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Critical Perspectives

The ontology of teaching in transcultural contexts: Four voices of competence

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ABSTRACT

In the growing body of research on globalisation of education, many studies focus on epistemology: knowledge and skills underlying the 'doing' of teaching practices. Herein, however, the ontological aspect of 'being a teacher' is neglected. This study developed a new holistic model to assist teachers working in transcultural settings. The model was applied to rich data engendered by a phenomenological study of four academics. Findings showed the academics' sense of identity and value systems were expressed and modified, illustrating that a focus on epistemology alone does not necessarily ensure competent practice. These voices grant insights into successful transcultural teaching approaches.

1. Introduction

When considering competence in international higher education, the issue of what constitutes 'excellence' in teaching and how to explore, and eventually, grow towards excellence is a matter of interest to educators. The globalisation and internationalisation of higher education is one of the fastest growing industries worldwide and has a significant impact on the lives of academics as well as students. Not only is teaching in transcultural contexts generally considered to be more challenging than teaching local students (Witsel, 2006), there is also valuable discussion which challenges the validity of imposing stereotyped curriculum views and culturally loaded, westernised education with its imperialist cultural capital onto a majority world (e.g. Arnold, Edwards, Hooley, & Williams, 2012; Dasen & Akkari, 2008). Many universities are steeped in the western paradigm, and ethnocentricity and bias have influenced the way in which they function (Dasen & Akkari, 2008; Ziguras, 2008).

Within a rationalistic approach, the issue of what constitutes 'competence' can be viewed from a work-based, or a worker-based perspective – but in both cases, competence is seen as an attribute-based phenomenon (Sandberg, 2000). When using an interpretive approach using phenomenology as its base, however, competence can be explored through the individual's lived experience of that world (Husserl, 1931; Van Manen, 1997), and where it is understood that competence is context-dependent, wherein worker and work form one entity (Gerber & Lankshear, 2000). In this way, competence is not constituted by acquiring a set of discrete attributes but rather, by a wider understanding of what it is to 'be' a teacher, rather than 'doing' teaching.

Conceptualising the academic's role in tourism and hospitality, sport and leisure higher education in a transcultural context involves therefore an exploration of not only the epistemology of teaching but also the ontology of teaching (Dall'Alba, 2005, 2009). However, many studies have hitherto ignored or glossed over the ontological aspect, preferring instead to focus on the knowledge and skills required to 'do the job'. This study critically questions the status quo within current educational hegemony and its focus on transferable knowledge and skills, and instead considers a holistic and inclusive approach, with a strong focus on the ontological aspects of teaching. The outcome of this critical exploration leads this study to thereupon develop a holistic model, which is

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introduced in this paper. This model was then used to analyse the lived experience of academics as they explored their competence in the transcultural environments they resided in. This model will be of help in training and developing teachers aiming for a multicultural teaching environment.

2. What constitutes 'competence' in teaching in transcultural contexts?

This section explores current research into competence in teaching in transcultural contexts, and highlights the gaps that are extant in the literature. We see that there is a desire for and promotion of quick-fix approaches, which is in contradiction to what much of the literature suggests, namely, that there is a strong need for a deep understanding of self-knowledge and recognition of one's own ethnocentric biases: a process which takes time and cultural exposure to achieve. The current models put forward for illustrating what constitutes competence, however, ignore this essential component required for a holistic understanding of competence in teaching in transcultural contexts. Therefore, this study puts forward a new holistic model which does include self-knowledge as an essential aspect of developing competence.

2.1. Literature review

Certainly, teaching in the multicultural classroom has been researched extensively, with a focus on meeting the learning needs of international students (Barron, 2004; Borah, 2011; Harper & Quaye, 2009), and the design of inclusive curricula (Arnold et al., 2012; Haigh, 2002; Tedesco, Opertti, & Amadio, 2014). Research into the experience of lecturers in the multicultural environments is somewhat rarer, and is often undertaken with the aim of quite prescriptive outcomes for 'good practice' and to outline how 'culturally responsive teachers' should behave (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Leask, Hicks, Kohler, and King (2005) identified fifteen desirable characteristics of the ideal transnational (offshore) teacher. These included nine key understandings and six key abilities which could be held by an ideal teacher. The understandings covered two major areas: on the one hand policy and procedural knowledge (PPK); and on the other hand cultural knowledge (CK). The abilities and skills covered specifically teaching skills and abilities (TS). As can be seen, much of the focus for competency is on knowledge, skills and abilities – the 'doing' of teaching, rather than the ontology of teaching, 'being' a teacher. There are, thus, significant gaps in the understandings surrounding competence in teaching in multicultural and transnational contexts.

Following on from Leask's earlier work in 2005, Leask et al.'s further research highlighted the desirability for certain personal attitudes and attributes (Leask et al., 2005; Leask, 2006), which comes closer to the concept of the ontology of teaching. Nonetheless, more recent work promotes the use of 'quick guides' to support "Good practice principles for learning and teaching across cultures" (Leask & Wallace, 2011, p. 44), which suggests that 'quick fixes' are what is needed to ensure "Effective Professional Development of Teachers" (Leask & Wallace, 2011, p. 51).

We would suggest that professional development is not, cannot, and ought not to be a quick process. Improving and increasing knowledge ('knowing what') and skills ('knowing how') are parts of developing competence, but they do not constitute the entirety of competence. Weinstein, Tomlinson-Clarke, and Curran (2004) argue that culturally responsive education entails a recognition of one's own ethnocentrism and biases, a knowledge of the students' cultural backgrounds, and awareness of the broader social, economic and political context. Regarding the first of these, Weinstein et al. (2004, p. 29) argue that multicultural competence in education is "directly related to an understanding of one's own motives, beliefs, values, and assumptions about human behaviour". This focus on the need for self-knowledge is not new to theory on intercultural communication. In fact, many researchers into pedagogy and education have also illustrated that culturally successful teachers must first recognise and understand their own worldview, attitudes and beliefs, in order to understand the worldviews of others (Arnold et al., 2012; Bennet, 1993; Lawrence & Tatum, 1997).

Pinto (1990) stresses the importance of being aware of one's own culture-specific norms, values and practices (in other words, displaying a keen sense of self-knowledge and awareness) in successful intercultural communication. Trompenaars and Hampden Turner (1998, p.201), too, recognise that genuine self-awareness and an understanding of how we are different from other cultures is a key aspect of intercultural communication, and that "we may find out more about ourselves by exploring these differences". Although firmly embedded in epistemology rather than ontological traditions, Arnold et al. (2012, p.290) argue that within a critical praxis, teacher education is located in self-reflective consciousness, which involves a recognition of their own biases:

> … teacher education is 'conceived as a matrix of interacting and referential personal and social practices' that immerse collaborative participants in ongoing recursive professional constructions of experience, knowledge and meaning. Teacher education as 'critical praxis' locates teaching and learning within the context of ideology critique, self-reflective consciousness and emancipatory action. Teacher education as 'epistemologically reflexive' enables participants to investigate explanations of social and physical phenomena while recognising their own intellectual partialities

In addition to self-knowledge, an exploration of personal values regarding internationalisation of education is important – an aspect that Leask explored in her 2005 work on personal attitudes. Much research has been conducted on strategic planning for managing multiculturalism, and much of it focuses on imperatives: economic, political, or quality imperatives, for example. Those imperatives aside, we would argue that accepting an imperative in this context – seeing the 'point', the internal, intrinsic acceptance that multicultural education has a point, is highly valuable. When it comes to research on values, though, again there are gaps in the understandings, in part due to the influence of western hegemony. The Human Values Project run by the Union of International Associations (2008) lists 987 constructive or positive values (and 1992 negative or destructive values). As with much within the

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