

**Looking outside, looking in:
designing courses for educators and policy-makers
in international contexts**

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Abstract: At the School of Education, Kingston University (UK) we have considerable experience in designing and teaching courses which enable educators and policy makers to research their own professional practice, whether in initial teacher education, continuing professional development or across the disciplines. Until recently this has centred largely on the English education system and UK education policy. Expanding the reach of our work to reflect the needs, interests and desires of clients beyond this particular geopolitical map, or of those whose research foci involve cross-cultural exchange, has been an exciting challenge.

In this presentation we will consider two models of Masters level courses that aim to respond to current demands in terms of themes and issues of education in cross-cultural or international settings, as well as to provoke critical, reflexive analysis of our decision-making processes so far. The first of these, MA Education (English Language Teaching) reflects an expressed need among students, teachers and educators for opportunities to develop their capability to teach the English Language, in their own setting, to a high level of pedagogy and practice. In designing this course we have located ELT within a contextual framework of the English National Curriculum, current and recent historical practices of English teaching in the UK and key interrelated areas such as teaching for inclusion and multimedia developments. The second, MA Education (International), mindful of the many controversies and dilemmas of policy makers and practitioners in educative settings (Education, the Social Sciences, the 'Caring Professions'), offers similar themes, but with a particular emphasis on the nature and role of education in matters of global concern. Both courses provide enhanced opportunities to develop appropriate research skills such as self-study, action research and comparative methods. Our presentation aims to unpack some of our experiences to date and to invite audience observation and critique.

Keywords: English Language, Global Education, Professional Identity, Reflexivity, Self-Study.

Perspective

This work is at a formative stage of development. Methodologically the study builds on prior work (Perselli, 2006) posing questions about the nature of self-study beyond its 'home ground' of pre-service teacher education; until now predominantly located in the English-speaking world. In this paper I speculated on self-study as a methodology that is currently practised primarily among teacher educators and Higher Education faculty in the USA and internationally, towards the improvement of practice in initial teacher training, for which there is a substantive (and growing) body of published research and practical, professional knowledge (Loughran *et al* 2004); Loughran & Russell, 2005, 2006). I wondered whether the method could be extended to areas such as curriculum or course design and development and the role that educational managers play in effecting programmes of teaching and learning in areas of education not directly linked to extant, *local* training regimes. More specifically, I wondered what relevance the self-study of our practices as course designers might have to an

international audience such as APERA. Was there a 'blended' discussion that could emerge around policy and practice in this area, to our mutual benefit?

The question is important because, whilst ontology is vitally important, a central tenet of self-study - contrary to what the term might imply - is that it is rarely conducted alone or necessarily with 'self' as the ultimate goal for the generation of new knowledge. Self-study aspires at all times to be both interactive and highly discursive. It is concerned with the co-construction of knowledge through practical action and reflection on action. The actor strives thus to make explicit his or her intentions, actions, consequences; i.e. what has been learned in the course of a teaching episode (which may be represented through words, artefacts, pictures or moving images) as embodied and contextual knowledge, on the axes of personal/professional, self/social. This process will frequently be conducted with and through 'significant others' acting as participants, collaborators or coresearchers. Therefore, whilst the ontological position of the actor, taking ownership of his or her stance (values, beliefs) regarding what takes place is highly significant, this will always be in supportive, critical and educative (Lomax, 1999) relations with others and the ongoing, dynamic nature of teaching and learning.

Adopting a self-study approach to my own work as project manager of the two MA courses (in which students will likewise be encouraged to conduct self-study and/or action research projects at the dissertation stage of the award), I wonder about the extent to which being English educators in England influences our approach and choices (curricular material, delivery styles, assessment modes, etc.) and our ability to project beyond this known environment. I wonder especially about the international students who might be attracted to courses which, whilst demonstrating the nature of English teaching in England at the present time, will encourage them to make critical, comparative analyses with their own experiences, probably within a range of international settings. My hope is that this process will enable us all to reflect more deeply on the relationship of language and language teaching to cultural and identity formations, at a time when the hegemony of the English language (Macedo, Dendrinos & Gounari, 2003) is already under scrutiny.

This is particularly problematic, for example, with regard to the teaching of English as an Additional Language (EAL) in England; where the assumption still tends to be that children who are multilingual need to acquire fluency in English primarily in order to be inducted into the National Curriculum of this country. As Macedo et al (*ibid.* 2003) argue, speaking of Europe in general, 'Western homogenization discourses are very evident in foreign and second language education practices. Second language teaching in schools, which is said to provide "equal opportunities" for upward mobility to the young of minority groups, has actually aimed at the assimilation of students into the dominant culture' (p. 97). What is ironic here is that the 'dominant culture' of the English education system - the National Curriculum and National Literacy Strategy - is a very particular, politically and ideologically motivated version of culture that does not actually represent the UK as a whole. 'National' pertains only to England and Wales, not Scotland or Northern Ireland, which have their own curricula and teaching methods. What constitutes Englishness in terms of the curriculum (and how to represent this in syllabi etc.) has thus already been separated out ideologically and in practical terms from what constitutes Britishness; something we found syntactically annoying, to say the least, when attempting to write course materials that reflect the British education system. In the course module entitled Teaching English Language and Literature, for example, are we referring exclusively to what is currently taught in schools in England and Wales, or across the UK?

So why would students want to participate in our courses? A safe or relatively simple option would be to assume that what students want is in-depth experience of the English/British education system (if we could finally organise that in our own minds) which can then be inserted into the system of their home countries. The assumption here is that the British/English system appeals because it has been largely successful in raising standards of achievement and bringing about cultural improvements and material benefits to all; and that this is unproblematically transferable across the globe. Visiting the various UK government websites on education and looking even superficially at how education is represented in the mass media, it becomes immediately obvious that the issues are far more complex; with on the one hand educational success being claimed in order to maintain the status quo (for example when appealing to voters at election time), and on the other scare tactics ('moral panics, 'policy hysteria' (Stronach & MacLure, 1997) being used by both opposition parties (to weaken the long-standing domination of New Labour), and by Labour itself to justify its interventionist approach in education. Some policy analysts would argue that this form of politicisation of education, which dates back to the era pre Margaret Thatcher (Perselli, 2007), may have damaged teachers' professional autonomy, and may better serve a business ethic and agenda than teachers' traditional commitments to issues such as social justice, diversity and equity (Tidwell & Fitzgerald 2006).

Reflecting on the roles of teachers and the positioning of the teaching profession, how our identities are constructed in these various scenarios (Weber, Mitchell & O'Reilly-Scanlon, 2005) illustrates for this author especially some of the tensions between modernist and postmodernist interpretations of 'progress'; of what education is and what it is for. Speculating on the motivations and aspirations of students wanting to do Masters level work in either English Language Teaching or International Education also highlights other more specific tensions between, as already mentioned, the English language hegemony, economic rationality, traditional social justice ideals, as well as notions of heritage, culture and nationality, that are never straightforward.

In simplistic terms, when engaging in course design and construction, what particular images of ourselves (as native speakers of English, as teachers of English in England, as individual and collective representatives of British culture or heritage, are we projecting? What might be *our* main motivations for wanting these courses to succeed? Material benefits to the institution? Personal and professional prowess? And when thinking very specifically about education in the service of equity and diversity (Griffiths et al, 2004. pp. 651-708), or attempting to locate equity and diversity - as it is understood or experienced in the West - within global contexts, how can these particular motivations, values and commitments be realised in the practice whilst avoiding an inappropriate imposition of Western, democratic or socialist ideals (Perselli, 2007)?

Method

In order to render these questions researchable a multilayered approach seems most applicable. Liz Thomas (2006), in her work using international comparative research on access and success in Higher Education, warns against 'cherry picking' (McGrath, 2001, p. 398 in Thomas, *ibid.*) or 'naive borrowing' when making comparative analyses of educational practices between countries or cultures. Rather than looking superficially at what appears to work well in one context and then emulating this elsewhere, she argues that a variety of different perspectives need to be considered in order to come to understand the complex ways in which education affects individuals and groups. Regarding policy, for

example, Thomas lists consideration of policy as espoused, policy as enacted and policy as experienced, as part of the analytic process. This is not incompatible with what is, again, arguably central to the self-study methodology, whereby in-depth autobiographical and case-study approaches, especially when carried out collaboratively, will always reveal the tensions that exist between what teachers and educators believe, think, say and do (Loughran *et al*, 2004; Loughran, 2005 pp. 5-16). Thomas further advocates dialogue as a strong element of method since this fosters mutual learning, so that ‘discourses on cases and discourses on variables [...] develop into extended dialogues between ideas and evidence’ (Evans *et al*, 1999, p. 1 in Thomas, *ibid.*). Thus she uses a blend of statistical analysis, policy critique and collaborative or participant inquiry. Indeed, the title and content of her recent work ‘From a distance you can see more clearly’ resonates further with the concept of self-study as coming to know one’s own practice through both looking outwards and looking within; observation of the Self in educative relations with the Other(s) as active research participants (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2004, p. 616). In our case this is interpreted in terms of designing courses in areas of policy and practice that we think we know well (as insiders), but for the first time tacking a step back and looking at this through the eyes and experiences of our international students in a comparative stance.

With regard to theory in the literature, it is envisaged that P. Bourdieu’s concepts of *capital*, *habitus* and *field* (Lane, 2000) will most likely offer a rich array of methodological tools prompting discussion around issues such as motivations and intentions, learning agendas and professional development, both among ourselves as teaching team members and in conjunction with participants on the two MAs. This will be exemplified in our session for APERA, not least in response to the headings signalled in the conference Call: access and equity in education, changes in language education and medium of instruction, reforms in curriculum, *etc.*

Data Sources

The data sources consist presently of pre and post validation course materials e.g. Field Specs, Module Directories and Module Guides, also the observations and feedback from the validity team and other critical friends, e mail correspondence relating to course design and syllabi, and conference presentation notes. A brief ‘competitor analysis’ has already highlighted generic similarities and differences in the conceptualisation of the two MAs and this will be briefly referenced. By 2007 it should be possible to document demographic information on student applications to the two courses. By 2008 the first cohort of students will be already participant and their responses and profiles will be incorporated, as appropriate and with due ethical caveats. At the heart of the research however lies the interpretations we the course tutors make of our own practices, at which site the self-study modality may be most effectively forefronted.

Importance of the Study

Strong arguments in favour of developing international courses in education have proliferated in recent years, aimed at both international and home students. Some of these have been identified above, including ones with more or less altruistic motives and ones driven by economic rationality (with implicit speculation regarding whether there can be intersections between the two or if they are, in essence, mutually exclusive). Critical discourse around drivers for change will form part of the contextualisation of the study, not least as means towards identification of values and standpoints of the actors involved. The major quest however is an articulation of enhanced pedagogy; as this relates to discrete subject areas and course design, as it relates to self-study research conducted in this less

familiar area of practice among tutors in higher education; what we may learn, reflexively (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000), about ourselves as educators. This hinges on an understanding of 'practice as a critical and theory-building process' (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2004 p. 614). Emphasis will be placed on the significance of knowledge generation that is situated and contextual, coherent with a desire to resist hegemonic or colonising tendencies performed through unproblematised notions of what education may achieve on a 'global' scale.

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