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Confronting Globalization: The Challenges of Creating Space for Global Learning

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Abstract: This study describes and analyses the challenges encountered in a recent case of global collaboration in developing a web-based masters program for adult educators. “Agency,” “structure,” and “frame factor” are used as analytical concepts to help understand the dynamics of the collaboration and the character of the program produced.

Background and Purpose of the Study

Higher education institutions are responding to the globalization of national economies in a host of ways but in many instances foreign universities are moving into other countries in virtual or actual mode and competing for a share of the local market. Whereas internationalization of higher education has a long history and was often based on the notion of solidarity across cultural boundaries, more recently it has been based on the commodification of knowledge. Globalization of higher education generally involves exporting a program developed within one academic culture to another country or importing students from another culture into locally developed programs. One implication of these practices is that such programs are not necessarily meeting the needs and priorities of students in either site. Technology is making it easier to cross national boundaries in the development and delivery of programs. Too often this is done with little sensitivity to cultural differences but with great hopes of capturing a lucrative share of the academic market.

This paper presents research that analyses an example of a radically different model which is deliberately based on cooperation amongst countries and providers, rather than on competition. We describe and analyze our experiences in developing a graduate degree program across four continents. This has involved four universities in South Africa, Sweden, Canada and Australia collaborating to offer an Intercontinental Masters in Adult Learning and Global Change that is essentially identical in each location. The basic approach has been to negotiate the program and its delivery amongst four equal partners. The focus of the paper is firstly on the structural restrictions and possibilities that have become apparent and, secondly, on the actors’ ways of dealing with these.

Theoretical Framework

There are two theoretical perspectives that have inspired this study. The first is Giddens’ (1984) concepts of “structure” and “agency.” The second inspiration is frame-factor theory developed by Dahlöf and elaborated by Lundgren (1994, 1999). Both perspectives focus on

structures as simultaneously restrictive and full of possibilities. Giddens presents a view where structures are composed of situated actors engaged in social interaction pursuing their individual and collective interests. It is through this enacted conduct that structures are both maintained and changed. Changes in structures can be the result of conscious decisions made by the agents, but changes can also result from less conscious processes, such as adjustment and adaptation. Intended actions can also lead to unintended consequences, which in turn can have major impacts on the system. In frame-factor theory educational procedures are formed by factors like administrative frames and material resources within which social relationships are produced and reproduced in social interaction. The actors' perceptions of how these frame-factors enable and constrain agency largely determine the shape and substance of programs.

In this project, the structures that the actors are operating within become very complex, since each partner institution has its own rules, traditions and convictions about academic rigor; its own bureaucratic structures and accountability frameworks; its own concerns about access and equity; its own terminology, methods and schedules for organizing academic work; and its own financial structures and policies. The processes of implementing a collaboratively planned educational program are thus processes of shaping new structures through negotiation. The negotiations become a means for making our tacit and taken-for-granted understandings visible and for increasing our discursive consciousness of our individual institutional practices.

Research Design

Data sources include detailed minutes of planning meetings, records of e-mail conversations, interviews with course convenors and others involved in planning, and diary notes of the key actors. Since the researchers are also the main objects of research, their own reconstructions of the process constitute an addition to the documents mentioned above. The processes of analysis and construction of narrative accounts have gone through several iterations to reach a negotiated consensus.

The researchers/planners agreed on a joint theoretical and conceptual framework for the analysis. We agreed that data were to be analyzed in critical and self-reflective ways and the conceptual pair "structure" and "agency" as well as "frame factors" were to constitute the means of analysis in the jointly constructed narrative.

Findings

The analysis reveals a number of dominant structural obstacles and patterns of how these were surmounted during the processes. Four areas reflect substantive differences among the collaborating universities:

- (1) information technology: realities and possibilities for accessing the web;
- (2) financial conditions;
- (3) systems for examinations and grading; and
- (4) local decision-making processes.

1. Information technology: realities and possibilities for accessing the web

The original idea of the program was to deliver the same curriculum at the four different institutions separately. This idea was eventually transformed into a distance learning program with a "world class" of students where the partners take turns teaching the different courses. One of the basic ideas was also that communication amongst the participants across continents should constitute an important ingredient of the program to serve the purpose of learning about global similarities and differences.

When shaping this structure, we were aware that the different conditions for technological resources and possibilities for accessing the web in different parts of the world had to be taken into consideration. The limited bandwidth of South Africa and the restricted economic resources of the South African students were, in this instance, the main issues to be overcome. Early in the planning, e-mail was considered as a possible medium for communication in the program. An analysis of the possibilities and shortcomings of this medium led the group to decide that a more flexible and sustainable medium was needed which allowed for administering the program and tracking students. At a planning meeting in Cape Town, the group had arranged to test an alternative course platform on the web. This event became an important reality check to the whole group when the enterprise failed, due to the difficulties in getting access to the web. This incident led to serious doubts about whether it would be possible to use an entirely web-based medium for the program. After further consideration, the group decided to choose the web-based solution anyway, despite the limitations of the South African telecom system.

The solution finally applied was twofold and consisted of both adjustment and reinforcement. On the one hand, the institutions with stronger technological resources adjusted to the weakest link in the chain by refraining from the use of working formats that were technologically too demanding. Text-based formats should be used prior to the more sophisticated working formats that can be used in web-based courses. We agreed to avoid too many pictures, video-conferencing and other devices that the medium can offer. On the other hand, the group simultaneously started to search for funding that could help supply South African students with computer equipment that could reinforce their position in the program.

2. Financial conditions

Early on it became evident that universities in different countries have completely different ways of funding programs. In Sweden there are no tuition fees. Universities get financial resources from the state for a specified number of study places. Funding a specific program is then a matter of competing with other programs within the university for these limited places. In Australia master's programs are financed by tuition fees. In South Africa and Canada programs are financed by a mix of state funding and tuition fees.

These differences constitute a considerable problem that could have hampered collaboration amongst the institutions. It is obvious that students for whom financial considerations are paramount would, if allowed, prefer to participate in the program through the Swedish university, since there would have been no tuition. The consequence of this would be that financial resources for the other universities to run the program would be drained. Early in the discussions about the program, we considered the possibility of moving money amongst the universities, but ruled that out, on the assumption that it would be extremely difficult to accomplish. The solution was to keep our finances separate and, in principle, only recruit students from our own continents. The partners were linked together by an agreement about the number of students that could be accepted at each university and the courses for which each partner would be responsible. It was up to each of the partners to cover their own costs for course development and teaching in the program. The solution pattern here was to exclude financial issues from the integrative parts of our work with the program.

A consequence of this solution was substantial differences amongst partners regarding access to resources. South Africa had difficulties, not least since it was anticipated that their students needed more technological support because of their more restricted access to these facilities. UWC engaged in a series of efforts to locate external funding agencies that could assist. Eventually there was some success through the Swedish International Development

Cooperation Agency. The solution pattern we find here is to concentrate on solving the problems for one specific partner in order to accomplish the general development of the program.

3. Local decision-making

It is a great challenge for contemporary structures in higher education to have a common program approved with four partners across four countries. Frame factors here are national regulations; the idiosyncrasies of local university bureaucracies; and something that could be called local academic culture. In this context we want to highlight three problems with which we had to deal. The first was the meaning of a masters degree: a thesis was required as a necessary ingredient in two cases (LiU and UWC), but the other universities had the option to choose between a masters degree by thesis and a masters degree by courses, and preferred the latter. This led to a decision that the program options should have some flexibility and we introduced local options that constituted 25% of the program. By deciding this, the obstacle of different conceptions regarding the required structure and content of a masters' program was overcome by reducing integration of the content.

The second problem was local requirements for texts constituting the basis for approving the program. The intercontinental steering group negotiated the program through some very difficult discussions. The underlying assumption was that the local administrations needed to accept our decisions without changing them in order to avoid an infinite negotiation process. The program was to some extent shaped by this adaptation to local expectations and norms including the content of curriculum outlines regarding how assessments and courses should be described and the details of reference material required. Basically, this led to the production of texts that met the most detailed and demanding requirements. One university's discourse in this way became more powerful than the others. The pattern of agency regarding this issue was to subordinate all partners to the requirements of one university.

Thirdly, differences in the tempo and complexity of procedures at each university stood out as a very important frame-factor. In the Swedish case there were three levels of decision-making that had to be dealt with. Each accepted the program in due course. One important aspect here was the initial support from the highest level of decision-making. Canada had to push the approval of the program through eight levels of decision-making. The internal decision-making processes did not move quickly enough to conform to the planned implementation timetable of the program. In part this was due to the elaborate approval process, but part was also due to uncertainty about the most expeditious path to take for approval of such an unusual undertaking. The result was that they could not recruit students for the first cohort. Eventually the program was approved and they will recruit students for the second round. They therefore had to contribute to course development and teaching in the first round without having any students of their own. In Australia, navigating the six layers of decision-making committees was not so onerous because those involved in promoting the program had considerable knowledge of the internal accreditation process. Documentation was no less demanding but the sensitive stages could be predicted and strategies were available to deal with the inevitable queries. No concessions were made by the various committees to the difficulties of international collaboration and the kinds of queries raised were just the same as if the proponents had it within their power alone to make changes. UWC in South Africa has four levels of decision-making including one at the national level. Political work was done both nationally and institutionally beforehand which helped the bureaucratic processes proceed relatively smoothly.

The pattern of agency adopted regarding this issue was one where one partner had to contribute without getting anything for their own students, because of their university's complicated and slow decision-making process.

It is clear that the administrative structures of universities are not adapted to complex, collaborative initiatives. This could be seen as an anachronism. The technological basis of the program as well as the emerging social practices of the planners transcended the boundaries of a local university as a unit that construes its own rules. Strong values are linked to this autonomy, but it creates the kind of contradictions that we have experienced.

4. Systems for examinations and grading

One structure that we encountered early in planning the program was the fact that the four institutions operated with different systems for examinations and grading. Two of the institutions (LiU and UTS) applied a pass/fail system, while two institutions (UBC and UWC) applied a graded system for assessment. Initially, we agreed on a common pass/fail system, but this was later discarded since it became an obstacle to the approval process at the different universities. The partners had to comply with the regulations prevailing on the local level regarding assessment systems. The issue of assessment remained on the agenda throughout the entire planning phase. It led to repeated, thorough and somewhat painstaking discussions about criteria for assessment and grading, during which fragments of our different academic cultures and value systems were revealed.

The solution finally adopted was to introduce a common instrument for conversion of different grading “currency.” This common instrument was the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS), which is a scale in seven grades that enables students to transfer academic credits from one institution to another within Europe. The ECTS grading scale ranges from “Excellent” to “Fail” and is based on the combined use of keywords and definitions intended to clarify the keywords. It turned out to be a solution that the partner universities could agree on and that also makes it possible for the institutions to issue a final degree that conforms to local norms and regulations.

Implications for Theory and Practice

The systematic and critical analysis of the processes involved in implementing a collaboratively planned program amongst four universities reveals the central importance of both structure and human agency. The results contribute to understandings of the possibilities for and obstacles to collaborative teaching and learning of adults across geographical and cultural borders within globalizing contexts. What has been learned by the partners in this collaboration—both theoretically and practically—offers hope that new models of program design and delivery can be developed that show greater sensitivity to cultural differences and locally-situated knowledges than “market-driven” models currently dominating the discourse of global learning.

Conclusions

The challenges of constructing collaboration which is experienced as fair across continents are key issues for the future. Information technology is already part of everyday communication and this technological base will change the way education is organized and distributed. It allows various possibilities, one of which is for universities to export their programs. A consequence of this is the strengthening of patterns of domination. For example, British, Australian or North American universities can export their programs to different parts of the world, without much adaptation to local needs or sensitivity to local cultures.

As becomes obvious from our analysis of an alternative, exporting programs seems easier than creating new ones based on genuine collaboration. The key problem seems to be the university structures lack of preparedness for collaboration. Each university or national university

system is constructed on the idea that they are operating in splendid isolation that has, until now, functioned fairly well. Autonomy is no doubt a value that is deeply embedded in the whole idea of universities and is thus defended by the academy. However, the structures that we have had to deal with have not in any way been related to academic freedom, but to bureaucratic regulations and processes that are not open enough to support collaboration. This is ironic because it is through this kind of collaboration that each university could be strengthened.

Collaboration that uses new technological structures enables a different kind of knowledge—a knowledge that is developed through discussions across continents and across diverse conditions. A repertoire of sophisticated technologies exists which can create opportunities for global learning, but whether they are successful in doing so depends more on the model of collaboration adopted than on the specifics of individual course and program design or the sparkle and flash of the delivery medium. As is clear from our experience, it can be done. But it has been done with many complications that—to various degrees—make it difficult to realize the possibilities evident in the original idea.

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