, there are many socially, culturally, and geographically driven idoms that would not initially make sense to international students until they are explained. For example, in a statement like, “All has pushed his media literacy grant proposal to the back burner,” there is a cultural assumption that the interlocutor, in addition to understanding the denotative meaning of the word “burner,” is familiar with a four-burner stove which is mundane in U.S. households. Researching on the geographic and sociolinguistic backgounds of international students is an important prelude.
Designing a curriculum as “window and mirror” As Styke (1996) posited, “basic to a Liberal Arts education is the understanding that there is more than one way to see the world; hence, a balanced program insists that the student enter into the patterning of various disciplines, looking at reality through various “window frames” (p.39). In order to challenge the students' points of view, faculty must ensure their students to think beyond their comfort zones, higher education courses need to be conceptualized from the “window” and “mirror” frames (Styke, 1996). Mirror curriculum provides content that reflects one’s life experiences and prior knowledge while window curriculum introduces one to unfamiliar content constructed from the perspective of the “other”. Balanced curricular perspectives require introducing students to content materials that enable them to look through the window frames to see the other social realities that have heretofore been unfamiliar to them and vice versa. Although both require faculty to do well when reading materials and class discussions mirror their past experiences, it is vital for them to see through the window frames in order to understand the realities of other people. To provide window and mirror experiences for both international students and domestic students, faculty need to infuse global content materials into their locally designed courses. Currently, U.S. liberal college course contents are representative of U.S. students’ mirror frames while that same content serve as a window frame for international students. For more meaningful learning to occur, students need to be exposed to both mirror (self) and window (other) frames. One simple way to go about this approach is to build choice in a course design by assigning common readings and choice readings (Shepard, 2008). Common reading, in this context, entails general readings assigned to the entire class while choice readings offer the opportunity for students to propose reading from their own countries. The combination of common and choice readings ensures that prior experiences are helping every student to make new knowledge more meaningful and unforgettable.

If Liberal Arts College course contents mostly mirror life experiences of our domestic students, then we are not preparing them for the increasingly globally competitive world economies. International students who start off college in the U.S. just as monocultural as their U.S. counterparts, are more likely to graduate with more bicultural skills, leaving their U.S. peers just as monocultural as they started off some years prior. The reason attributed to the cultural disinvestment is that the international students are more likely to be exposed to the “window” curriculum which is a “mirror” curriculum to the domestic students. If both groups of students were exposed to window and mirror curricula, they would all graduate with a reasonable degree of multicultural and global skills. Inasmuch as students can be attracted to course contents that reflect their background experiences, they equally enjoy readings that talk about specific issues pertaining to societies that are not their own. As Christine Styke (1996) puts it, “Young people are often curious about those who differ from themselves (p.151).” Although they may, sometimes, not collide that point of view, it is important as their own, continuous exposure to myriad of points of view can lay the groundwork for a more tolerant and respectful national and world citizenship. Helping international students adapt to the culture of U.S. education by way of accommodating their needs (Ladd & Ruby, 1999) is a laudable goal in itself but ensuring that there is a mutual exchange of knowledge between domestic students and international students should be the target for all academics. Thus, it is academically vital to involve domestic and international students in selecting some of the reading materials for a course (Sleetor, 2008).

A major benefit to a potential course content that is in-fused with window and mirror perspectives is that more international students could become more actively involved in class discussions. Language barrier is not generally the only obstacle to international students’ voicelessness. Lack of mirror frames in the curriculum can also cause anxiety and can lead to apathy as well as lack of confidence to express oneself. It is very hard for these students to connect with the course discourse on a topic that is unfamiliar and unrelated to their past discourse as it was the case with me. Discourse in this context is a “plural set of cultural practices or culturally appropriate ways of knowing, believing, acting, thinking, reading, writing, and listening”(Li, 2010, p.42). Exposing the international students to a curriculum that also mirrors their experiences could be very beneficial for them to venture into the “window” territory given that they develop assertive skills as they begin to draw from their personal (mirror) experiences to understand the “other”. Cognitive development is also fostered during class interaction that are beaded with mirror and window frames. Seeking to make meaning of the world should be a reciprocal process involving every student in a school setting. In this process, locutors and interlocutors seek to appropriate each other’s ideas and ideas (Bakhtin, 1981) refers to this process as “authoring the self”. He argues that words are always half someone else’s because they often carry embedded perspectives of interlocutors from which they were derived and subconsciously appropriated. Thus, when students of various national backgrounds find themselves in one classroom, they have a lot to gain cognitively and linguistically, as educators provide them the interlocking pavers to negotiate value systems and worldviews. Hence, it is critical for faculty to recognize the notion that they and their students may be products of different cultures with different worldviews resulting from different historic, religious, axiological, and epistemological exposures. Such recognition will help shape their judgment on what counts as knowledge and thus, should be included in the course syllabus.

CONCLUSION

Global competence is increasingly indispensable in this 21st century for academics. There are two main ways of achieving this global competence (especially in teacher education programs) which are “internationalization at home” (Teckens, 2007) and study abroad. However, the responsibilities of “internationalization at home” lie squarely in the hands of academics who have to deliberate- ly conceptualize a globally responsive curriculum, as well as instruction, in every course that they are called upon to teach as well as see globally minded students as they be or she is “using the presence of international students to see intercultural learning, by providing alternative per- spectives and illustrative examples from other countries and cultures” (Harrison & Peacock, 2002, p.2). Ensure intercultural learning, in this case, should neither only fo- cus on the countries represented in the class nor should it be tokenized and superficialized by limiting a global curriculum only to food, culture, countries, festivals, and folklore (Banks, 2002; Sleetor & Grant, 2002). Whether U.S. students choose to gain global com- petence through study abroad option or not, their local college courses should be able to instill the global compe- tence in them effectively. If globally responsive pedagogy is not yet a common prac- tice in many college classrooms across the country, it is as a result of a lack of inclination on the part of the professors, as well as the absence of a purposeful inclusive planning that is suitable for onward pedagogical application in their respective syllabi. Every student can tell when they are not personalized either by their instructor or their peers. Ryan & Viete (2009) re- ported international students in an Australian university complained about domestic students tuning out when it is international students’ turn to talk. Students [in class] have not the patience to hear us, to stay and listen, to put some attention, while we must do this for them” (p.389). Another student who had experienced teaching in her country of birth prior to embarking on her graduate studies in the U.S., had the feeling that no one cared about her perspective in class discussions. As a matter of fact, universities and their faculty have to understand that a majority of students will not travel abroad to acquire international experience for many rea- sons ranging from lack of funds, lack of interest, to family
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