

TOWARDS WEB 2.0 ENABLED POSTCOLONIAL LEARNING IN TRANSCULTURAL HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract

This paper draws attention to the ways in which Web 2.0 social media more easily provides transcultural higher education with culturally inclusive online learning spaces. Despite the huge influx of students from non-dominant cultures, including in online learning environments, a white, Western, elite discourse continues to dominate higher education. In this context Web 2.0 based learning architectures that recognise the social construction of knowledge provide a window of opportunity to shift from neo-colonial to post-colonial practices. This combination of a non-foundational approach to the nature of knowledge with Web 2.0 social networking capacities provides a framework for creating 'homely' learning spaces for culturally marginalised students. This in turn promotes a more egalitarian form of cosmopolitanism.

Introduction

Western or Western-modelled universities, despite massification and increasing emphasis on internationalisation, tend to be anything but universal in their acceptance of non-mainstream cultures and discourses (Beverley, 2000; Eijkman, 2004). The focus of internationalisation in curriculum is on the individual, ad hoc, adjustment of *content* and not on any *systemic* focus on either pedagogic or curricular *form*. Therefore, while individual academics are encouraged to insert international exemplars into their courses the curricular form dominant in Western universities is implicitly committed to distinctly white, Euro-American, middle/upper class, urban oriented (mono-cultural and mono-linguistic) educational discourses (Low & Palulis, 2004). This disadvantages discursively marginalised students and places them on the cosmopolitan periphery as the current neo-colonial approach in higher education creates an *elite* rather than *vernacular* form of cosmopolitanism. I want to demonstrate that the prospect for social interaction afforded by non-foundational Web 2.0 based learning spaces provides us with a powerful lever for change. This new paradigm combination of postmodern epistemology and technology now enables us to transform web-assisted transcultural learning. Non-foundational epistemology — the standpoint that all knowledge is socially constructed — enables all participants in the learning process to embrace alternative framings of reality and grapple with multiple standpoints. Web 2.0 social networking gives us the communication tools with which we can much more easily engage in dialogue about the *form* as well as the *content* of learning and incorporate diverse socio-cultural perspectives. This

epistemological and technological combination can drive a change that enables us to question and transcend the uncritical privileging of Western elite discourses in transcultural learning. Together they enable us to gear transcultural higher education towards a more socially inclusive *egalitarian*, rather than an *elite*, form of cosmopolitanism.

At this point a few explanatory words about terminology are in order. An in-depth exploration of the emerging field of post-colonialism in international higher education would entail clarifying and defining a set of highly complex and contested concepts. Given the introductory purpose of this paper and the limited space available I focus on presenting, in accessible language, the key features of the post-colonial higher education landscape. To ensure we are all on the same page, so to speak, we need to be clear about what I mean by “Western universities, post-colonialism, cosmopolitanism and non-foundational epistemology.” When referring to Western universities I include Western-styled universities regardless of their location. Post-colonialism is an exceedingly complex and diverse field in which there is considerable disagreement over the term itself. In this context post-colonialism refers to the ambiguous struggle to identify and analyse the dominant practices of Western higher education and how marginalised and disempowered social groups resist and disrupt their disprivileging power arrangements and construct alternative, more socio-culturally inclusive futures *together* (Ashcroft, 2001; Eijkman et al., 2005; Verran, 2001;). The term cosmopolitanism refers to the ability of people to transcend localised cultural identities and conventions and engage in transnational, trans-cultural practices. The ability to do so is largely reserved for elites and supported by a neo-colonial higher education sector. I argue for a more inclusive and egalitarian approach that includes marginalised socio-cultural groups. Last but not least the term ‘non-foundational epistemology’ refers to an understanding of the nature of knowledge that recognises that knowledge does not directly reflect the real world but is always socially constructed, that is, mediated by socio-culturally situated knowers (Crotty, 1998; Williams, 2001).

The paper presents the key features of a non-foundational Web 2.0-based architecture of postcolonial learning in three steps. I first set the stage by pointing out how, despite massification and internationalisation, the form of educational practices of Western higher education reflects the culture, language, and literacy practices supportive of Western elites. This makes current internationalisation mostly a neo-colonial practice. Second, in response, I identify the prerequisite elements of a post-colonial learning architecture that encourages the formation of a more socially just vernacular (or egalitarian) form of cosmopolitanism both within and outside the world of higher education. Third, I conclude by showing how non-foundational Web 2.0 based network-centric learning provides a powerful lever for constructing such culturally inclusive and epistemologically

respectful learning spaces by virtue of its enhanced capacity for collaborative transcultural negotiation.

Internationalization as a Neo-Colonial Practice

In Western nations, if not to some extent across the sector globally, higher education has, over the span of the last few decades, experienced three major transitions: massification, internationalisation, and Web-assisted learning. The first two refer to the influx of local and later foreign student groups that have significantly increased the culturally diverse make-up of its student population. The last comprises a huge technological shift in the design and use of learning spaces.

Propelled by the twin drivers of massification and internationalisation the higher education sector has experienced a vast increase in student numbers and the cultural diversity of its student population. Massification refers to the widening of the student body to include, for the first time, large numbers of students from non-mainstream social groups such as from working class, indigenous, rural, and migrant communities. This opened the academy to vast numbers of students who do not share the dominant ways-of-being-in-the-world: the culture, language, and literacy practices of the dominant and dominating elite for whom higher education was designed. Despite this influx of cultural and discursive diversity, the culture, language, and literacy practices of the distinctly urban elite continues to dominate the academy's curricular and teaching practices (Zamel & Spack, 1998). This locally based injection of culturally diverse students was soon followed by a wave of culturally diverse foreign students. Although arguably predominantly middle class, international students provide an additional influx of cultural, linguistic and, most importantly, epistemological diversity. However to date neither curriculum nor teaching practices have been substantively transformed to meet the learning needs of these academic immigrants.

Thus, while our classrooms now constitute richly diverse transcultural and multi-epistemological environments, all students are required to conform to essentially mono-cultural, mono-linguistic, and mono-epistemic discursive practices (Eijkman, 200; Gee, 1999). With few exceptions, mainstream educational practices continue to (a) privilege the elite knowledges of the Western Indigenous Knowledge System, (b) impose English as the 'natural,' 'neutral' and 'value-free' *lingua franca* of learning and teaching (Phillipson, 1992), and (c) limit itself to an ad hoc focus on content rather than on form (Eijkman, 2004). There appears to be a great reluctance to adapt academic practices to these new transcultural learning spaces and accommodate culturally diverse ways of knowing (epistemologies) let alone diversify our language and literacy practices. Western oriented academic

literacy practices and their cultural underlay remain dominant and thereby disprivilege non-dominant discourses. In addition, the demanded mastery of an illusory, pure, unified academic English regardless of student background is nothing less than “a veiled assertion of colonial sovereignty in classrooms” (Low & Palulis, 2004, p. 20). It is not surprising therefore that in Australia for example the completion rates of non-mainstream students tends to remain problematic and foreign students struggle with their English-only environments (Eijkman, 2004). Actions to address cultural and linguistic diversity have bypassed mainstream curricula, being largely limited to supplementary, not-for-credit, academic literacy and English language programs, while even then their availability and adequacy varies considerably. These access programs and internationalisation practices, while necessary, are insufficient to address cultural disprivileging. The former ignores equity in the classroom and the latter is preoccupied with content while ignoring the underlying form of disprivileging educational practices. Consequently these peripheral adjustments have little impact on improving the learning outcomes of non-mainstream and foreign students (Eijkman, 2004). This refusal to recognise the deeply negative impact of discursive and epistemic disprivileging implicates Western higher education in neo-colonial practices and in promoting a distinctly elite form of cosmopolitanism. The ability to traverse the globe, participate in the global economy, and watch CNN from five star hotels serviced by Filipino maids is predominantly the prerogative of an emergent transnational capitalist class (Sklair, 2000). Not surprisingly, today’s cosmopolitan choir sings with a distinct, well educated, Western accent.

How can we promote a more socially inclusive transcultural higher education sector that actively fosters a vernacular, a much more egalitarian cosmopolitanism in which peoples from marginalised social groups can engage as equals in socio-economic and politically transformative global practices? It is here that both epistemology and online learning can, together, play an increasingly important role. A shift to a non-foundational epistemology that operates from the standpoint that all knowledge is socially constructed so that there are no automatic ‘universal’ (read ‘Western’) Truths is a necessary precondition for genuine transcultural learning at both the local and international level. And it is Web 2.0 with its social networking tools that provides us with the technology to do so for students engaged in distance learning. Let us explore, in turn, the breakthrough benefits each of these offer non-mainstream students.

Towards a Post-colonial Learning Architecture

While international students value participation in Western higher education their so-called ‘international’ experience guides them into a distinctly Western elite cultural landscape. It locks these students into the specifically Western tradition of

scientific inquiry imbued with a value-neutral objectivist stance and a spirit of individuality and competitiveness. While much is of value, this long dominant tradition has great difficulty balancing the acculturation of non-mainstream students into a Western worldview with a respectful acceptance of their cultural and epistemic traditions and Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS). This dominant knowledge system represents a way of knowing that, steeped in a liberal vision of progress and enlightenment, is deemed by its adherents to constitute a set of self evident universal core truths (Eijkman, 2004). There is therefore scant regard for developing and nurturing the values, beliefs and wisdoms of students from non-mainstream and non-Western cultures that are central to their identity formation. There is little evidence that transcultural higher education acknowledges, respects, and gives the culturally embedded knowledges, wisdoms, and discursive practices of non-dominant social groups a place in its curricular practices (Eijkman, 2004; Kopong & Teasdale, 2000). Thus, for many local and foreign students, higher education is and remains an unfamiliar and strange cultural and epistemic environment. Many, be they working class students in Australia, First Nation peoples in the U.S., or indigenous students in South Africa, experience a significant, and at times disabling, dissonance between the dominant knowledges and discursive practices imposed on them from ‘without’ and the dominant knowledges and discursive practices they have inherited from ‘within’ (Mel, 2000). This uncritical acceptance of the dominant Western scientific tradition and its educational practices creates adversarial social identities and knowledge systems and legitimizes cultural imperialism (Gergen, 2003). This empowers epistemic violence as both marginalised peoples and their Indigenous Knowledge Systems are positioned as ‘different’ and ‘deficient.’ Our curricula continue to impose a Western episteme: Western structures of knowledge and its discourses that ignore and devalue other epistemes.

A post-colonial critique however argues not against the Western knowledge paradigm *in toto* but against its uncritically accepted dominance and the consequences thereof (e.g. Eijkman, 2004; Harding 2006; Mutua & Swadener, 2004). As Soto points out,

we are the ‘colonized’, feeling the consequences of the Eurocentric, scientifically driven epistemologies in which issues of power and voice are drowned by the powerful ‘majority’ players reflecting the ‘master’s’ ideology. For us, *there is no postcolonial*, as we live our daily realities in suffocating spaces forbidding our perspectives, our creativity, our wisdom (2004, p. ix, original emphasis).

I argue for a better more socially just balance, one that more equitably blends ‘Western’ with many other ‘local’ knowledges and wisdoms. I argue for a greater emphasis on recognizing and responding to cultural differences at the most

fundamental levels of epistemology so that all students can draw on the accumulated wisdom of their own epistemic traditions and knowledge systems and engage successfully with a dynamic and technologically oriented world economy (Gee, 2000; Kopong & Teasdale, 2000). While many internationalisation practices are of considerable value (e.g., Carroll & Ryan, 2005) they ignore deeper and more fundamental issues around epistemology; about very different ways of knowing. They fail to address the disprivileging of other knowledge systems and the linguistic imperialist tendencies of 'English only' practices (Low & Palulis, 2004). Accepting a wider array of knowledge systems is essential if we are to support dialogue with marginalized cultures and create a cosmopolitan world for ordinary peoples. The re-imagining of discursive inclusion begins at the level of epistemology. Let me spell out what this means and how we can begin to achieve this.

A post-colonial transcultural curricula works towards substantially different outcomes. Instead of contributing to the marginalisation of other ways of knowing, their linguistic and literacy practices, the commodification of knowledge and relationships, a post-colonial approach rejects, as Bhabha (2004, p. xiv) points out, "a cosmopolitanism of relative prosperity and privilege founded on ideas of progress that are complicit with neo-liberal forms of governance, and free market forces of competition." Instead, a post-colonial perspective foregrounds 'a range of cultural patterns of interaction characterised by personal dialogue, mutuality, and intergenerational sharing and responsibility' (Bowers, 2001). It aims for a vernacular cosmopolitanism that incorporates the perspectives and practices of the least advantaged, such as the inhabitants of national and diasporic minorities rather than those who frequently inhabit the 'imagined communities of silicon valleys and software campuses' (Bhabha, 2004). The challenge is to call into question "the crude thinking of culturally homogenising international projects" (Gough, 2004, p. 3), find ways of disrupting the dominant curricular discourse of the Western academy, and create learning environments in which non-mainstream students can feel that these are 'homely places' in which they can begin to speak as equals (Bhabha, 2004; Spivak, 1988). An important aspect of this process is to 'expose the implicit colonial assumptions of normalcy embedded in the cultural unconscious of academia' and to 'decolonize the space of academic discourse and enable the negotiation of difference' (Carter, 2003). Therefore a post-colonial project:

has to constitute itself on one level as a critique of the academy and academic knowledge as such. It cannot be just "another" way of doing history, cultural studies, literary criticism, ethnography, and the like. Although it is not a narodnik project, which presumes that we must go outside academia to find a more politically, ethically, or

epistemologically advantaged space, the work of [post-colonial curriculum work] is a kind of border war (Beverley, 2000, p. 33)

Post-colonialism invites us to examine our ways of thinking and knowing and how different ways of knowing might create more socially inclusive social futures (Ma Rhea, 2000). To this end we need learning spaces in which all participants can respectfully explore culturally diverse perspectives and epistemologies. A first principle then of a post-colonial approach is to reject the foundational, dualistic, epistemic assumptions and monolinguistic preference inherent in the Western episteme. A non-foundationalist epistemology offers an exciting alternative because it recognizes multiple ways of knowing that are always embedded in specific cultural, spatial, and historic settings and that each embodies specific linguistic and literacy practices. This challenges and disrupts the legitimacy of Western scientific claims to have universal authority when its knowledge claims in fact only constitute culturally relativist Western representations whose power derives from its position of dominance (McConaghy, 2000).

We need to build on cultural and epistemological differences, and ground our practices in learning spaces that constitute democratic (or egalitarian) transcultural contact zones (Pratt, 1992). Egalitarian transcultural contact zones refer to democratic dialogic spaces, discourses, and practices that enable participants to recognize and negotiate different ways of knowing and different language and literacy practices, that incorporate the perspectives of the least advantaged, and are based on the fundamental principle of the “right to difference in equality” (Bhabha, 2004). As such, these egalitarian transcultural contact zones are marked not by cultural and epistemological homogeneity but by ambivalence. They are ‘in-between Third Spaces’, disruptive/productive spaces capable of generating innovative hybrid learning trajectories, participatory positionalities and a vernacular rather than ‘elite’ cosmopolitanism. It is in these ‘in-between Third Spaces’ that are home to neither dominant nor subjugated knowledges that we can critically analyse all epistemologies and knowledge systems without fear or favour and thus hopefully “elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of ourselves” (Bhabha, 2004, p. 56). These egalitarian transcultural contact zones provide a safe space for exploring knowledges, linguistic and literacy practices relevant to the specific lived locations and situations of all participants especially those belonging to traditionally excluded peoples. Participants from already privileged groups can engage in self-reflexive theorizing that critically interrogate their role within relations of power. At the very least this approach highlights the importance of examining the paradigms and the conceptual frameworks within which knowledge and learning are defined. It enables us to step outside our own conceptual frameworks, and begin the learning process from outside the dominant epistemic paradigm (Harding, 2006). In this way new forms of knowledge do not simply subsume existing ways of knowing but widen the range of epistemologies,

languages, and literacy practices that academics and students now have at their disposal (Haraway, 1995).

Thus egalitarian transcultural contact zones are a generative space for vernacular cosmopolitanism in higher education out of which new and more equitable curricular and pedagogical spaces, discourses, and practices emerge. The contact zone is above all a space for negotiation in which all participants, recognizing the socio-cultural and historic complexities of their interrelationships, reject the negation or imposition of subjectivities and their discursive practices. Here subjugation or imposition of socio-culturally based discourses and practices give way to *transcultural negotiation*: dialogue, collaboration, and adaptation in which participants collaborate in reframing and decentering their own knowledge traditions and negotiate trust in each other's contributions to their collective work (Gough, 2003; Pratt, 1992).

I recognise that this is not an easy process. Such dialogues are particularly 'problematic in societies where power and status control participation in deliberation as well as the topics considered appropriate for deliberation' (Parker, Ninomiya, & Cogan, 1999). Moreover in distance education we require virtual learning spaces that enable students and academics to engage effectively in such dialogues. We need Web-based tools that enable the creation of virtual transcultural contact zones. This is where the third wave of massive change in higher education, that of Web-based learning and its recently emerging capacity for social networking, comes into its own. Currently, and although information rather than communication focused, Web 1.0 technologies have enabled more and more non-mainstream/local students to engage in higher education studies regardless of location. It is increasingly in this online environment where richly diverse cultures, languages, customs and literacy practices meet – and meet the inevitable challenge of having to bend to hegemonic academic practices. In such spaces "the colonial smile [still] lingers in the air" (Nandy, 1989, p. 276). Here Web 2.0 social networking provides us with a much more communication oriented platform on which to construct virtual egalitarian transcultural contact zones.

The Third Wave: Online Learning and the Emergent Role of Web 2.0

The third wave of change to hit universities is the widespread introduction of Web-based or online learning. More and more non-mainstream and foreign students learn 'at a distance' in Web-based learning spaces. Yet these information focused Web 1.0 spaces have not as yet enabled educators to easily exploit them successfully for intensive dialogue such as is required for creating egalitarian transcultural contact zones. Although constructivism has begun to shift online

learning in the direction of two-way communication, forums comprise rather stilted communication spaces and many educators still locked into an 'information paradigm' tend to approach forums as an 'add-on' rather than as an important feature of learning (Brown & Duguid, 2002; Eijkman, 2004).

Significant here is the introduction of Web 2.0 social networking and the emergence of a distinctly *social theory of learning* based on a non-foundational epistemology that transcends constructivism and its *theory of social learning*. Web 2.0, built on a non-foundational architecture of participation, promotes a shift from information to interaction and facilitates epistemic openness. Web 2.0 is beginning to drive a change towards more conversational pedagogic practices. The rather minimalist response of educators to the increasingly transcultural composition of their virtual classrooms can be attributed to a lack of transcultural imagination and of suitable online communication technologies. This is where Web 2.0 may well provide us with a way forward.

Web 2.0 refers to a new social phenomenon; to significant changes in web usage. This is because it embraces a new approach to generating and distributing Web content that transforms web sites from isolated information silos to sources of knowledge based on open communication, a decentralization of authority, and a freedom to share and re-use content. I define Web 2.0 as a perceived second generation of web-based applications and services that, designed on ideals of participation, enable individuals anywhere to easily form rich and decentralized social networks based on common interests and to collaboratively create, distribute, share and recreate content from multiple sources, leverage collective intelligence and organize action (O'Reilly, 2005, 2005a).

Web 2.0 social media provide us with a new conceptual framework that uses web technologies in different ways; ways that reject the reproduction of a hegemonic Western liberal individualist ideological orientation that was implicitly built into Web 1.0 usage. The architecture of participation on which web 2.0 is constructed already incorporates a non-foundational mindset. Its implicit 'architecture of participation' has a built-in ethic of cooperation that harnesses the power of the users themselves, which in turn further helps to lower barriers to participation (O'Reilly, 2005). Web 2.0 provides us with a platform and tools such as wikis and blogs that enable us to create richer communicative and collaborative work spaces that lend themselves to the creation of virtual transcultural contact zones. Web 2.0's architecture of social participation and collaboration at least begins to move away from a narrow commitment to the Cartesian scientific-technocratic — progressivist view of reality and the colonizing discourse reinforced by much Web 1.0 based educational computing. The academic wars over Wikipedia are one indication of these epistemic tensions (Eijkman, 2008). Web 2.0's architecture of participation is encouraging the social networking of peoples around the globe

using social media such as wikis, blogs, blog carnivals, mash-ups etc. on an unprecedented scale. Participating via applications built on, and embedded in, a culture of open communication and a decentralization of authority begins to blur lines between the production and consumption of (multiple) knowledges. The capacity for collaborative writing and dialogue begins to problematise hegemonic ways of knowing and the use of English as the (taken-for-granted) language of choice. Although it is at this point open to the criticism that it may still marginalise some minorities due to lack of access to or confidence in emerging technologies, it does enable peoples from marginalised social groups (the subaltern) 'to speak'. For example see <http://www.avaaz.org/en/> ('Avaaz' means 'Voice' in many Asian, Middle Eastern and Eastern European languages) and www.GetUp.org.au. Because Web 2.0 is designed to facilitate global knowledge sharing, participants face the challenge of having to negotiate multiple ways of knowing and communicating.

In formal education, such as in transcultural higher education environments, Web 2.0 provides us with multiple spaces for communication and collaboration in which it is now easier to create ICT enabled transcultural contact zones within which participants from around the globe can engage in more egalitarian transcultural dialogue and epistemic negotiation. Web 2.0's socially driven usages incorporate a different epistemic premise; there is an acknowledgement that language, thinking, learning, and literacy practices are rooted in the epistemic patterns of cultural groups, that the perspectives of the marginalised deserve to be heard, and that epistemic negotiations are an essential prerequisite to respectful egalitarian dialogue. Web 2.0 also enables us to frame our online interactions not in terms of the colonizing discourse of individual empowerment but in terms of *interdependence* that is in terms of our membership in and responsibilities to wider global and epistemically diverse communities of practice.

Conclusion

It is clear from the ways in which people from all walks of life engage in the emerging plethora of blogs and wikis for example that Web 2.0 invites us to rethink radically our educational use of the Web (Anderson 2007; Owen et al., 2006). It enables us much more easily to create post-colonial learning spaces as egalitarian transcultural contact zones. We can now much more readily connect our students not just to their localities, their places of learning, to each other, but also to a huge and ever-expanding diversity of social, cultural, political networks — and therefore to multiple ways of being, knowing, and communicating. Web 2.0's architecture of participation allows us to construct much more immersive learning experiences that build on a social theory of learning (Eijkman, 2008). The socially embedded nature of learning, implicitly embraced in Web 2.0's focus on

social participation and the harnessing of ‘collective intelligence’, can now effectively enable students and academics to engage in their communities of practice and to construct *identities* in relation to them (Wenger, 1999). Web 2.0 enables students and teachers to develop and explore new social ways of non-linear modes of interacting and working. When aligned with a non-foundational educational framework Web 2.0 social technologies enable students and teachers to easily cross epistemic, disciplinary and socio-cultural boundaries and negotiate and interact through shared engagement in the different practices and discourses of dissimilar disciplines and social cultures.

I trust that this exploration will generate a deeper appreciation of epistemological as well as cultural diversity that need to be recognised and responded to and that this paper will stimulate and encourage ongoing conversations about finding new and more fruitful ways of doing justice to marginalised cultures and indigenous knowledge systems in transcultural higher education.

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