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Towards the new exclusive in internationalisation

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Speakers' Corner

“Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) is considered an inclusive form of internationalisation because it would be accessible to all students. We challenge this assumption by exploring three exclusion mechanisms and make a plea for research into inclusion mechanisms that make COIL truly collaborative.”

We have ample evidence that traditional internationalisation, understood as mobility of students and staff is quite exclusive. Seeking a degree abroad is costly and only accessible to few students. Also, credit mobility is for a selected group of students. In the European Union, the Erasmus programme removes financial barriers for mobility and thus potentially brings study abroad within reach of all students. Yet mindsets often prevent students from taking this opportunity. This caused Saarikallio-Torp and Wiers-Jenssen (2010, pp. 44-45) to refer to these students as a ‘cultural elite’.

Partly in response to the exclusive character of mobility, internationalisation at home emerged, which is aimed at all students. But also within internationalisation at home, exclusion mechanisms are at work. If internationalisation at home is misunderstood as delivering internationalised electives, these will also only reach a minority of students. Integrating internationalisation at home into the core curriculum requires engagement and expertise of academics, which is a recurring issue in international higher education. More recently, Virtual Exchange (and its most intensive variety: Collaborative Online International Learning or COIL) has emerged as a potential instrument to engage all students in internationalisation. Yet, even when students can potentially participate in COIL, exclusion mechanisms come to light in the form of lack of bandwidth and devices, which has been major issue with campuses being closed during the COVID pandemic, highlighting pre-existing major inequalities among COIL participants (see Jacobs et al., 2021).

Another issue that emerged is the lack of alignment of COIL

with other components of internationalisation in the curriculum, leading to COIL practices as stand-alone activities (Beelen, Wimpenny & Rubin, 2021). Inequalities between academics have also come to the fore, with some academics feeling confident in the complex process of designing inclusive learning environments, crafting internationalised learning outcomes, incorporating the principles of Collaborative Learning, dealing with the hidden curriculum and with teaching and learning in a second (or third) language. Many other academics however, felt that they needed support to engage them in COIL.

As yet, we do not know much about exclusion mechanisms within COIL practices, but we can suspect that some of them correspond with those in physical international classrooms (see e.g. Leask, 2010). Below, we explore three relevant but less obvious exclusion mechanisms.

Three less obvious exclusion mechanisms

Several exclusion mechanisms in the physical (international) classroom operate in specific ways in online international classrooms and adjacent educational activities, often exacerbating existing exclusions while hindering emerging opportunities for inclusion that online education may offer. Over the past year, much has been discussed and written (McKinney, Hall & Lowden, 2021; Grover, 2021) on inclusive pedagogies (Zembylas, 2019) and student experiences of exclusion online due to the sudden global move to online education (Nas, 2021). Three stand out with regard to COIL; assessment, learning styles and the hidden curriculum.

Assessment

Feelings of dissociation have been expressed by many students involved in online course work (Kanik, 2021), making student engagement and connection a particular challenge for COIL which has collaboration at its heart. ‘Teaching to test’ (e.g. Robinson, 2015; Addison & McGee, 2015) is teaching that is solely configured around summative assessments, commonly placed at the end of the course work, which engenders a narrow and linear focus in educational online encounters with very little room for active participation, flexibility and midway adaptation to students’ life worlds, interests and needs.

In contrast, participatory assessment (Astle et al., 2020; Van Staple & Many in press) entails a combination of continuous and mutual evaluation moments and assessments between students and teachers (in which the teachers also participate to learn, adapt and improve) that is threaded through the online course work. This allows students to be active players in feedback processes, working with and applying information from each other to future learning tasks while also learning to offer each other feedback, including teachers. Such a mutual and collaborative learn-



Perspective from The Netherlands

ing-oriented approach of formative assessments (rather than just summative assessments) in an online context ideally underpins the entire teaching and learning process of online education.

Learning styles

Another advantage of participatory assessments in online education relates to the possibilities to adapt to diverse learning styles, aspirations and needs. While recognition of diverse learners has become more prominent in academic debates on off- and online education, modalities of inclusion are often organised in auxiliary ways rather than integrated into the fundamentals of online educational collaboration. Subsequently, specific assumptions about (academic) cognition, culture and knowledge continue to underpin online learning spaces. This issue becomes more poignant online where disconnect may manifest quicker, may be more difficult to remedy and may have far more reaching consequences. Offering students more space to choose and enact their preferred learning styles and translate these collectively to a variety of learner-generated content, exercises and assignments contributes to an inclusive and effective learning experience for all.

The hidden curriculum and hidden pedagogies

Assumptions regarding learning styles also connect to broader but perhaps more covert normativities that govern (academic) morality, principles and suitability. Entrenched in such often elusive ethics are particular ideas about race, class and gender (etc.) that engender processes of othering which may be less tangible (from a dominant viewpoint) but which have wide-ranging exclusionary implications for all students (though in diverse ways depending on their context-bound positionalities). This is often analysed by using the conceptual lens of 'hidden curriculum' (Giroux, 1978), which alludes to all those norms, morals and power dynamics that shape learner experiences within specific (online) educational settings. An important question to ask here is: 'hidden to whom?', given that students (and teachers) who are positioned as 'others' are often acutely aware of the exclusionary tendencies of 'hidden' curricula. By way of an anthropological device called 'making the familiar strange', such structures can be exposed, even if partially, and further interrogated and countered by using an inclusivity framework.

However, 'hidden pedagogies' (Brown, 2019), i.e. theories of teaching and learning that underscore teaching practices are often overlooked in such endeavours. Many teachers lack awareness of how deeply socialised they have become regarding specific colonial beliefs about what teaching is, how students learn, who students are and what the role of

the teacher is. Notwithstanding, hidden pedagogies acutely shape their instructional decisions and therefore actions as they interact with students. Without critical reflection on authority, positionality and power in pedagogies, teachers may automatically rely on exclusive scaffoldings built with colonial and neo-liberal notions of productivity, efficiency and meritocracy.

Conclusion and actions to undertake

While COIL is often presented as an inclusive form of internationalisation, reality demonstrates that this is a simplification. COIL, possibly more than other educational interaction, requires a critical approach to a) participatory assessment, b) including diverse learning styles, and c) hidden curriculum and pedagogies to counter hegemonic praxis by opening up to a pluralized framework of mutual learning.

In order to understand exclusion mechanisms in COIL better, we need research that reaches beyond case studies of individual COIL practices. Above all we need to identify mechanisms that make COIL truly collaborative and inclusive.

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