

Pedagogic theory

The information on these pages has been developed as part of the Teaching International Students project





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1. Introduction

This section gives an overview of the theoretical framework that underpins the Teaching International Students project. It also provides a synopsis of contemporary theories of teaching and learning that are useful in analysing teaching practices. Identifying the theories that underpin our practices helps us to understand the reasons for our actions and thus a foundation for re-evaluating them.

2. The importance of theory

We all operate from implicit or explicit beliefs and values about education such as the purpose of education (transmissive or transformative), the nature of relationships between teachers and students, and the purpose and methods of assessment. It is important for teachers to recognise that these theories, whether we are able to name them or not, influence our teaching, including our pedagogical approaches, curriculum design and assessment methods, and what we value as knowledge. Understanding and identifying these theories also helps teachers to avoid seeking a 'toolkit' approach of wanting simple answers to complex problems but instead reflecting on their own practice as a starting point. As Ramsden (1992) argues:

Some lecturers do not know where to start improving [teaching], at once overwhelmed by and unwilling to admit its complexity, they ask for a set of rules that will solve all their difficulties. Half the difficulty with doing it better is knowing what the real problem is, of being aware of what we do not know.

3. Contemporary pedagogical theories

Understanding how individuals learn helps teachers to identify how their teaching practices impact on the learning of students from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

Most conventional constructivist or behaviourist theories of learning tend to assume homogeneity of learners and have become less useful as student cohorts become more diverse and potentially more challenging for teachers. More recent socio-cultural theories of learning, and offshoots such as cultural historical activity theory, posit that teaching and learning are shaped by the social and cultural context of the learning environment and the complex and dynamic human activity systems within them at a particular point in time.

Such theories help to explain the connection between the conditions of the new learning environment and an individual's previous educational experience and their cultural and social background for facilitating or hindering learning. They are helpful in understanding the kinds of difficulties that international students report in their new learning environments. They also help to explain the feelings of marginalisation often reported by international students and the impact of 'cognitive dissonance' (Festinger, 1957) when a student's existing 'schema' (the 'meaning systems' of cultural groups, Cole, 1996) means that they are unable to 'hook' new information into their existing knowledge. An individual's personal, social, cultural, economic and political experiences will shape their knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, behaviours, language, identity and even thinking, and this applies to both learners and teachers. Teachers' background beliefs and assumptions also influence their teaching practices, including sometimes in a negative way (Arenas, 2009).

4. Theoretical framework of the TIS project

The theoretical framework of the TIS project is based on critical socio-cultural theories of learning and teaching. This involves turning the 'gaze' not on the individual learner but to the social and cultural learning context within which they are situated. It avoids 'problematism' international students by expecting them

alone to change and adjust to fit the institution. Instead, it examines the teaching and learning context to see how it can better fit students' learning needs, particularly in changing contexts. This applies to contexts where the numbers of international students are rising as well as the different contexts within which lecturers are increasingly required to work including online delivery, teaching at a branch campus or at an institution overseas where the lecturer can be the cultural 'outsider' (Slethaug, 2007).

Our philosophical position is that international students bring with them a range of cultural knowledge, experience and skills that can be shared with local teachers and students in a more globalised and interconnected world. Rather than seeing international students as 'bearers of problems' they can be seen as 'bearers of culture' and an asset to teachers who want to internationalise their pedagogy and curriculum for all their students.

International students, as newcomers to a teaching and learning environment, can help us to hold up a mirror to ourselves to identify and reflect upon our own teaching and learning practices and the beliefs that have shaped them.

Cross-national comparisons help to sharpen the focus of analysis and help to reveal national cultural traditions, by comparing the known with the novelty which can lead to a deeper understanding of the issues of another culture, whilst also considering ones' own country from the perspective of a skilled observer from outside (Pepin, 1996)

In this project, we have tried to avoid a 'toolkit' approach by beginning with a discussion of the issues and current debates so that teachers and others can become aware of the types of difficulties that international students report and the complexities involved in addressing these issues in practice. We offer a range of suggestions and resources for teachers to consider using in their own practice, as well as relevant contemporary research and conceptual and theoretical thinking in these areas to inform further discussion and debate.

5. Theories in the literature on international students

Internationally, the research fields of teaching and learning for international students and internationalisation of the curriculum tend to be disparate, fraught with 'mixed messages' (Caruana & Spurling, 2007) and, according to some, lacking a conceptual framework to underpin and transform research and practice. Huisman (2010) argues that there is a paucity of evidence-based and theoretically-informed work and research continues to be small-scale, 'scattered' and a-theoretical.

However, much of the research in the area of international students and internationalisation is informed by an array of theoretical and conceptual frameworks, depending on the view of the researcher or the particular phenomenon chosen for study. Some theoretical approaches are mentioned briefly here to give an indication of the diversity of approaches that are available although this doesn't do justice to the breadth and depth of theoretical approaches available.

Studies that look at aspects of teaching and learning are often underpinned by socio-cultural theories of learning or critical pedagogy to examine underlying social, cultural and economic structures and issues of interpersonal relationships, roles and power. Other studies examine the nature of international students' experiences using ethnography (Deumert, Marginson, Nyland, Ramia & Sawir, 2005; Grimshaw, 2007; Montgomery, 2010), contact theory (Schweisfurth & Gu, 2009), or phenomenological approaches which focus on the 'lived experience' (van Manen, 1990) or 'lifeworld' (Husserl, 1970) of the individual. Others use theories of social identity construction to analyse the impact of international study on the agency and identity (re)formation of individuals (Robinson-Pant, 2009). Intercultural and cross cultural communication theories are often used to examine the ways that personal relationships and knowledge are shaped and changed by culture and cultural interactions. Some studies examine the power relationships between teachers and

international students, using theories and methods such as critical pedagogy, discourse analysis, or postcolonial theories to examine international education as an exercise in hegemony (e.g. Madge, Raghuram & Noxol, 2009) or as a corporatist enterprise which views international students as clients in the global educational marketplace (Deumert et al., 2005).

Some researchers question the very definition of the 'international student' (e.g. Madge et al., 2009) due to the changing nature and location of international education as well as the validity of 'large culture explanations' that make statements about students on the basis of national culture (such as those arising from critical sociology, cultural studies and post-structuralist discourse theory).

These various theories and debates remind us that the field, disparate as it is, is hotly contested and contestable, but that there are rich and diverse theories and methods available for study and discussion.

A further consideration is the somewhat homogenous nature to date of the literature on international students itself. International education and international students exist around the world, not solely in Anglophone countries and the field is changing rapidly in terms of the countries that now offer international education as well as the nature of the study that students are undertaking. Much of the most commonly referenced literature in this field represents 'Western' views (and reflecting the mostly one-way traffic of international students from East to West until recent times) despite the growing body of work in other non-Anglophone countries, and the existence of non-European epistemologies and intellectual traditions such as Asian/Confucian ones (Ryan & Louie, 2007; Turner, 2006). Even 'Western' literature, as Connell (2007) argues in 'Southern Theory', often portrays a 'partial' view; it is not just about east/west divides but north/south ones as well.

6. Further reading

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