Frameworks for Intercultural Learning

Dr Stephen Scoffham, Canterbury Christ Church University and Dr Fran Martin, University of Exeter

stephen.scoffham@canterbury.ac.uk Faculty of Education, Canterbury Christ Church University, North Holmes Road, Canterbury, Kent, CT1 1QU

fran.martin@exeter.ac.uk , Graduate School of Education, College of Social and International Studies, University of Exeter, St Lukes's Campus, Heavitree Road, Exeter, EX1 2LU

Abstract

This paper focuses on the development of a new website on global learning designed for teachers, students and educators called 'Frameworks for Intercultural Learning'. It considers how the attitudes and frames of mind that learners bring to new situations influence their understanding and how new paradigms can open up alternative ways of thinking. The paper draws on scholarly research and the findings of the ESRC funded Global Partnerships in Mutual Learning (GPML) project (2009-2012). It is rooted in transformative learning theory and informed by post-structural and post-colonial perspectives. The argument explores the way that intercultural learning involves many inter-related factors some of which are not immediately obvious. In particular, the long shadow of colonialism and exploitation continues to affect relations between people from the West and global South but its impact is often hidden or indirect. Understanding such issues can enhance our perspectives and deepen our thinking. Ultimately, however, it is the integrity and authenticity of the relationship between people from different cultures, which stands at the heart of meaningful interactions. We offer the website and the ideas that it embodies as a constructive contribution to the complex challenge of promoting intercultural learning.

Introduction

Recognising our role as global citizens is an essential part of living in the twenty first century. Global challenges such as climate change, the loss of biodiversity and conflicts between social groups require global solutions. Schools, universities and other educational institutions have a key role in developing critical and creative thinking about such issues - intercultural learning is a central part of this process. Intercultural learning raises complex questions about competing narratives, global inequalities and ethical relations between people. It also challenges us to re-examine our pedagogical approaches. We argue, along with Andriotti (2010) that intercultural learning leads us to question our assumptions and ultimately to transform our thinking. We also contend that intercultural learning needs to be placed in a values frame that recognises and honours agreed principles.

This paper is informed partly from scholarly research and partly from the findings of a research project, funded by the ESRC (Economic and Social and Research Council) between 2009 and

2012 to explore the impact of overseas study visits from both Western and Southern perspectives. The resulting website, which is aimed at Western students and educators and entitled *'Frameworks for Intercultural Learning'*, is presented here. We acknowledge from the outset that the site is rooted in Western modes of thinking and is bounded temporarily by the early twenty first century perspectives. We also recognise that it is limited to the extent that it is written in English and restricted by regional cultural and linguistic norms.

Colonial legacies

Any attempt to develop intercultural understanding inevitably raises questions about colonial and imperial legacies. Although European empires have long been disbanded, colonialism still casts a long shadow over global relations. Said (1985) offers a penetrating critique which has now become a classical reference point. His detailed study of English literature reveals the extent to which colonial attitudes are engrained in Western thought.   In recent decades globalisation has served to perpetuate and even accentuate the inequalities and power structures, which Said illuminated. It is argued that the subservience and obedience, which was once imposed by military might, has been replaced by a new colonialism based on globalisation and international finance (Steger 2009, Sachs 2013). Even in countries where independence appears to have been successful achieved, old modes of thought persist. In particular, it has proved remarkably difficult for those in the global South who have internalised Western notions of superiority and development to deconstruct their thinking. Decolonisation of the mind, as Sharp (2009) puts it, still remains a distant goal in far too many instances.

Giving a voice to the dispossessed is no easy matter. In an influential essay on discourse and power Spivak (1988) asks the question 'Can the subaltern speak?' to draw attention to the way that attempts to give a voice to citizens from the global South (the subalterns) can just as easily end up silencing them. One critical issue is that for the subaltern's voice to having meaning it is necessary to change the relations of power and knowledge that created the subaltern in the first place. Spivak (1990) goes on to argue that 'Who will listen?' is perhaps a more crucial question than 'Who should speak?' A major implication of this analysis is that 'listening seriously and respectfully to Southern voices implies critical engagement on the part of non-Southern people with the *individual* perspectives presented' (Andriotti 2007 p7).

The power structures, which support a polarised narrative of Western superiority and Southern inferiority, are discussed by Adiche (2009). Focussing especially on representations of Africa, Adiche uses the idea of a single story to refer to those forms of discourse, which elevate a single account into a universal narrative. Hegemony is a key issue and she observes:

How (stories) are told, who tells them, when they're told, how many stories are told, are really dependent on power. Power is the ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person (Adiche 2009 p3)

Adiche's critique reveals how Europeans assume that their own position is a universal standard against which others can be understood. This approach depends on dividing people and experience into rigid groups set against each other as opposites. Terms such as same/different, like/unlike and us/them are telltale hallmarks, which signify the language of difference. Binary logic of this kind has far reaching consequences. It leads people to unquestioningly accept their values as the norm and to see other ways of being and knowing as deviant and inferior. It also provided the underpinning for colonialism, which when re-inforced with nationalism, racial stereotypes and prejudice, created deep seated notions of superiority.

If Western thinking about culture and 'otherness' is dominated by binary thought, the challenge is to disrupt this mode of thinking and the false dichotomies, which arise from it. Martin (2012) argues that difference rather similarity might be the starting point from which we can develop our understanding of other people and cultures. From this stance what becomes important is not the object of understanding but the relationships, which enable that understanding to develop. As she explains,

A relational logic is proposed as an alternative way of understanding culture and identity that leads to a more open-minded, non-judgemental stance towards difference. From this perspective culture and identity are understood through relating to difference, and as dynamic, fluid, and plural. (Martin and Griffiths 2013)

The advantages of such an approach is that it focuses on the spaces between people and holds out the prospect of dialogue leading to mutual respect and better understanding of both 'self' and 'other'. From an historical perspective it is evident that bias and privilege were central to the civilizing mission, which supported colonialism. It comes as something of a shock, however, to realise that these structures have still not yet been successfully dismantled. Being comfortable with uncertainty, challenging assumptions and recognising multiple perspectives isn't always easy. To understand how such a mind-set might be developed we need to turn to learning theory.

Transformative learning theory

Transformative learning theory provides a useful framework for understanding the changes in mind-set which are particularly relevant to global learning. This theory, which was first developed by Jack Mezirow (1985) in relation to adult learning, focuses on the way individuals make their own interpretations of the world rather than acting, albeit unconsciously, on the purposes, beliefs, judgements and feelings of others. Mezirow describes transformative learning as 'the process of effecting change in a *frame of reference*' (1997:5, Mezirow's emphasis). He describes a frame of reference as consisting of two elements: (a) a habit of

mind, and (b) a point of view. Mezirow argues that habits of mind are more durable than points of view and harder for the individual to identify. This is because they have been tacitly learned through a process of enculturation. Transformative learning thus focuses on how individuals change the structures, which prevent them from viewing the world from more inclusive, discriminating and integrating perspectives. A crucial feature is that once an individual has transformed their perspective they are unable to return to way that they previously perceived the world. One of the implications is that such transformations will have a lasting impact on personal and professional life.

Transformational learning is more than simply an increase in knowledge or even a change in behaviour. It always features some level of epistemological change and involves restructuring the way we think. Sterling (2001) makes this clear when he distinguishes between different orders of learning.   He points out that first order learning takes places within existing boundaries and is adaptive in the sense that it leaves basic values unexamined and unchanged. By contrast, second order learning involves challenging basic assumption through a process of critical reflection. At a deeper level still (third order learning) we become aware of different ways of doing things and recognise alternative world views.   Such shifts of consciousness can happen at an individual or societal level and are fundamentally creative.
Responding to interdisciplinary discussions around globalisation, power and identity, Andriotti (2010) has developed a seven-stage model which provides further illumination by mapping the learning process in greater detail. She charts how learners move from a position of certainty where they are definite in their opinions, to spaces where they 'feel comfortable with complexity, uncertainty, contingency and difference, and are willing to negotiate meaning 'in context' in dialogue with others'. (p14)   At each point the model also maps enabling and disabling responses in relation to the openness of participants to the learning process itself. The simplest level of response draws on a single lens and is characterised as 'This is what I think. It comes from my experience and works for me'. Higher level responses involve moving through a stage of confusion to recognise the validity of multiple perspectives.

Underpinning Andriotti's model is the recognition that knowledge is contingent that meaning is negotiated and that ambiguity and conflict are deeply embedded in understanding. This does not imply that there is no objective reality and that 'anything goes'. The subtlety of Andriotti's position is that she suggests learning involves moving from certainty based on a single viewpoint towards deeper levels of interpretation and meaning based on multiple viewpoints, negotiation and dialogue. Learning thus becomes a never-ending process. New knowledge and understandings are themselves re-interpreted as additional perspectives are taken into account, which means that they can only ever be provisional

A theoretical understanding of the processes involved in global learning makes it easier to recognise the impact of barriers and inhibitors. Some learners adopt disabling responses in order to buttress existing ways of thinking and seek to accommodate new ideas rather than enter into a more radical process of re-visioning. Scoffham, Owens and Whyte (2012) have reported at a previous TESSNet conference on the different stances taken by ITE students in response to a short module on the global dimension and drawn attention to a small but significant proportion of 'deniers' who reject new ideas. It seems that ethno-centric stereotypes can be particularly hard to dislodge. Davies and Lam (2010), for example, report that even overseas study visits do not always result in cognitive change. Structured support and sensitive debriefing can, however, make a crucial difference. The analysis of evidence from the GPML project (Martin and Griffiths 2013) also suggests that students need access to alternative models to help support them develop new habits of mind.

Deconstructing intercultural understanding is a challenging process, which calls into question basic values and principles. If relationships are at the core of global learning then the way those relationships are negotiated really matters. Understanding what distinguishes ethical relationships from those that voyeuristic or exploitative is a key issue. And the way that different cultures and world views interact is fundamental to making sense of life in the twenty first century. Issues to do with equity, justice and human rights underpin global learning and raise difficult questions. Finding out about sustainability and the environment requires us to face up to what is happening all around us. Martin (2011) enjoins us not to shy away from these matters. Indeed, as she affirms, there is no way that we can avoid them.

Website structure

This brief summary of the discussion surrounding colonial legacies, power relations, dominant narratives and relational epistemology illuminates the rationale behind the website. Meaningful intercultural understanding involves looking beneath the surface to uncover some of the assumptions and biases that permeate our thought. It challenges us to recognise that our viewpoint is both bounded in time and located in space. And it means we have to accommodate some of the complexities and contradictions inherent in intercultural relations (see Figure 1).

The *Frameworks for Intercultural Learning* website is not designed to present a particular viewpoint or to convey a specific body of information. Nor is it concerned with the practicalities

or organisational details of overseas study visits. Rather, it is designed to raise questions and draw attention to different interpretations and viewpoints. It seeks to challenge assumptions in order to open up new ways of thinking. Theoretical models are offered alongside analysis, video extracts and selected readings and other texts to give users creative space and support to reconstruct their ideas. The opportunity to revisit the site over a period of time offers up the possibility of increasingly deep thinking.

The site is divided into seven main areas focusing on a major theme relating to intercultural studies. Each of these areas follows the same structure: an introduction to the topic, links to further 'texts', vignettes from the ESRC research project and suggestions for further reading. Questions for discussion and debate are included to help structure the study. The areas, which have been selected for detailed examination, are:

- relationships,
- development,
- culture,
- assumptions,
- identity,
- charity and
- footprints.

The first area, relationships, sets the parameters for the rest of the website. There are two main objectives. On one level this area sets out a theoretical stance, which draws attention to the importance of mutual benefit and the dangers of 'othering'. On another level it emphasises the importance of ethical and principled interaction. The other areas explore some of the different themes which make an important contribution to reframing Western thinking about the global South. Values have not been highlighted as an area/topic of their own as a principled approach is central to the rationale for the entire website.

Underlying principles and notions

1   Intercultural learning needs to be contextualised in terms of time, space and culture.

2   Colonial legacies and globalisation cast a particularly long shadow over contemporary relations

3   Multiple texts and critical questioning help learners to recognise the assumptions which underpin their thinking

4   Intercultural learning is not simply a matter of accumulating knowledge which can ultimately be counter-productive – what matters more is the framework in which that knowledge is set

5   Learners need time and structured support if they are to reframe their ideas about people and culture

6   Conflicting interpretations and multiple stories, in conjunction with structured support in safe environments, are key ways of helping learners move beyond adaptive and accommodating responses

7   A focus on relationships based on mutuality and respect, whether between individuals or groups, is a necessary basis for worthwhile intercultural learning

8   Recognising and re-examining our personal values is an integral part of intercultural learning

Figure 1 Notions and principles which underpin the *Frameworks for Intercultural Learning* website

There is a danger that a website which seeks to explore such contentious areas could slip into bias and indoctrination. At a surface level this might involve, for example, an uncritical acceptance of material from campaigners and pressure groups. At a more fundamental level it might lead to a failure to question underlying assumptions. Moreover, the decision to focus on real world problems could itself be open to question. For example, a number of academics such as Fruedi (2004), Ecclestone and Hayes (2009) and Standish (2012) believe that education should avoid politics and take a disinterested and theoretical stance. This is not our view. Whilst we recognise the value of knowledge as a goal and end in itself, we also believe that students, whether at school or university need to engage with the dominant issues of the age. Promoting better international understanding is a major challenge and could be fundamental to the continued survival and prosperity of the human race. Nothing could be more important than that.

Note

The '*Frameworks for Intercultural Learning'* website can be accessed at www.gpml.org.uk

References

Adiche, C. (2009) The Dangers of a Single Story. Paper given at TED global July 2009. Available at http://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story.html, accessed May 2013

Andriotti, V. (2007) The Contributions of Postcolonial Theory to Development Education (DEA thinkpiece) London: DEA

Andriotti, V. (2010) Global Education in the' Twenty First Century': Two different perspectives on the 'post-' of postmodernism, *International Journal of development Education and Global Learning* 2 (2) 5-22

Davies, D and Lam, E. (2010) The Role of First-hand Experience in the Development of University Students. *International Journal of Development Education and Global Learning,* 2 (2) p. 35-52

Ecclestone, K. and Hayes. D. (2009) *The Dangerous Rise of Therapeutic Education,* London: Routledge

Furedi, F. (2004) *Where Have All The Intellectuals Gone?* London: Continuum

Martin, F. (2011) Global Ethics, Sustainability and Partnership, Butt, G. (Ed.) *Geography, Education and the Future,* London: Continuum

Martin, F. (2012) The Geographies of Difference, *Geography* 97(3) 116-122

Martin, F. and Griffiths, H. (2013 forthcoming) Relating to the 'Other': Transformative, intercultural learning in post-colonial contexts, *Compare*

Mezirow, J. (1985) A Critical Theory of Self-Directed Learning, *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, 25: 17-30

Mezirow, J. (1997) Transformative Learning from Theory to Practice*, New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education,* 74: 5-12

Sachs, W. (2013) Liberating the World from Development, *New Internationalist* 460 22-27.

Said, E. (1985) *Orientalism*, London: Penguin

Scoffham, S., Owens, P. and Whyte, T. Problems with 'Real World' Problems: Barriers to sustainability education in ITE, Inman, S. and Rogers, R. (Eds.) *Envisioning Change and Achieving Transformation: ESD/GC core 'competences' for educators, Conference book,* London: UK Teacher Education Network for Sustainable Education/Global Citizenship p99-106

Spivak, G. (1985) 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' Nelson ,C. and Grossber, L. (Eds.*) Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, Chicago: University of Illinois Press

Spivak, G. (1990) *The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, strategies and dialogues*. London: Routledge

Standish, A. (2012) *The False Promise of Global Learning*, London: Continuum

Steger, M. (2009) *Globalization: A very short introduction*, Oxford: Oxford University Press

Sterling, S. (2001) *Sustainable Education: Revising learning and change*, Dartington: Green Books