Reconceptualising our cultural maps: Teaching for Cross-Cultural Understanding through the Studies of Asia.

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Abstract

This paper explores some of the assumptions and arguments about teaching for cross-cultural understanding through the Studies of Asia. First, it examines what cross-cultural understanding might mean and why it is significant. Second, it reviews some of the past discussion and debate about how it can be achieved. Third, it argues that global and regional realities indicate that Australian students require cross-cultural understanding through the Studies of Asia if they are to be effective citizens in the region.

'The cultural maps we hold in our minds to make sense of the world are tangible maps which we often mistake as immutable truths. To dislodge the apparent immutability of our cultural interpretations of the world requires considerable effort. It requires educating the mind to identify cultural boundaries within which we operate and it requires the willingness to venture into the foreign and to potentially be changed by it.' (Crozet, Liddicoat, and Lo Bianco 1999: 9)

The meaning and significance of cross-cultural understanding

Terms such as 'cross-cultural understanding', 'cultural competence', 'cross-culturality', 'interculturality' and, with specific reference to the Asian region, 'Asia-literacy', are used by educators to emphasise the capacity to reflect upon and explore cultural difference in a meaningful way. As the above quotation from Crozet, Liddicoat, and Lo Bianco (1999) implies, the ability to understand cultures different from our own is challenging and dependent upon our capacity for reciprocity and self reflection. The Australian historian, Inga Clendinnen noted these qualities when she was recently interviewed about her work on South American cultures. Clendinnen emphasised that human experience is most valuable when it 'comes in cultural forms unfamiliar to us' for 'one of the most difficult things to do in the world is to get a grip on our own pre-conceptions, assumptions, unexamined convictions …' (2003: 9).

Of course, philosophers have grappled with challenges of understanding 'the other'. According to Michael Theunissen (1984:1), '(f)ew issues have expressed as powerful a hold over the thought of this century as that of "The Other". It is difficult to think of a second theme … that has provoked as widespread an interest as this one … the problem of the other has never penetrated as deeply as today into the foundations of philosophical thought – the questions of the other cannot be separated from the most primordial questions raised by modern thought.' In *Orientalism*, Edward Said (1978/1991) challenged '(h)ow does one represent another culture? What is another culture? Is the notion of a distinct culture (or race, or religion, or civilisation) a useful one, or does it always get involved either in self-congratulation (where one discusses one's own) or hostility and aggression (when one discusses the "other")? Do cultural, religious, and racial differences matter more than socio-economic categories, or politico-historical ones? How do ideas acquire authority, "normality", and even the status of "natural" truth?' (pp. 325-326).

Readers of this journal will probably be familiar with the pioneering work of David Dufty in understanding other cultures. Dufty drew upon anthropological conceptions of culture, to develop what he termed 'intercultural awareness' in the Australian curriculum. His work stemmed from the New South Wales Asian Social Studies course in 1966-67, and from the Intercultural Studies Project which commenced at the University of Sydney in 1969. This collaborative work was made accessible, in terms of the theory and practice of intercultural education at the classroom level, with the publication of *Seeing it Their Way* (Dufty et al. 1973). This handbook and support materials, subsequently

published in 1975 and 1976, were designed so that the Intercultural Studies Program could be used at any level of the school curriculum.

The introduction to *Seeing it Their Way* noted that the materials aimed to 'bring a clear awareness that we are all conditioned by our culture, that we tend to judge other cultures by our own standards and that to be culturally mature we need to be able to understand and appreciate at least one other culture in some depth and to be able to imagine with some accuracy how others view their world: in other words, to develop an intercultural perspective - to try seeing it their way as well as our own way' (ibid: 2). Three brief principles were articulated for Intercultural Studies. The first involved '(u)nderstanding the basic idea that we perceive and do things in our own way but others within our country and in other countries perceive and do things in their own way.' (ibid: 4). The second included '(d)eveloping awareness skills needed for one's journey through life such as: looking and listening, meeting and interacting with others, seeking to make sense of a complex and changing world' (ibid). The third involved '(u)ndertaking depth studies of other cultures within our country and in other countries in order to apply these understandings and skills' (ibid: 4).

Previous discussion and debate

Much discussion and debate followed Dufty's significant contribution to this field. Two views from educational theory about the teaching of Asian cultures reflected broader perspectives about culture. These perspectives stem from the traditional school of anthropology which emphasised the unity of human kind as well as its diversity (Kessler 1991), and the Geertzian (Geertz 1973; 1983) notion of culture as a collective way of life which is bound and discrete.

One view advocated the need to foster the commonalities of human experience and stressed the interrelatedness of different cultures. Advocates of this approach are usually termed global educators. Global educators claim that the study of different cultures promotes sets of shared values and understandings which, in turn, promote a more cooperative and sustainable global community. Although they do not write specifically about Studies of Asia, the work of Selby and Pike (1987), Hicks and Steiner (1989), Calder and Smith (1993), and Hicks and Holden (1995), has been used by teachers who wish to infuse studies of Asian cultures within in the Key Learning Area, Studies of Society and Environment (SOSE). The most recent manifestation of this view, *Global Perspectives, A statement on global education for Australian schools* (Curriculum Corporation 2002), advocates a transformative approach in preparing students for global citizenship. 'Global education aims to develop … an open-mindedness to new thinking about the world and a predisposition to active participation as a member of the global community building a shared future' (p. 6).

Different subsets to this position raised more specific educational goals. For example, Luke (1995; 2003) argued for global literacy, Hoepper and Burkett (1996) stressed issues of global citizenship, whilst Williamson-Fien (1993) argued for a gender-specific emphasis in the study of global development issues. Collectively, such global approaches to acquiring knowledge and understanding about Asian cultures attempted to demonstrate that 'what may be understood as separate interests are part of interrelated curriculum concerns' (Singh 1995: 35).

The second view advocated teaching about Asia's cultural diversity. The view here was that cultural understanding could be achieved when students of one culture underwent educational experiences which enabled them to develop and transform their perspectives (Taylor 1994) and see another culture in its own terms. As noted, the early work of Dufty (Dufty et al. 1973) focused on this approach. Related to this was the argument that cultural 'difference' must be maintained and respected for its distinctiveness (Corson 1995). This approach informed some early 1990 education policy papers, such as the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy (AEP) and statements about multicultural education.

However, it must be noted that this approach was critiqued by some educators for fostering essentialist notions of culture. Rizvi (1995), claimed that the policy rhetoric of multiculturalism and anti-racism, implicit in these documents, relied on essentialist assumptions about culture, for they involved 'the formation of categories of cultural difference which are assumed to be separate from the social, economic and political contexts in which they are embedded' (Rizvi 1995: 27). Rizvi argued against the traditional anthropological notion of culture as 'a way of life' for, in his opinion, this anthropological view informed such policies to their detriment. 'The version of multicultural education

essentialism such as this supports involves learning about 'other' cultures as a way of breaking down stereotypes and thus promoting greater tolerance of diversity in society. But a major problem with this approach is that it does not define the 'cultural other' in any relational way. Rather, it naturalises the 'other' in representations that are assumed to be objective. The issues of disadvantage and discrimination are thus obscured, as are the politics of ethnic and racial formation' (ibid).

A third perspective encompassed features of the first and second, and assumed that cultural understanding was dependent upon the attitudes and values brought to the study of other cultures, along with the knowledge acquired of these. Moreover, this perspective assumed that cultural understandings occurred when participants/interlocutors recognised which commonalities were shared between cultures and what remained distinctive amongst them (Halse and Baumgart 1995). As Dufty (1994) put it '(t)here is a need for balance between these cultural universals and cultural uniquenesses' (p. 60). A subset of this third view was advocated by critical educators, who included the Gramscian critique of culture with the Habermasian notion of emancipatory knowledge, to argue that Australian studies of Asian cultures and societies must be set in the context of human agency. That is, cultural learnings should foster a socially critical perspective in students by 'providing them with the concepts, models, and theories to enable them to work as active citizens in a nation facing many challenges' (Singh and Gilbert 1992: 13).

How can cross-cultural understanding be realised in the curriculum?

These conflicting views prompted further debates about the most appropriate curriculum and pedagogy for achieving cross-cultural understanding through Studies of Asia. Four positions can be identified from these debates, all of which made claim to 'successful practice'. The first push was for discipline-based learning, albeit with second language provision (FitzGerald 1994). The second position was that Asian studies should be infused across all school curricula (AEF 1995). The third view claimed that Asian studies could best be achieved if it was taught through the interdisciplinary social sciences (Dufty 1994). The fourth position was that Asian cultures and societies should be studied in their own right (Williamson-Fien 1994). In contrast to the first position, the latter three views advocated the value of studying Asian cultures and societies in their own terms and not in the context of Asian language studies. Each push for curriculum authority is examined briefly.

The prominent Asianist, Stephen FitzGerald, was the strongest advocate of the discipline-based approach to Studies of Asia. FitzGerald (1995) claimed that because the Australian push for Asian engagement had been dominated by institutions, it was essential to work within the traditional disciplines to acquire cultural knowledge so that the next generation of Australians could develop 'new and more intimate relations with Asian cultures' (p 162). He argued that the ethical and value judgements necessary for effective Asian engagement could only be fostered if Asian cultures and societies were studied with 'rigorous, sequential and in-depth instruction within a discipline-based subject' (FitzGerald 1993: 7).

Moreover, FitzGerald was pragmatic and his argument was essentially based on the practical outcomes of cross-cultural understanding and its contribution to Australia's national interest in the Asian region. Although FitzGerald suggested that the study of Asia contributed to the general internationalisation of Australia's outlook, it must be noted, he was not a global educator. In fact FitzGerald derided interdisciplinary and integrated approaches for studies of Asian cultures as 'omnibus subjects' (1993) and 'curriculum anarchy' (1997).

The second position advocated infusing Studies of Asia across the school curriculum, into all subject offerings. The Asia Education Foundation (AEF 1995) endorsed this whole school approach for its potential to reach the entire student body, regardless of age and subject choice, with minimum disruption to the school routine. In its current framework for teaching and learning about the nations and cultures of Asia, the AEF (2000: 13-14) identifies five curriculum emphases across all learning areas. These include developing concepts of Asia; exploring challenging stereotypes; identifying and analysing contemporary issues; identifying the world contributions by the peoples of Asia; and analysing the likely implications of closer Asia-Australia relationships.

The infusion approach was also advocated by social educators. For example, Dufty (1994) endorsed the breadth and scope of social education as a vehicle for learning about Asian societies and cultures. Dufty argued that FitzGerald's (1993; 1994) views on social education were ill-informed, and that

social educators were not antagonistic to the traditional disciplines. Rather, this field drew upon, and expanded, discipline-based learning in order to integrate sociology, anthropology and political science along with interdisciplinary fields such as 'environmental, urban and communication studies' in the social investigative strategy (Dufty 1994: 55). This approach, Dufty argued, also drew upon the work of development, peace and human rights educators, to prompt students to explore the ethical dimensions of Australia's engagement with Asia. This argument valued the social education approach for its potential to critique the dimensions of Australia's Asian engagement in viewpoints not 'popular with politicians, business people and bureaucrats of the day' (ibid).

The fourth position was advocated most strongly by Williamson-Fien (1994). She drew on the work of postmodern and postcolonial scholars to argue that Asian studies should challenge traditional knowledge and create new forms of knowledge with the proviso that 'constructing such new knowledges implies awareness of the extent to which our insights are imbricated in western codes' (p. 16). In this fashion, Williamson-Fien (1994) emphasised the cultural construction of Australian knowledge of Asia and questioned whether existing curriculum structures could accommodate a study of Asia free of 'the hegemony of western discourse' (p. 15). Moreover, she questioned the 'appropriateness of the frameworks within which we seek to explore Asia' (p.16) and advocated the study of Asian cultures and societies in a separate subject in the curriculum 'as befits new areas of knowledges' (ibid).

Yet it must be noted that postcolonial theory was, and continues to be, used by intellectual elites who presumed the authority to 'speak for others' and reinstate them. Moreover, whilst this paradigm critiqued the authority of Western epistemological practices, postcolonial scholars assumed their own voice of authority and excluded the work of other scholars who worked within different paradigms. This begs the question about the normative grounds for critique in postmodernism.1 At a more pragmatic level, it is doubtful if schools would embrace Studies of Asia as an 'extra' subject in an already crowded curriculum.

Although such conflicting views demonstrate that skilling the next generation of Australians in cross-cultural understanding is problematic, major policy documents continue to recognise its significance (Tudball 2004). For example, the Adelaide Declaration on National Goals for Schooling in the Twenty-first Century (MCEETYA 2000: 3), noted the value of cultural and linguistic diversity and stressed that all students should posses 'the knowledge, skills and understanding to contribute to, and benefit from, such diversity in the Australian community and internationally'.

Regional and global realities

Significant insights into cross-cultural understanding can also be drawn from the key findings of the Australian-Asian Perceptions Project, initiated by the Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia in 1991. This project investigated the cultural issues which needed to be addressed in the context of Australia's desire for Asian engagement. It was designed to identify, clarify and analyse the different approaches to interaction in the Asian region in terms of business ethics, human rights, education, labour relations, democracy, national security, the media, perceiving citizenship and government. The project attempted to probe the world views which affected different practices in the various nations of the region and worked to identify the implications of such differences for Australia's Asian engagement. Research, conducted from 1991 to 1995, concluded that cultural features were profound, not only in terms of Australians negotiating the Asian region, but also, in terms of how Australians viewed their own society.

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[1]Postcolonial theory works within a particular view of history. According to this view, there is the precolonial, the colonial and the postcolonial (During 1992: 339). Moreover, postcolonialism works on the overriding assumption that it has to reinstate back into history the 'victims' silenced by Western imperialism. However, this position does not always serve the interests of the communities most affected by colonialism. This paradigm, as During demonstrates, creates an artificial notion of time and change which, if taken to its logical conclusion, denies the potential for human agency. At base, the argument undermines the foundations of its own propositions. As During observed '(p)ostcolonial theory argues, first, that there is no simple continuity between pre- and post-contact eras, and secondly, that after contact each group can only articulate its identity in relation to the other ... by depriving both post-colonised and postcolonising communities of a culture and a history constructed in their own terms, postcolonial theory makes current political action more difficult ...' (During 1992: 350).

As Milner (1997: 43) noted '(i)n light of these cultural features - and of the profound differences in approach to operating in such fields as business, security and diplomacy that are encountered when moving from one society to another in the region - the Australian-Asian perceptions Project argued that Australia's engagement with 'Asia' was likely to be a far more difficult task than the national leadership seemed to imply'.

It is timely to recall that for more than four decades, Australian scholars of Asia lobbied for a national strategy for the study of Asia and its languages in the Australian education system (Henderson 2003). This culminated in 1992, when the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) commissioned a high level working group to draft a proposal for Asian languages and studies. The Working Group's report, *Asian Languages and Australia's Economic Future* (Rudd 1994), emphasised that it was in Australia's national interest for such a strategy to be developed. After much deliberation about funding, the first national initiative for an Asian languages and cultures strategy in schools, the National Asian Languages and Cultures and Strategy in Australian Schools (NALSAS) Strategy commenced in 1995.

Despite the positive outcomes of the NALSAS Strategy and the work of the Asia Education Foundation (AEF), it seems that the current national government lacks the political will to support an Asian languages and cultures strategy. In fact, the Howard government decided to cease the Commonwealth's funding quantum of the NALSAS Strategy in December 2002. This now jeopardises State and Territory initiatives and undermines past and current efforts to teach Australian primary and secondary students about Asian languages and cultures. When the funding cuts were announced, the AEF predicted a 70% decrease in national funding support for studies of Asia for the following year's programs (AEF 2002: 4). Yet that same year, the peak body representing Australian scholars of Asia, the Asian Studies Association (ASAA), observed that Australia's Asia-knowledge base was already in jeopardy at a time when 'the forces of globalisation will lead Australia to interact increasingly with the countries of Asia' (ASAA 2002: xvi).

As we attempt to deal with global uncertainties and future challenges, the significance of Australia's relationship with Asia is of great importance (Derigo 2004). Despite the economic fluctuations of the late 1990s, Australia's trade with the region grew to half our total trade by 2000 (DFAT 2000: 59). The magnitude of such trade for the Australian economy was demonstrated on 24 October 2003, when Prime Minister Howard signed the largest single export contract in Australian history, a $30 billion liquid gas deal with China's President, Hu Jintao. During their discussions, both leaders negotiated a trade and economic framework and a promise that China would consider a free trade agreement between the two nations.

Of course, Asia's significance for Australia extends beyond the economic. The Asian region includes 60% of the world's population, 30% of the earth's land and presents the largest emerging markets. Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim nation and one of our most important neighbours, is a significant nation in this region as are India and China, two of the world's most populous nations. The range of Asia's belief systems, which includes Buddhism, Shintoism, Confucianism, Hinduism, Islam and Christianity, indicate aspects of the region's diversity and its cultural complexity.

Sadly, the events of September 11, the aftermath of the Bali bombing and the current situation in Iraq, indicate the increasing uncertainty and interconnectedness that characterises our world today. These situations also remind us that, regardless of the difficulties and debates, knowledge and cross-cultural understanding of the region's diversity are required for Australians to build a secure future. As Kessler (1991: 63) noted more than a decade ago ' … it is only by engaging with difference, not simply intellectually within our own minds but in the pluralistic public or political world where difference has its origins and is upheld, that we can really understand ourselves.'

Given such global and regional realities it seems puzzling that the Howard government does not advocate the study of Asia in the education system and support education policies for future generations to be inter-culturally skilled. For as Gantner (2003) reminds us '(t)he challenge is to ensure that the next generation [of Australians] has the knowledge and understanding to get on with their neighbours, to solve global problems, and to build a shared and prosperous future. It must start in our own front yard – Asia. We don't need to 'Asianise' our curriculum. We need to 'Australianise' it'.

Conclusion

Two significant and related themes emerge from the range of arguments raised by the debates about achieving cross-cultural understanding. The first theme is that an understanding of Asian cultures depends upon the knowledge base, intellectual skills, attitudes and values of the Australian interlocutor. The second theme stresses the reciprocal nature of cultural understanding. For this involves not only acknowledging and respecting what is distinctive and shared about other cultures, but it also involves acknowledging those features which form the Australian cultural lens through which observations about others are made. Our students must be prepared for the rewarding and complex challenge of engaging with the Asian region and Australia's Asia-knowledge base should be supported by specific school-based Asian cultures strategies.

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