

Learning Agency: The Interactional Negotiation of Difference and Identity in Group Work

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Abstract

The paper draws on mediative research analysing interaction between home, European and international students in a London university through observations, interviews, and workshops. It argues for an integrative approach to mediative research into student interaction combining insights from interactional discourse approaches with consideration of world-system and postcolonial contexts as they articulate with subject area – here fashion – as a means to transformative intervention. Internationalisation for home students is seen to mean moving from Eurocentric to inter-/transnational frames of reference but also interactional styles, and for institutions, to include developing the outlook, practices and curricula to mediate that.

Keywords

internationalisation; conversation analysis; intercultural communication; de-Westernisation

Introduction

The following is a consideration of implications for internationalisation of curriculum content of interaction patterns of students involved in group project work, and the need for an interdisciplinarity of research and delivery able to intervene transformatively among them. Within the local London context, this meant seeking to foster globally outward-looking student behaviours, so it is fitting that I should return to at the end to a discussion of just how much a consideration of the entirely different, but nevertheless intimately related issues presented by others at this conference from locations around the world help situate it.

The project focus was on the interaction between what are called within the British HE system home, international, and European students. In this institutional usage, 'international' means not British or European in citizenship, and 'European' refers, not to the continent, but the political union. Each of the terms is problematic, however. As Bourdieu points out, such ethnic or regional terms being objectifying constructions, their use by researchers can never pretend to neutrality, objectivity being better sought in a description of the symbolic and material uses made of them (1982: 140-141). 'Home' may potentially imply territorial rights, for instance, and the term 'local' that Chinese students, particularly, often use to refer to British peers may be preferable in that respect. Similarly, to deny the status of European to a student from outside the European *Union* may play into essentialist discourses around membership bids – of Turkey, for instance – making 'European Union student' preferable. The restricted use of the term 'international' potentially articulates with prevalent hegemonic Western discourses according to which only the ethnic 'other' has identifiable culture (Baumann 1996; Wetherell and Potter 1992), and may feed the complacency concerning the need to adopt global outlooks on the part of some local students (or indeed staff/curricula).

However, the power in naming does not belong equally to all, and the sense of the terms (the groups defined) is part of the institutional situation of students and staff alike, embedded in fee structures, attendance policies and resource allocations, including to the research funding behind the present project. My approach within this article, then, will be to problematise them, but, importantly, not to pretend that this can occur merely at the descriptive level, or that they do not refer to institutional realities and connect, at times, with students' own categories. It is also worth noting that behaviour is frequently on the basis categories which remain at once fuzzy, vague, fluid (contextually mobilised), and tacit. One and the same student may at one point be oriented to as 'international', at another as 'marketing student' (rather than design), another 'East Asian', and another 'slightly older', 'female' or whatever. Thus the terms that I will use as a researcher will also be fluid, frequently a best guess based on what can be observed on the moment combined with interview data, but necessarily informed also by the research agenda.

For the project arose within the institutional context of the categories themselves and from the groups that they constitute. It was prompted by anecdotes in the language support context, - classes provided specifically (differentially) for international students, that is – who had frequently reported feeling sidelined from decision making in the group project work on their main courses by local students. Reflecting

anecdotal and other evidence from elsewhere in the university, this was the basis of a funding bid for strands explicitly supporting the ‘international student experience’.

The aim of the project was to identify issues causing difficulty, dissatisfaction, or impeded outcomes within group work and to share the findings with the students so as improve communication through awareness and skills work. Specifically, since international students were already having classes targeted at helping them to adapt to the culture of the college as new to them, the idea was extend the principle to all students: to ensure that local students, too, learned to adopt appropriate communication practices to an environment which, to them, too, was novel.

Literature and Methodology

The methodology has three strands, roughly equating with the levels of intervention that this paper suggests, but also disciplinary divisions. I will not try to be exhaustive within any one, the aim being specifically to argue for a disciplinarily integrative approach. Theoretical issues related to linguistics models have been tested in conferences, and the intention is to do so further in independent articles.

In the literature on internationalisation, there is a growing body of data from research in comparable HE institutions (for example, Australia and the U.S.; that is, both nations with English language dominance, whose international academic capital is connected to a position at the economic core, Western cultural traditions, and a colonising rather than colonised history), frequently replicating the sorts of feelings expressed by students prior to, and then within, the present project. Brown (2009), Lee and Rice (2007), Volet (2004), for instance, discuss international students’ feeling sidelined in group project work in findings that are concerningly typical.

Observational data from previous studies is more rare. Leki (2001) corroborates similar interview findings with observation of a small group in an American university (though, in a common limitation, only interviews international students). Jones *et al.* (1995) found related domination in experimental situations by Australian male home students with Chinese peers (the findings did not replicate for females, the gender of the vast majority of students in the present project, and all transcriptions here). However, this was limited by the artificial nature of the experimental approach. More problematically still, and not untypically of the field, the research accepts national and cultural identities at face value treating them as an independent variable, rather than questioning these as constructions, and so fails to respond to the formidable gauntlet cast by Said at the feet of the researcher, including of ‘home’ / ‘international’ student relations: ‘Can one divide human reality [...] into clearly different cultures [...] and survive the consequences humanly?’ (1995: 45)

Observationally, a methodology with particularly fine tools to avoid this is Conversation Analysis, which allows a focus on how (and if) participants themselves orient to, and so interactionally accomplish ethnic type identity (I use this term to cover the range of identifications from ‘international’ and ‘home’ to ‘western versus eastern’ (to quote interview data) that students mobilise). To take a typical example, Mori (2003) discusses how American and Japanese students in self-initiated informal language learning encounters in Japan engage in ‘conversational procedures [which] often, but not always, exhibit the participants’ orientation to the “interculturality” of

these interactions, and at the same time, how this interculturality is used as a resource for organizing the interaction' (2003: 144). The methodological procedures in this sort of work allowed me as a researcher to seek to avoid simply projecting the 'international', 'home', or related categories onto students regardless of interactional relevance.

However, Conversation Analysis, with its exclusive focus on the interactional moment, cannot alone account for orientations to macro environmental phenomena. If, and when, student 'members' did 'accomplish' ethnic identity (in the terms of the discipline), this by no means appeared to be on the basis of self-presence or overt willing alone, but was a response to contextual features over which their control was limited.

Rampton (2005) and Bucholtz (2011) are useful in conceiving ways of addressing external agencies within interactions. They furnish complimentary examples of interdisciplinary linguistic methodologies drawing on ethnographic, discourse based, and cultural studies approaches, for instance, to trace how students negotiate - produce and reproduce, but also challenge - hegemonic discourses and practices of ethnicity embedded within contexts, including the educational.

However, what also emerged from the data was that macro features, even of a 'world system' sort (Wallerstein 2004), though they clearly related to the local interactional level, never did so by some direct and massive determinism, but always on the terms of what was locally going on. And what was locally going on, of course, much of the time, was teaching and learning of a specific subject: fashion. For, as Bourdieu and Delsaut (1975) identified, the field of fashion has its own very specific logics characterised by homologies with but also differences from other fields. To identify the strategic ends to which the mobilisation of identifications such as ethnicity could be put in the competition for symbolic capital required, as will be seen, consideration not of an abstract or merely economic system, for instance, but also fashion as a context of culture.

The argument of this paper, supported by the interactional data, is that straddling these disciplinary divisions is not only of theoretical, but also practical importance, allowing effective research, but also transformation. 'Transformative learning [...] is the process of effecting change in a frame of reference', with 'ethnocentrism' one such frame (Mezirow 1997: 5). The theme of the present conference leads me to reflect on this change in three areas, only one directly students.

Hymes, an ethnographer of communication with an eye always on the interface of structure and interaction (frequently within educational contexts), suggests that 'The proper role [of the researcher] should not be "extractive" but mediative. It should be to help communities be ethnographers of their own situations, to relate their knowledge usefully to general knowledge' (1996: 1528). This was a principle at the heart of the project: to transform the students' understandings of themselves and each other, and so their behaviour, by sharing observational research among them with them in mediative interventions. What I perhaps could not have predicted was the degree of transformation in my own understanding of the students as well as of culture more generally and its research. For this I am undoubtedly as indebted to the

participants who shared their experiences and understanding with me as they are, I hope, to me for my analyses and advice.

But there is also a third area of change. As Ryan and Carroll suggest: ‘The presence of increased numbers of international students presents opportunities to re-assess not just how we teach but also the role and functions of the university as institution’ (2005: 9). Transformative learning, that is, must occur at the institutional level. The college initiatives forming the context of the present research (including the funding offer in the first place and changes put in place as a response, but also entirely independent work by colleagues, whether piecemeal or, increasingly, in co-ordination) bear witness to the fact that the conference theme is as applicable to pedagogical institutions seeking to address ethnocentric academic frameworks as to the increasingly diverse students they teach. On one level, this means internationalised curriculum content of the sort outlined by Leask (2013) or in Thussu (2009), say. But what I hope to establish here is that this can best be accompanied by mediative research-end efforts to relate it right back down to the face-to-face.

Observations Discussion

The research involved eighteen hours of observation, interviews and mediative workshops, mostly recorded and transcribed. Further, more have been conducted since, broadly confirming the patterns outlined here. Participants were Year 1 FDA students (roughly equivalent to BA Year 1) of fashion business, including design, marketing, and buying and merchandising, for instance, engaged in group project work. Throughout, I use a simplified version of the full transcription system used for research/presentation in specialist linguistics contexts:

IS/HS	International/Home Student
[square brackets]	parallel speech (interruptions), numbers showing order
(round brackets)	inaudible words/ best guess
{braces}	researcher comments
..	short pause
bold	emphatic stress
. Capital,	this punctuation approximately represents spoken sense

Though some truly exciting group work in which out of internationally and ethnically diverse groups, fluid relations and identifications emerged, and genuinely open collaboration, in the worst scenarios more rigid identifications of in- and outgroups helped to construct strong culture-based ‘barriers’ (a frequent interviewee term) in the mobilisation of or amenable to mobilisation for symbolic (fashion) capital. Here, international students had no, or almost no active part in discussion and no, or inadequate attempts were made by others to involve them, leaving them frequently sidelined from decisions.

The focus here will be on features of those more problematic scenarios. The following example is from a seminar. Five students (two British, three Chinese) are brainstorming the relative advantages (presumably for Europeans) of using European and non-European suppliers. IS2 takes notes for the group on an A3 tear sheet for presentation to the class at the end. At one point, IS2 asks for an explanation of a note during which HS2 turns to HS1 and mentions being hungry in a very short extraneous

conversation. The Chinese students continue the brainstorming in English, before whole-group talk begins again. I show the break with parallel columns.

IS2: you can get maybe the [shipping fee]

IS 1: {Mandarin, asking Int Student 3 what she's written}

HS 2: I'm hungry I'm **starving** {quietly and aside}

IS 2: shipping

H S 2: we can **go** (to eat after)

IS 2: Um long lead time

H S 1: I need to go to H&M to get clothes so is it okay if I just

H S 2: yeah sure

HS 1: um the lead time of course

This 'schisming' (Heritage and Clayman 2010: 8895) revealed itself as a pattern, which the tools of Conversation Analysis helped to identify and explain. The talk that occurs between all students, represented by the left hand column, addresses the set seminar topic alone, with restricted topics and predefined speaker roles, matching what is referred to as 'institutional' talk (Heritage and Clayman 2010 is a thorough overview). Another type of interaction is 'lifeworld' or 'ordinary' conversation: freer, not set by the tutor, this was discussion of topics ranging from food to music and light flirtation or dating news. In the observations that I made of seminars, this was exclusively the domain of home/home or roughly equivalent (for participants) groups. Using interviewees' terms, this equivalence mapped 'West versus East' patterns, appearance ('we don't look the same'), for instance, or first language (or rather assumptions about these themselves formed presumably on the basis of the previous categories and accent, in the case of some Singaporean students wrongly believed not to be first language speakers of English).

I selected a banal, short, and independently benign example of schisming. What was problematic was firstly that the pattern was remarkably rigid, to the point of inscribing itself even into the seating plan that emerged, seemingly by unspoken mutual consent at the beginning of each session: the groups sat opposite each other in an alignment such that institutional talk occurred across the table, tying home/international talk to the axis of the AV instructions and the tutor at the top, while lifeworld 'asides' occurred in parallel to, and independently of this axis, between in-group neighbours only. On occasions with less seminar work, there could be almost no cross-group interaction. In one observation of over twenty minutes, the only interruption of largely lifeworld conversation exclusively between home students consisted of two failed attempts by a Chinese peer to join in with a return to institutional talk.

Further, this connection to degrees of participation in social reproduction – lifeworld – was by no means only about discourse style, but was almost always also caught up in aspects of the fashion subject matter as that itself articulated with the global industry and, thereby, aspects of the world economic system. An example occurred when an international student (implicitly identified as ethnically other, being 'touristy' in fashion initiative, earlier in the meeting) offered to show her home peers

a marketing video she and an international peer had made to represent the ‘lifestyle’ of the group’s design. She is about to show it on her iPad when a change to lifeworld chat about British bands occurs, during which she finds herself instructed to search out music videos on the internet. Her joint idea is never again discussed in the following two-and-a-half hours observed:

I1: we don’t wanna show the entire thing// just like.. **parts** of it\ or maybe the [()]
I4: [()] part\=
I1: The **production** process
H1: Are you **literally** gonna do that.. Are you gonn[a do a video or]?
I2: [Um]
H2: [Are you planning on video cause I think video’s the way forward]?
H3: [Oh can I watch the video did you come up with that]?
I2: [Yah].
H2: [Have you] seen um have you checked Wipe Out? um by a band called (band name).
H1: Er **ah** I’ll tell you a **good** one. What’s what’s a [what’s the Peters’ one]?
H2: [ah hah hah (?) about today. Heh heh heh]
H1: The {acquaintance name}’s one? you know {acquaintance name}.
H3: Coeur C O E U R
H1: Yeah. Look on C O
{...}
H1: **This** shows lifestyle

In the competition for power over decision-making, the structural division institutional/lifeworld participation by group membership is mobilised to sideline an idea from international students (here East Asian) as somehow inherently less able to deal effectively in lifestyle.

The connection to the concept of ‘lifeworld’ is not terminological coincidence – both represent the ability to pass beyond a mere business-like approach to fashion to one where ideas come from the spontaneity of life experience in the authentic high-fashion capital urban environment itself. This clearly maps onto wider factors relating world systemic inequalities and what Hardt and Negri identify as a ‘fundamental division of labor within the realm of [the new industries of] immaterial production’ (2000: 3372) - a realm clearly including the production of fashion as symbolic culture. Within this division, affective labour, or production of and from lifestyle capital, becomes associated with economic (and cultural) centres, while the more menial tasks (from manual labour to simple data input) fall to peripheries.

Various theorists have identified this tendency within fashion, its particular re-inscription, as Kondo (1997) discusses with reference to Japanese designers, of the global inequalities onto individuals via, for instance, differential access to the status of design leader on unwillingly ethnicised subjects. Similarly, Skov discusses the tendency of fashion to ‘fill a cosmopolitan form with local content’ (2011: 139), with designers from peripheral cities attributed lower fashion capital. With fashion a central apparatus in articulating identities and roles, spaces and practices, it’s no coincidence, then, that we saw it defining groups in the first extract by lifeworld/institutional differentiation through talk of shopping together at H&M, or, in the second, London heritage mobilised for ‘lifestyle’ capital.

These re-territorialising forces within the field of fashion are not exclusive of deterritorialising, exploratory and creative tendencies, and if, frequently, strategic constructions of difference resulted in the sidelining of international students *as such*, at other times the students would produce more genuinely – and excitingly – international outcomes together. Focus on the more problematic observational data reflects the greater urgency for intervention.

Interview data

Striking in the interview data was the degree to which they not only corroborated what we see in the interactions, but draw on it as evidence of what would frequently be attributed to an essentialised culture as its origin; not as something that groups – including themselves – interactionally produce, but as a deep and unavoidable essence governing them.

Thus a Korean student:

I18: But .. you know Asian people .. they're like.. they listen to people first and decide together everything. .hh but if .. when I talk with home students .. sometimes I can see that they are arguing, like something like EU student and home student or home student and home student, because like .hh you know no 'I think this is this is right', and they they never say oh 'okay'.. then you know just talk and you know .. make it goes right. They always say you know, 'no this is right this is right' and .. like I'm I'm just looking at them and let them you know finish their kind of little arguing, and, yeah that's all and like it's all about we have different culture. [...] they are too different and I I don't understand their thing or their style or even how they handle their coursework, you know in a group or yeah things like that.

This, of course, describes exactly the sort of scenarios in the observations, where behaviour of mostly home students produces precisely what can look like 'just talk'. This interactionally accomplished in- and outgroup construction then itself becomes evidence of essential and deep divisions.

The pattern is mirrored by home students discussing those from the 'Far East':

HS4: And we noticed it um a bit in our halls as well, 'cause we live in the same halls. .hh There is definitely a lot of like the Chinese students .. They all seem to gravitate together but I live with um in my flat there's me, South African girl, Chinese guy, and a Korean guy. .hh And .. I get on with the South African girl very well, a- we never spend any time together, at all

Researcher: [right]

HS4: [but] if I see her in the kitchen we'll have a chat or whatever but if the boys come in I'll chat to the Chinese guy for a bit, but the Korean guy, just like doesn't say hi anything like that .. he's just very very closed off.

A lack of interaction is taken as evidence of deep cultural differences, and the lack of communication *between* groups a feature of 'closed off' East Asians alone 'gravitating' together. Interestingly (in a contradiction common in the data), this is despite elsewhere implicitly acknowledging a part in that lack of interaction:

H4: I would never dream of hanging **out** with them .. At **all**.

Of course, the agency of these participants should not be over-emphasised: as we've seen, their interactions themselves are to some degree determined by massive scale socio-historical factors as well as institutional ones, and this discourse of cliquiness (the most common student term) is not a student innovation, but part of a hegemonic discourse. Baumann, for instance, would have had no difficulty recognising it from his research in West London nearly twenty years ago: "'The Muslims always stick together,' is a stereotype that I encountered time and again even among children and teenagers.' (1996: 83), or Blommaert and Verschuere in Belgium, encountering accusations of immigrant 'clannishness' (1988: 2055). Acknowledging that the 'accomplishment' of discursive hegemony is never interactional alone is important both for intervention and in terms of research ethics. It was clear to me in this instance that laying responsibility for structural patterns at the feet of individuals alone would have been both inaccurate and ungenerous. That identification of patterns required transcription, coding, sifting and consultation of theoretical literature attests that much of what occurred was unconscious: a product of habitus.

Workshops

And yet there clearly is some balance between agency at this micro level and that at the macro which it invokes, and that, surely, is the basis on which the notion of transformative intervention depends. Certainly this was the aim of the workshops: to help students to identify, articulate and contextualise the patterns, and to develop the means to break them. Without going into details, the workshop process involved discussion of interaction between students, including by reference to observation and interview findings, and identification together, in their working groups, of weaknesses and their causes, and ways that communication could be improved.

Some students in the workshops simply adopted a winner-takes all approach in which involvement of each was the individual's personal responsibility, and nothing to do with the group, as the quote below illustrates:

H6: well I mean I'm .. maybe it is arrogant but .. I feel that I speak .. pretty good English, therefore .. if someone doesn't understand I've got no if someone wants to like say .. what did what was that word, then I will try and explain it (I know) but I wouldn't personally ask everyone oh did you all

This was part of a superficially liberal egalitarian discourse, where difference was seen to be a matter of individuals alone, rather than a structural issue that placed some at a systematic disadvantage. Observationally, within this group, I had watched it lead to the utter exclusion of some students. But behind it is the extremely illiberal notion that English communicative behaviour is utterly normative, and no accommodation to others is worth contemplating. Without countenancing the view, though, I will again acknowledge the limitation in the student's agency here: one key research finding was the difficulty for students of changing communicative practice which, naturally enough, appeared 'natural'.

However, others had much more pro-active response: acknowledging difference, but without construing it as a deep essential thing, rather as open to strategies by the group as a whole to respond to. Here the point is made by a British student:

HS9: People are obviously going to separate out like that. It's natural. I'm the sort of person who speaks to people easily, but some people have a fear of that, and it's not their fault. {...} It's all about give and take. Everybody has to make the effort, and that means being ready to wait. If some people are nervous, you have to be that much more patient, and that helps them be more confident. It's just like taking the time to say to someone who's quieter 'what do you think?' and involve the person. Power comes with responsibility.

Noticeable is that differences in style of the participants are seen not as essential traits, but something that emerges from the group: if someone doesn't speak, this is not because they come from some cliquey culture, but from the behaviour of all interactants – from the community, not of origin, but of practice, the students as a group.

Further, implicitly, what produces the difference in the first place – the more shy and the less shy – is seen, again, not as an inherent cause, but as a result of power. Here is a beginning of the discussion of the collection of factors – language practices, fashion capital relevant to the institutional curriculum, and world systemic features – that load the interactional footing from the start.

Conclusion

This conference, both formally and informally, has provided invaluable opportunities to identify connections to issues elsewhere in the world, whose differences can be as illuminating as the similarities. To pick out a strand of work relating most directly to my own, hearing of an innovation in New Zealand to rethink the boundaries between the animate and inanimate to accommodate Maori knowledge within the science curriculum; attempts to imagine and pedagogically enact conceptions of space non-exclusively of the knowledge and practices of indigenous peoples in India; a project to make Australian students Aboriginal studies aware of the embedding of the privilege of whiteness in their everyday talk; work in Johannesburg aimed at empowering marginalised groups to engage in the production of legitimate knowledge of their culture as a means to inclusion in and reshaping of the democratic environment post-Apartheid: all of these were somehow both excitingly new, different and entirely contextual, and yet, as was clear from the sense of common purpose referred to in formal and informal discussions, linked by strong connections, clearly a great part of which was the shared need to deal with the very various legacies of colonialism.

The conference, then, has helped me to identify still further with Chakrabarty's project of *Provincializing Europe*, as one that can be local at one and the same time to his writing of Bengali history and yet also to the specific situation of a London college:

To "provincialize" Europe was precisely to find out how and in what sense European ideas that were universal were also, at one and the same time, drawn from very particular intellectual and historical traditions that could not claim any universal validity. (2000: 125)

And in fact, that transformational project is, of course, the same that I needed to share with the students, where ‘international’ would not only be a categorisation of some, but what all needed to become. In this sense, to ‘provincialize’ the home student – to allow them to see, for instance, that British-like communication patterns or London lifestyle capitals were not universally normative – would also be to help them to internationalize.

The frame which Mezirow suggests is the object of transformation includes ‘cognitive, conative, and emotional components, and is composed of two dimensions: *habits of mind* and a *point of view*.’ (Mezirow 1997: 5), the habits of mind including ways not only of thinking, but also of acting. What I hope to have shown is that research-led transformational intervention can be most effective by integrating these analytically and in practice: investigating the patterns of action that students habitually employ; relating to those practices to structural factors, though always with a close eye on their articulation with contextual features including subject area; and, finally, helping students both critically to identify those articulations (to situate, at the cognitive level, their own perspectives and practices relatively to wider factors, for instance), and to develop most accommodating interactional behaviours – perhaps thereby also attaining greater agency.

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