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Beyond ignorance: using the cultural stereotypes of Americans studying in the UK as a resource for learning and teaching about British culture

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Keywords:

Abstract:

A course introducing British culture is a standard component of many study abroad programmes running in this country that are aimed at international students who will be spending a limited amount of time in the United Kingdom. However, it is not often acknowledged that such students possess a range of strong pre-conceptions about British culture and society prior to their arrival. Conventional teaching strategies assume student ignorance of the subject. However, an alternative approach which makes us of pre-arrival stereotypes can be more productive in terms of engaging students in active processes of comparative analysis of their new and existing knowledge. A case study of American student stereotypes of the British monarchy is presented and it is suggested that these can be used as the basis for refining student understanding of cultural politics in the United Kingdom. International students, therefore, should not be treated as being culturally ignorant of Britain in the sense of having no knowledge or opinions at all. Rather, it should be understood that they possess a culturally mediated state of subjectivity which I refer to as 'ignorance' and that this can become a valuable resource for teaching and learning.

I teach an introductory course on British culture to international students doing a term abroad in this country. In the first class I always ask them about their reasons for coming here and the images they associate with Britain. The country that emerges from their descriptions is, perhaps unsurprisingly, somewhat distorted from what I regard as reality: it is the UK as seen via the medium of American popular culture. This emphasises certain aspects of Britishness at the expense of others. Let me give you an example. Yahoo! Music published a piece on Britpop in 1997 which explained why a number of the bands,

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for example Pulp - which had a major hit in Britain with the album, 'Different Class' - did not have commercial success in the States: 'Pulp were *too British*. It is a sad cliché but one that's sometimes true… it just doesn't translate here' (Holdship, 1997).

It is interesting to note that a report on teaching social awareness in the US commented that 'participants may not have considered their own class identity prior to this course [on classism]. When asked to do so, most conclude that, with very few exceptions, 'we are all more or less middle class' (Yeskel & Leondar-Wright, 1997, p. 233). The refusal to engage with class as an issue may be rooted in a desire not to confront the unwelcome reality that US society, far from being fully egalitarian, is deeply class ridden and has low levels of social mobility: all of which runs against the received 'script' of US self-identity as a land of opportunity (Jackson & Solis, 1995). My international students tend to report that a class system is something that the British have but they do not. And when asked to give an example of a symbol of the UK class system they invariably pick the monarchy. Working class identity seems to be a mystery for these, admittedly, reasonably affluent students. Does this mean that I should assume these students are simply ignorant of many aspects of British society and are sorely in need of some remedial teaching? This article argues that there is a more productive way of working with students who have intense, if sometimes inaccurate, cultural stereotypes and attitudes. The cultural differences, just like those between British and American accents, can be an excellent starting point for learning and teaching. If they are ignored they are not likely to vanish in the course of a few lectures of 'correct thinking'. So why not work with them, and help students to understand both Britain, and their own culture?

The difference between ignorance and 'ignorance'

'I don't know, sir!': on occasion this can be the right answer.

In my experience as a pupil and student I was sometimes expected not to have any knowledge of a subject. The topic would then be taught from first principles. On other occasions the teacher would ask the class what they had covered previously. The course could then begin from that point. That approach works well in situations in which there are clear right and wrong answers, however it is less successful in areas of the curriculum such as the humanities where the issue is often the degree of sophistication of a students' thinking in association with the depth of their knowledge.

My own recent experience has involved teaching American undergraduates, but the approaches that I have been developing can be applied whenever the spectre of 'ignorance' floats about the classroom. Many of my students are highly experienced in a range of academic fields, but know very little of the British culture,
art and literature which it is my role to help them learn during their stay in this country. The reason why I want to talk about their 'ignorance' rather than ignorance is that the latter suggests that the students know nothing. In fact they know a great deal about their own culture and, moreover, have a distinctive set of stereotypes about Britain and the British. These attitudes are often hard-wired from long exposure to American popular culture (for instance, that 'the British have bad teeth', is one truism that I had no idea about until I started to work with US students). If one simply treats such preconceptions and (mis)understandings as false there is the danger of setting up resistance to the

'corrective' information that one is providing. Students may think that one is being deliberately oppositional, hostile to their notions, or acting as a propagandist for Britain. Or else, the information that one provides, if it goes against received notions, may be absorbed in a surface manner, regurgitated for assessment purposes and then abandoned when back in the comfortable certainties of the home culture.

The key point is that deeply held stereotypes and preconceptions of, for instance, 'Brits' or 'blacks' or 'Jews' are, in a sense, functional. They can be deeply culturally embedded and have meanings and resonances beyond their precise dictionary definitions. For example, a racist stereotype may be a reflection of a whole host of cultural assumptions and deeply rooted cultural practices. Avoiding such resonances may, in practice, be unavoidable because we are not simply dealing with cultural imagery, but with what might be termed personal vocabularies and definitions. In other words, we all may be aware, whatever English dialect or variant we speak, that 'black' means the darkest colour, and that it is used to refer to a set of ethnic or racial groupings, but people will differ in the degree to which they associate positive or negative qualities with that word. Students will, of course, always bring part of themselves to the reading of any text, since they construct its meaning for themselves. If one simply teaches a meaning which is in conflict with a student's expectations they may be forced into a position of rejecting either the new definition or their own previous opinion. Therefore, I have started to attempt to overcome some of these problems by working to examine preconceptions and stereotypes as a way into suggesting the diversity of possible cultural (mis)understandings between Britain and America. The aim of this is to engage students in an active process of evaluation of their preconceptions in relation to the new ideas they are being exposed to in class (compare the 'active' approach in teaching history, Frederick, 2000 and, for this approach to culture, Giroux, 1994, with Hall, 1997). Thereby 'ignorance' can become a powerful resource for learning and teaching.

A further advantage of working in this way is that it helps to overcome initial student reluctance to participate. This tends to derive from fear of contributing to class when you are not sure what the right answer will be. If you as the teacher make it clear that you value preconceived notions then students can feel empowered to contribute since they are speaking from their assured area of personal competence. An example would be to ask students who know little about the United Kingdom to draw images that they associate with Scotland. The result will, in my experience, be a mixture of kilts, bagpipes, the Loch Ness monster, whisky and Sean Connery. I would then move on to ask students what adjectives they associate with Scotland. The aim here is to get them to think about their personal definitions of the word 'Scotland' – what does it evoke for them, what qualities, positive or negative, for example, does it hold for them? This exercise, of course, does not work in situations of complete ignorance, in which a group of people really does know nothing about what they are being asked. However, it works very well in cases of 'ignorance', where the students possess a distinctive vocabulary of more or less appropriate words, concepts and images which are in need of development. I imagine it could work very well when a group of white children are asked to think about their associations of the word, 'Islam', for example. They may not know very much about Moslems, but they may 'know' a fair amount in terms of the cultural stereotypes that they have internalised.

So what is your definition?

I first became interested in this approach when I was thinking about the issue of different forms of English, specifically American versus British English. I was struck that this was often reduced to being an issue of amusement, such as is summed up by George and Ira Gershwin's 'Lets call the whole thing off': the idea being that 'potatoes' and 'potahtos' do not matter and the two singers should just get on with being friends (Janes, 2005, p. 53). Another approach to differences between forms of English is that which poses the question in terms of a technical barrier to communication which is to be overcome by the assistance of accurate comparative dictionary definitions (Zviadadze, 1987. See also Ilson, 1985). A more nuanced approach is to provide expanded definitions so as to flesh out the appropriate cultural background. An attempt at this is Grote (1992), which is a detailed dictionary of culturally specific terms. However the perspectives of such an enterprise mean that it can never be entirely a neutral matter. For example, on the front cover of Grote, all the title text is normal, save for the word 'British' which appears in mildly Gothic calligraphy – suggesting quaintness and age – and so encapsulating a key US stereotype concerning Britain. The volume was inspired to help those having problems understanding British culture as it arrives in the US on the Public Broadcasting Service – note that this organisation is, unlike the BBC, culturally marginal (Grote, 1992, p. ix). The author is Californian and not all of his detail is correct; for instance: 'gnome, no one can quite explain why, but among the respectable classes no garden is thought complete without a stone or plaster figure of a gnome somewhere' (p. 242).

A dictionary implies accurate and fixed answers. The reality is always more messy and more interesting. Let me give you an example of this from my own teaching practice. Since I wished students to take ownership of the process of nuancing their received ideas of the nature of Britain and its cultures, I started by talking to groups of students about their preconceptions and definitions of the word British. In other words I told them I valued what this word meant to them, but wanted to them to explore why they thought the things they did. Why should people from their background have such attitudes, for instance? This then led to our thinking about the fact that the meanings of words can vary enormously, such that they are often invested with very personal and sometimes strongly emotional values. The very word 'England' might, in time of threatened invasion in 1940, mean much more than in times of peace. Variations between British and American English may conceal the fact that the same words may have quite distinct resonances for different genders, classes and ethnicities.

The importance of such personal perspectives was strongly brought out in an interesting study of students in Wilmington, Ohio. This provided the example of approaching a Scots poem which used the word 'muir'. A footnote reference check could explain that this was the dialect spelling of the word 'moor' which could then be looked up in a dictionary. However, translating Scots dialect was not the main problem. These students had very 'meagre' visual vocabularies. They simply could not visualise a moor, even once they had read the definition (Fairlie, 2004). They had no personal definition of the word and, therefore, had no way of approaching the issue of what might have been meant to be evoked by it. They thought it might mean something like a prairie. Without

asking what they thought the word meant and addressing those preconceptions this aspect of the poem would have remained half-understood.

Case study: the British monarchy.

Let me give you an example of working with the results of discovering students' pre-course preconceptions. At the beginning of a class on the subject of the monarchy, I encouraged my students to think of the associations they had in their minds about the words 'British', and 'monarchy'. They were to write their own definition of each of these, then to give a definition of the phrase 'British monarchy'. I then asked them to write a side addressing the question 'should Britain keep its monarchy?' The traditional approach would be to lecture the students on the subject before asking them this question. However, I wanted to find out their views first and then engage them in the process of refining their views and definitions by showing enthusiasm for their insights, albeit ones which were highly subjective.[1]

Of the 21 pieces from the class the following key themes, views or assumptions appeared in the cited number of essays:

Against the monarchy:
Monarchy is 'outdated' and 'old fashioned' and therefore bad, 3 responses.
Too weak, should be an absolute monarchy, 1
Tourism would continue anyway if it were scrapped, 1
The monarchy is glamorous but such celebrity is always stupid, 1

Neutral
The monarchy is not necessary for government, but why not keep it anyway? 8
Relativism – people should have whatever system they want, 1

For the monarchy:
Monarchy is traditional and historic and, therefore, good, 8
The monarchy is glamorous and, therefore, good, 5
The monarch is a necessary figurehead, 4
Monarchy boosts tourism and is an earner for the country, 3

It might be assumed that people from the US would be anti-monarchic because they are believers in the values of their own republic. However, Americans choosing to study in Britain might be among those with greater Anglophilia, at least in the sense of being attracted to what they *think* Britain is. This is made clear by specific comments such as 'the words "monarchy" and "Britain" have always been associated" [implication, they have been so in the USA]; 'when people think of the United Kingdom they think of the Royal monarchy' [ditto] and 'it is what makes Britain Britain'. The overall bias of the students was clearly positive, with one student finishing their essay, 'I believe wholeheartedly that there should be a monarchy in Britain today. Much good has come of it, and I cannot think of any ill. God save the Queen!'

One of the more thoughtful students had clearly started to think about the issue of personal perspective as shown by the comment that 'I do realise that all these things are typical ways in which some foreigners view the monarchy, it all depends on people's ideas and standpoint on things'. Similarly, another student made the comment that 'many individuals, particularly foreigners, do not know that the monarchy's absolute power has reduced and changed over the years'.

I grew up with the idea that the key point about the British monarchy was the way in which was uneasily embedded with the development of a representative democracy. However, some of these students may have a sharper idea of the true contemporary significance of the monarchy in comments which at first sight might be dismissed as naïve:

> *It is very true that the Parliament has the ability to take care of the UK by itself, but the Parliament will never exhibit the image of elegance that Princess Diana or Elizabeth II have demonstrated. The queen and princess expose how educated, cultured, fancy and elegant they are.*

Having read this, I would want to explore a number of key assumptions, for instance the idea of Elizabeth II and Diana being 'educated'. What may lie behind that is the US notion that Britons are more highly educated than Americans, as are upper class people in general and, therefore, the upper class British must all be highly educated. This would contrast with a British perspective that the upper classes do not need to be educated; rather it is the competitive middle classes who are desperate to use the universities to get their children a safe position in the job market. The student's apparent 'ignorance' should be set in the context of their conception of the monarchy in relation to its image and importance in American popular culture. A similar insight can be found from another student who commented that:

> *being transplanted to another country where I live under the rule of a queen has lent a dreamlike quality to my trip, a fantasy come true. The thought of getting rid of England's monarchy is like changing the story to President Arthur Pendragon and First Lady Guenivere [sic], like replacing Camelot's glorious white towers with modern, plastic architecture that may be aesthetic and functional but has no devotion or dedication or emotion behind it.*

This student is evoking the power of romanticism which lies behind the notion of celebrity. An intensely utilitarian culture can drive people, in their off-duty moments, to strain after the emotionally glorious. Such students, in other words, already have an interesting perspective on what the monarchy is 'really' *for* in the modern world. This provides a good basis for developing their self-awareness of the personal nature of their perspectives as well as forming a basis for singling out specific areas for learning development. For instance, it is quite clear that a number of these students did not know how to handle sentence structures concerning royalty: one asked 'should there be a royalty in Britain?'; another talked of 'the Royal monarchy'. I was told about 'the monarchial rule' and that George I 'was ascended to the thrown'. The fact that three essays featured the last misspelling suggests that they have spoken about the monarchy, or heard about it on the news, but never had to write formally about it before.

My learning objective for these students would be for them to be able to write fluently about the monarchy and to engage with the range of opinion on the subject in the United Kingdom. I am encouraging them to see how their viewpoints lead to a distinctive set of views, whilst those of someone who had lived through the London Blitz might be very different. They can, therefore, begin to appreciate that the word 'royal' can mean very different things to different people at different times. This approach is far more productive of cultural understanding than one that attempted to assert the political and historical role of the monarchy in Britain whilst ignoring their importance in worldwide (and especially American) popular culture.

Conclusions

The key point is not to assume that students know nothing, or, in your turn, to ignore their misapprehensions. This is particularly important when teaching international students who are in Britain for a single term. They have clearly developed some key notions about Britain before arrival or they would never have opted to study here. The cultural landscape that they left behind will probably surround them again for much of the rest of their lives. I want them to rethink their preconceived notions of what British culture is all about.

Working with concepts with which students are already familiar can be a way of shining a new and interesting light on the commonplaces of life in the United Kingdom. For example, a useful method by means of which to get students to think beyond the desire for a simple answer and a single cultural definition (of what the monarchy is 'for', etc) is to engage them in discussion about brand values. Students almost invariably have strong views about a range of prominent consumer brands. Whilst I am not keen to suggest that everything is reducible to a set of marketing slogans, students are aware that advertising is an attempt to influence them. In other words an attempt is being made to alter their personal definition of the word 'Levis', or 'Coca Cola', or whatever it might be. This approach can lead students to think in terms of the values or messages put out by the persons and symbols of monarchy and, thereby, to begin to understand how people have been persuaded to support the institution. By working with student's 'on-board' cultural knowledge, I can enable them to explore British culture via their personal stereotypes as being something which they are themselves actively exploring, rather than regarding it as an 'other' to be learnt for dry pedagogic purposes. They should understand that their experience of that 'other' helps them to develop personal awareness. I believe that the crucial thing is not to worry so much about students initially getting things wrong, but to be concerned about them not engaging.

A ripple of interest crossed the American media when an academic report, 'When ignorance isn't bliss: how political ignorance threatens democracy', warned against the low level of political awareness in the United States (Somin, 1994). In the classroom, I moved on with this group of students from exploring why glamour mattered so much to so many of them, to why political relations mattered to me, not in the sense that one was true and the other false, but in a spirit of engaged intercultural learning. To me it is fascinating, if very worrying, that 'God Save the Queen!' translates, but not Pulp's biggest hit, 'Common People'? Why not? We discussed.

Notes

1. The results here are given after students gave signed permission for data to be used anonymously. I cannot, therefore, give precise references, but I am very happy to discuss the material and method with any interested inquirer.

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Bio

Dominic Janes is a Senior Lecturer in History of Art and Religion, with a specialism in British culture and imagery. In addition to a spell as a lecturer at Lancaster University, he has been a research fellow at London and Cambridge universities. He has lived in several countries including Malawi, Iraq, Indonesia and the United States. He has taught on and designed a wide range of international education programmes, the majority of which have been aimed at students from the United States taking up semester-abroad study opportunities in the United Kingdom.

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