

Creating Spaces of Learning for International Doctoral Students: The Role of Transcultural Learning

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Introduction

What happens when doctoral students in education from three universities in different countries, conversant in English with varying abilities, come together to explore what it means to be emerging scholars? How do they engage, discuss, listen and perhaps create new understandings and knowledge? Do they remain separate or does an “inbetween Third Space” (Bhabha, 2004) emerge through relational learning? In this inbetween space, where new knowledge emerges from varied voices and perspectives within the group, “egalitarian transcultural learning zones, provide a safe space for exploring knowledges, linguistic and literacy practices relevant to the specific lived locations and situations of all participants” (Eijkman, 2009, p. 247). In this paper, we explore what needs to be in place in order to create and sustain these spaces, or transcultural learning zones, where these international doctoral students from different cultures and contexts come together and take the risk to move beyond their cultural perspectives, in order to interact with each other and gain a better understanding of themselves and others. Indeed, in letting go of tightly held notions of epistemologies and knowledge systems in addition to societal ideologies, they are placing trust in the importance of relational learning in order to know, do, live with others and be (Aldridge, Kilog, & Christenson, 2014; Wulf, 2010, Nelson et al, 2017).

Context

As background to this exploration, our faculty of education in Canada has established formal partnerships with two other faculties of education – one based in a university from China, and the other located in Australia. The focus of this partnership is to promote research collaborations across the faculty members and graduate students of these three universities. Part of this initiative involves a Joint International Research Seminar hosted by these partner institutions, on a rotating annual basis. Doctoral students, typically four to five from each university, along with one or two accompanying faculty members, engage in collaborative activities through a process that involves three phases. During the first phase, the chosen doctoral students from the respective universities meet ‘at home’ with their faculty members to prepare for the actual on-site-seminar event. Second is the actual event, typically five days in length, where these doctoral students come together to participate in academic forums and workshops, student presentations, and related cultural activities. The third phase is a continuation of the first phase; students, upon returning home, continue to meet with each other and their faculty members to reflect on and deepen their understanding of learnings gained from the seminar and continue the process of writing. In this paper, we explore the transcultural spaces that emerged through the International Doctoral Seminars bringing examples from three years of working with graduate students and our colleagues from China and Australia. To begin, we position our understanding of transcultural learning and what it means for us, by examining what it

means for us to move toward a transcultural perspective from a stance of holding the language and culture of dominance and homogeneity . Then we describe why it was important for us to deeply engage with our students by reflecting and discussing what it means to work with others from different cultures who communicate with different languages. Finally, we demonstrate how we understood and lived transcultural ways of living through the illustrations from our International Doctoral Seminar.

Nation-state to transcultural learning spaces

Historically, a conception of a nation combines ethnicity with common descent, history and language and a defined physical territory or a state (Hobsbawm, 1990). Alternatively, Anderson (1991) also calls a nation state an ‘imagined community’ which is described as relationships that members of a nation have based on ideas of who belongs to the group or who is excluded. Finally, Heller (2011) stipulates nation-states were legitimized by the “construction of standardized languages coterminous with state boundaries and linked to uniformed cultures understood to be the distinctive property of nations” (p. 7).

Turning to Canadian history, the notion of the ‘two solitudes’ refers to French and English Canadians’ communities and their lack of perceived communication that makes these two nations seem as separate communities, or almost nation-states, in the same country while other communities exist but are not recognized (Hayday, 2015). Maintaining the ideologies of these two separate communities in Canada has consequences. We still see today that people who want to learn French or English have to be able to speak like native speakers and be able to understand the culture of the others (Roy, 2010). For the other communities established in Canada who have different ethnic backgrounds, they are not included in the discourse of the country (Galiev, 2013). Having an accent for example continues to bring tension to those who don’t possess the appropriate way of talking and communicating in Canadian society (Hilman, thesis in preparation).

However, there are shifting perspectives and a loosening of this homogenous, monolingual and monocultural ideology; ideology being an idea that a particular way of living is the right and only way. The International Doctoral Seminar constitutes an example on how postsecondary education is looking toward cultivating cross-cultural competencies as a result of globalization. As Wulf (2010) mentioned, our current education system is now trying to take into consideration cultures as dynamic and changing according to context. Indeed our globalized world is making room for more cultural diversity; not a national culture but cultural identities which are often enacted, negotiated or challenged through communicative practices. Cultural identities are then defined as status, experience, co-creation of group memberships and social identifications within particular contexts (Kim, 2007). It is then with transcultural education that words such as differentiation and hybrid formation play a role in understanding our relationships with others. For these authors, transcultural learning is oriented toward a better understanding of the other and toward a reduction of violence toward other people, not by dividing but by understanding better who others are. Drawing on Bhabha (2007), we begin to realize that the diversity of cultures is not equated with a stance where we observe ‘something’ strange and separate from us but that we view culture as hybridity where we are all included in sharing the space. To elaborate:

It is significant that the productive capacities of this Third Space have a colonial and postcolonial provenance. For a willingness to descend into that alien territory may reveal that the theoretical recognition of the split-space of enunciation may open the way to conceptualizing an *international* culture, based not on the exoticism of multiculturalism or the *diversity* of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture's *hybridity*. To that end we should remember that it is the 'inter' - the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the *inbetween* space - that carries the burden of the meaning of culture. It makes it possible to begin envisaging national, anti-national histories of the 'people'. And by exploring this Third Space, we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the other of our selves (Bhabha, 2007, p. 56).

In this era, it is even more important to dialogue with others with mutual respect; as cultural identities are understood as a human right 'whose realization must be protected and promoted by the international community of countries' (Wulf, 2010, p. 34). In this next section, we will examine why it was important to create conditions for transcultural learning spaces for our doctoral students who were participating in the International Doctoral Seminar.

Create and sustain these spaces, or transcultural learning zones: The Why?

During our first experience of planning the International Doctoral Seminar with our colleagues from Beijing and Brisbane, Australia, given that we had no previous engagement with this seminar, we didn't know what to expect. Our colleagues from the other two universities had ten years of experience of working together to plan and launch these seminars, going back and forth from one university to the other on an annual basis. In order to prepare ourselves, we had several sessions with our own doctoral students before our departure for Beijing. We knew that it was important to respect other cultures and understanding and we were open to knowing 'others' better so our students could fully participate and gain as much as possible from this seminar. We did not want to go to China holding previous assumptions that would impact the development of positive relationships. So, we read background material about Australia and China and listened to presentations from our International Office, with a particular focus on Chinese culture and the education system in China. We thought that we were ready. Once in China, it occurred to us that we never really discussed the fact that the doctoral students from China might not speak English or understand English. In hindsight, we are amazed and a bit chagrined by the fact that Australians and Canadians (us) didn't even think about the fact that the domination of our language (and Western culture) would be a problem. The sad part is that we never talked about this before the seminar event in Beijing. How did we actually think that we could construct a space where everyone is included if we showed up, naively assuming our language domination? As part of the follow-up to our experience in China, our doctoral students and us wrote reflective article about these assumptions and the implications for our ability to truly engage in an inbetween space (Roy & al. submitted).

The reasons why we need to create transcultural learning zones became evident during the experience we had in Beijing. If we really want to connect with others, we

need to give a space for their language and their way to understand cultural differences while at the same time inviting them to our space. In response to our realization that we had simply assumed and taken on the language of dominance (English), everyone from the three universities met and talked about the ‘language dominance issue’. It was then decided that the many Chinese doctoral students who were participating in the Seminar could have some time to discuss, in their first language, the seminar content – research approaches and methodologies. However, even then, we needed to continue to negotiate between two languages, and more languages, because some of the participants spoke other languages than English and Mandarin and cultures in our quest to try and understand how others live and understand scholarly work. We Canadians, were also really humbled while navigating in the streets of Beijing; realizing of course that we were totally dependent on our Chinese hosts to guide us once we left the safe space of the seminar classroom. Fortunately, for us, two of our own doctoral students, originally from China, also spoke Mandarin and they became the negotiators between us and them.

So, the question remains – how did this experience in China inform our planning and preparation in anticipation of hosting the International Doctoral Seminar at our own university.

Create and sustain these spaces, or transcultural learning zones: The How?

Six months later it was our turn to welcome our colleagues from Brisbane and Beijing. With a new group of our own doctoral students participating in the Calgary seminar, we decided to explore the theme of transculturality with them before our guests arrived. We reflected on Slimbach’s (2005) definition of engaging in transcultural learning. Specifically, we realized that we as learners and educators need to move beyond traditional classrooms and structured presentations toward creating a community where members bring knowledge from their own culture to the process of creating and cultivating relationships and interactions across cultures. It was also interesting to notice that none of our own students were not from Alberta, Canada but from other parts of the world which add to the complexity of who we were as hosts from a Canadian university. In sum, the most pivotal decision we came to as hosts was that we needed to listen more to others in order to better develop transcultural competencies. To make this happen, as we divided the doctoral students in different small groups for the actual on-site portion of the seminar, we ensured that each group had representation from each of the three universities/countries. In turn then, the hosts would be the ones that would listen more, ensuing that others were heard in discussing scholarly doctoral work. We also determined that we would have experiences in the classrooms and outside the classrooms such as cultural trips and outdoors. As we wrote a reflective paper on our experiences (Nelson et. al, 2017) we concluded that developing a community of emerging scholars needs to take care not only of intellectual growth but also address our overall well-being, including our emotions, bodies, and spirit. By doing so we can reach across boundaries and borders and create the possibility of new ways of being in the world. One particular example of changing our ways of thinking came from one of our students. She was in a group with a young Chinese girl and also with an Australian woman shared their experiences of being a mother. So, their discussions started by looking at their personal lives and how they manage children, study, and other priorities. The young Chinese girl was too young to have a family but she also participated in the conversation. Our

Canadian student, who had had bad experiences with young Chinese woman, was a little bit reticent to meet and engage with her. However, we had also discussed the importance of being open and to listening as hosts of this seminar. As time went on, we took an off-campus to spend time in the nearby mountains in order to engage with our guests more informally. The young Chinese girl in her group forgot a jacket and it was cold in the mountains that day. In response, our Canadian student then went home and brought her a warm jacket to borrow for the day. The Canadian student's husband was surprised by her actions because of the past experiences they had in their family. It is a minor example, but this is how transformation occurs through such daily interactions. We listened, we took care of others, and we understood that not all people are the same. In summary, in order to create and sustain spaces for transcultural learning zones, we discovered the following:

- 1) We need to be open to the unknown, to listen and to learn
- 2) We need to understand our biases and stereotypes and be ready to change
- 3) We need to dialogue but also, we need to find time in our formal universities, to engage in more informal personal discussions and to go outside of our classrooms to learn.

Conclusion

In summary, we, as the faculty members from the Canadian university, who have been coordinating this international doctoral research seminar series over the past three years took this opportunity to reflect on our varied experiences on connected and relational learning associated with each of these seminars. While on paper, the actual structure of each seminar was similar; the animation of these seminars varied in multiple ways reflecting differences in participants' background and experiences, their particular cultural context and differing emphasis on creating transcultural learning zones. As we consider the levels of connected learning, and whether or not an "inbetween" space emerged in each of these three seminars, we drew on the framework of transcultural learning and associated processes required to negotiate multiple ways of knowing, alongside different languages and cultural contexts. We are then deconstructing the notion of homogenous cultural and linguistic ideology to open to the globalized world where people are connecting in different ways and forming new identities in their every day life.

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