

DOH04077

Managing potentials: cultural differencing in a site of global/local education

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**Presented at AARE Annual Conference,
28 November – 2 December 2004, University of Melbourne.**

ABSTRACT

Internationalised online education offers a valuable window for research into the cultural processes of globalisation. This paper reports preliminary findings of a doctoral project about cultural difference in an online MBA unit with an internationalised student group. The case study was conducted as a critical ethnography (Carspecken 1996) adapted to virtual settings (Hine 2000). The study was also informed by a critical realist frame (Bhaskar 2002) which recognises the ontological level of potentials that can shape events, in addition to the empirical (that which is observable) and the actual (that which occurred). Cultural difference has typically been associated with negative potentials in pedagogical settings, in particular, the risks/problems of exclusion, disadvantage, and cultural offence. In emerging discourses of internationalisation, however, cultural difference is often constructed as potentially beneficial, enriching the mutual exchange of new insights. In this case study, the negative potential of intercultural offence and the positive potential of cultural difference as a vicarious asset for the curriculum were influential in shaping how the texts/interaction were designed and conducted. This paper will report in summary a variety of ways in which processes of cultural differencing realised both negative and positive potentials in the case study unit.

... the task of the sociological student of globalization must now include that of comprehending the bases and thrusts of movements in the field of education, not least because such movements are major sites of socialization into our greatly compressed world. Those movements are significant arenas for the study of what I referred to ... as processes of relativization in the global field as a whole. In any case, universities have become significant 'players' on the global scene. Traditionally, they have contributed much to transnational communication through cross-national 'communities' of scientists and other academics. But recently universities *per se* have begun to act in a much more dynamic way with respect to the global field, and to the world spaces within it. (Robertson 1992, p. 187)

Robertson (1992) chose to finish his influential book on the cultural processes of globalisation on this note, flagging the university with global aspirations as one of the proactive 'players' in globalisation. Education he suggests is not a marginal bystander and passive victim of globalisation, but rather, one of the main events. Internationalised online education, with its instantaneous yet 'timeless' (Castells 1996) electronic flow of commodified knowledge products across 'borderless' (Cunningham et al., 2000) space makes a particularly good example of how the globalisation game is currently being 'played'. In this paper, I take a step along the path suggested to look inside this new extreme case of globalised/globalising pedagogy to see how cultural differencing is understood, how it is happening, and to what end.

The concept of globalisation suffers from its current popularity in a number of discourses, and disputes over the nature of its existence as fact or ideological fiction (Robertson & Khonder, 1998; Kumar, 1995). However in matters of cultural identity, current times are widely understood to be characterised by the marked acceleration in the quantity, and growing complexity in the quality, of cultural exchange between what were ostensibly separate parts of the globe. The dispute becomes not whether this is happening, but whether its newness constitutes a radical, discontinuous break with earlier social processes, thus warranting new social theory (Robertson, 1992; Hall 1996a). Waters (2001, p.5) defines globalisation as: 'a social process in which the constraints of geography on economic, political, social and cultural arrangements recede, in which people become increasingly aware that they are receding and in which people act accordingly'. Robertson (1992, p.8) similarly highlights the role that consciousness plays in the contemporary moment of globalisation: 'Globalization as a concept refers both to the compression of the world and the intensification of consciousness of the world as a whole.' He offers a model of the 'global field', which recognises multiple levels from the individual to humanity, with the common relational link being 'relativization':

globalization involves comparative interaction of different forms of life. Globalization refers in this particular sense to the coming into, often problematic, conjunction of different forms of life ... In an increasingly globalized world there is a heightening of civilization, societal, ethnic, regional and, indeed individual, self-consciousness. (Robertson, 1992, p.27)

In contrast, Appadurai (1990, 1996) disaggregates what Waters considers a singular process, to distinguish the variety of disjunctural cultural flows or '-scapes' that are producing new imaginary horizons, trajectories and possibilities. He chooses to highlight the role of imagination in the constitution of new or nostalgic homes: 'The imagination is now central to all forms of agency, is itself a social fact, and is the key component of the new global order' (Appadurai, 1990, p.5).

In any account of globalisation, technology particularly in the form of electronic networking is implicated in the acceleration and radical enabling of de-territorialised cultural flows (Castells, 1996; Kelkar & Nathan 2002; Mansell 2002; Sassen 2002). In particular, the capacity for virtual networks to accommodate and facilitate new identities and their referent communities (Castells, 1997) has also been linked to the device of simulation, that is, the act of sustaining an imagined model in the place of any grounded reality (Baudrillard, 1988; Nichols 1988; Wertheim 1999; Turkle 1995). In this vein, popular imagination would construct cyberspace as a culturally inclusive, colour-blind utopia:

Like the Heavenly City, cyberspace is also unfractured by national boundaries, a 'space' where people of all nations can in theory mix together with mutual ease. Indeed, many cyber-enthusiasts would have us believe that the Net dissolves the very barriers of race and gender, elevating everybody equally to a disembodied digital stream. ... Invisible and incarnate on the sea of cyberspace, here we cannot be summed up at a glance by the color of our skin or the bulges beneath our sweaters. (Wertheim, 1999, p. 24)

This imagined ability of the 'virtual' world to transcend difference ignores the politics of cultural difference under conditions of globalisation in the 'real' world. Processes of globalisation are understood to produce competing and simultaneous potentials being 1) cultural homogeneity/convergence, 2) cultural polarization and 3) hybridity, each with its own associated moral panic (Holton 2000; Cowen 2002). Robertson terms these opposed but mutually dependent tendencies as 'a massive, twofold process involving the interpenetration of the universalization of particularism and the particularism of universalism (1992, p.100), while Appadurai (1990, p.17) terms it: 'the politics of the mutual effort of sameness and difference to cannabilize one another.' Similarly, the notion of a dialectic tension is captured in Robertson's concept of 'glocalisation' (1992, p. 174) to capture the contingent articulation between local (diverse) and global (universal) contexts. Former models of culture and cultural differences as stable, mutually exclusive and predictable will need radical renovation to deal with such facts of life.

As Smith (2000) points out, culture as an object of study has been redefined through the logics of different paradigms such as Marxism, cultural studies and semiotics. He demonstrates how culture has moved from a relatively stable, 'out there' phenomenon and object of analysis, to become an object that is constructed in dialogic relations, subject to cultural politics and discursive conditions, necessitating a different methodological approach. To this end, my focus is on cultural differencing (verb), being a relational process to be tracked, rather than on cultural difference (noun) as some 'out there' reality to be tapped. This coheres with Clifford (1988; 1997) critiques of past theorisations of culture as stable located ways of life, as inadequate for all times, not just times of globalisation. Clifford argues that notions of culture are

borne of encounters with difference at the interface and margins, where decisions about insiders and outsiders have to be policed, and not at the centre. Now, perhaps more than ever so, culture needs to be understood as an ongoing process of producing and sustaining collective identity in which the individual engages by choice and imagination, that is, '(cultural) identity, not as an archaic survival but as an ongoing process, politically contested and historically unfinished' (Clifford 1988, p. 9). With the emphasis on processual, present, and relational understandings of culture, Clifford encourages the study of 'hybrid, cosmopolitan experiences as much as on rooted, native ones' (1997, p. 24), not just in physical travel, but also metaphoric travel via 'different modalities of insider-outsider connection (p. 28),' of which online education would be one example.

It is these combined senses of global awareness, the heightened sense of relativization, the 'social fact' of imagination, cultural identity as a relational process amidst competing cultural potentials, all made possible in new global electronic connections, that I want to explore in this paper. In addition, I am interested in the conflict between firstly, globalisation as the impinging and intruding consciousness of difference with its inherent tensions and frictions, and secondly, our 'wilful' (Robertson 1992) collective dreaming of cyberspace as a zone that can transcend differences. These theoretical conundrums will be explored in terms of the potentials of cultural difference firstly imagined, and then managed, in the design and conduct of the case study of an online MBA unit with an internationalised student group. The paper is presented in five sections. Firstly, the literature shaping online education is briefly reviewed in terms of how it constructs cultural difference as a pedagogical issue with both positive and negative potentials. Secondly, the case study of an online MBA unit is introduced, with its informing critical realist frame that recognises the ontological level of potentials as contributing to how open social systems operate. The third section offers an analysis of how the imagined positive potentials of cultural difference were factored into the design and played out in the case study unit. The fourth section similarly offers an account of how the imagined negative potentials of cultural difference were managed in the unit's design and conduct. The final section revisits the introductory conundrum regarding cultural difference under globalisation in light of the case study exploration.

Online dreaming and nightmares

Much of the current enthusiasm for online modes of educational delivery stems from the school of utopian 'dreaming', where cyberspace offers a colour-free, no artificial flavouring, environment for the meeting of pure minds. In times of shrinking public funding for university provision, the vision of online delivery of courses to international and domestic students has become a popular solution to extend markets, maximize profits, lower costs and position institutions competitively: 'The virtual university, the virtual classroom and the virtual laboratory are heralded by what we shall call the "techno-utopians" as the answer' (Peters & Roberts, 2000, pp. 127-128). This enthusiasm for online modes of teaching/learning amounts to a pervasive agenda in Australian higher education that enjoys bipartisan support (West 1998, Nelson 2002, Beazley 2001) and is now being pursued with a sense of urgency by the university sector (AV-CC 2001) as much as by governments, though not without its critics (e.g. Brabazon 2002). It has typically been pursued in full-fee post-graduate coursework programs for the 'earner-learner' (Cunningham et al., 2000), in particular,

in Business and Information Technology studies. In this dreaming, the dissolution of geo-political boundaries has tended to also dissolve the imagined boundaries/obstacles of linguistic and cultural difference. In previous on-shore and off-shore modes of internationalised education, these obstacles of difference were imagined substantial enough to warrant considerable investment in preparatory efforts, and management in the guise of foundation/bridging programs, often informed by Orientalist notions of cultural learning styles (Humfrey 1999; Coleman 1998; Singh & Doherty 2004; Doherty 2001; Pratt, 1998).

There have been some studies addressing issues of cultural identity in public Internet usage (Hawisher & Selfe, 2000; Nakamura, 2002; Burkhalter, 1999), which suggest that though the internet offers new imaginative potentials in terms of ‘conscious coalition, of affinity, of political kinship’ (Haraway quoted in Hawisher & Selfe, 2000, p. 281), cyberspace is still ‘a culturally interested geography’ (Hawisher & Selfe, 2000, p. 10). Despite any revolutionary potentials, it is however occupied and constituted by people who are ‘neither revolutionary nor perfect, armed with ordinary ways of understanding each other’ (Burkhalter, 1999, p. 74). Thus race/ethnicity/cultural stereotypes and their attendant prejudices can be reproduced in cyberspace, and even encoded in the software interface (Nakamura 2002).

In the nascent literature regarding issues of cultural difference in online internationalised pedagogy, authors construct cultural difference both as a ‘problem’/‘concern’ for pedagogy (i.e. teaching *for* cultural diversity), and as an asset for curriculum (i.e. teaching *about* cultural diversity). In the former frame, cultural difference is a negative potential to be managed by risk minimisation and sensitivity (Evans & Henry 2000; Goodfellow, Lea, Gonzalez & Mason, 2001; Ziegahn 2001; Williams, Watkins, Daley & Courtenay 2001; Bates, 2001). There is a strongly moral tone to this frame, as cultural offence risks ‘perils of cultural marginalisation ... (and) the spectres of pedagogical imperialism’ (Goodfellow et al., 2001, p.66). Authors, typically in the genre of reflecting on their practice, grapple with accommodating cultural differences, while ensuring their product is yet an authentic rendition of their local brand. For example, Evan & Henry (2000) reflect on the inherent dilemma in their ‘off-campus, off-shore’ (p.1) program:

Here we confronted a troubling dilemma: how to avoid being too demanding and insensitive to cultural difference while at the same time making realistic decisions about students’ chances of completing an Australian doctoral program. (Evans & Henry 2000, p. 12)

While laudable, such constructions are locked into the impossible task of protecting some nostalgic sense of cultural separateness, while the whole setting is about ‘complex connectivity’ (Tomlinson 1999), intersection and ‘interpenetration’ (Robertson, 1992, p.100). The avoidance of difference, and/or cultivation of sameness, is also considered good quality assurance in the ‘risky’ business of off-shore delivery:

Student entry standards, academic regulations and discipline [in off-shore partner institution] were identical to the Curtin University campus. Students received the same learning materials and the same teaching ... The assessment method for offshore students was the same as for on-campus students.

Offshore students sat for the same examination paper, or a paper of identical standard, and all examination papers were marked by Curtin University staff on the Western Australian campus. (Hacket and Nowak 1999, p.4-5)

In this scenario, Hacket and Nowak recommend face-to-face teaching by the Australian institution's staff as a desirable measure to protect the quality of the exported product, and fully on-line delivery as increasing associated risks of cultural differencing, unless full control is maintained by the Australian provider.

The latter frame in the literature regarding online learning constructs cultural diversity as a positive potential, to be managed by risk maximisation (for example, McLoughlin 2001; St Amant 2002; Mason 1998) achieved through the social engineering of cultural mix in pedagogic interactions:

Technologies can serve to bring communities together and can create contexts where cross-cultural awareness and understanding are developed by the group. (McLoughlin, 2001, p. 15)

Cultural difference/intercultural competence is thus identified as a curriculum objective in itself, but to be delivered through the happenstance of peer interaction, not through systematically selected curriculum materials. Leask (2000) suggests that cultural differences will be more salient in the online internationalised class, given that 'it is the information and ideas rather than the students that are mobile' (p. 4 of 16). Leask suggests various strategies to internationalise curriculum and pedagogy in online environments, in particular, exploiting the interactive affordances of computer-mediated communication, in order to harness the possibilities by interacting with international students, experts and informational sources. Leask argues that such pedagogical experiences will deliver the desired graduate attribute of demonstrating 'international perspectives' (p. 8 of 16).

Such understandings of cultural diversity as a vicarious curricular asset have been cultivated strongly in the policy discourse of 'internationalisation' for value-added education. Initially, the idea of internationalisation was a fairly nebulous umbrella concept for a range of strategies stemming from an equally diverse range of motivations, usually citing Knight & De Wit's (1995, pp. 15-16) definition of internationalisation as 'the complex of processes whose combined effect, whether planned or not, is to enhance the international dimension of the experience of higher education in universities and similar educational institutions'. As an explicit policy discourse, its adoption served to re-image Australia's effort to export education in a less aggressively commercial way than the previous 'trade' discourse (Back & Davis 1995) though there is plenty of overlap (Gallagher 2002). Internationalisation as a policy agenda has received more attention recently in particular in relation to how its interpretation is refracted in particular local settings (Yang, 2002; Callan 1998; Scott, 1998; Welch, 2002; Sidhu 2002). In Australia, there is also more attention being paid to internationalisation of the curriculum and higher education experience as value-adding for domestic students. For the purposes of this paper, internationalisation could be understood as the purposeful strategies enacted by national institutions such as Australian universities to position and construct themselves as 'players' in the global field, that is, to work beyond national boundaries (Marginson 1999). Thus, an

‘internationalised’ student group results from the marketing and partnerships forged by the selling university in their attempt to carve a niche in global markets.

This section has discussed the potentials of cultural difference – both negative and positive – envisaged in the literature informing online internationalised education, and how policies of ‘internationalisation’ seek to represent and maximise the positives. The former section outlined the competing potentials inherent in the cultural reconfigurations of globalisation and virtual dreaming. These issues are now taken into the empirical enquiry of how such competing cultural potentials were constructed, managed and lived out in a case study of an internationalised online MBA unit.

The case study

A semester-long unit was selected as the case-study ‘site’ by the following criteria:

- 1) offered by an Australian university in ‘fully online’ mode, that is, all course interaction taking place online in 2003;
- 2) included international students located in their own country of residence in its enrolments;
- 3) a core, entry level Master of Business Administration (MBA) unit whose generic content could not identify the institution or the participants in any way;
- 4) the consent and cooperation of university and faculty management, staff and students involved.

The study was constructed using a methodology based on the ‘genre’ of critical ethnography (Carspecken 2001, p.4, see also 1996,) which offers a rigorous theory of validity to guide principled qualitative studies. This frame with its multiple layers of data collection and data production¹ to access varied ontological levels has been adapted to the virtual setting following Hine (2000), wherein it is the networked connections that constitute the ‘site’ case, rather than any physical boundaries. In addition, the traditional ethnographic privileging of ‘sight’ or face-to-face witnessing is challenged, so the virtual setting can be understood on/in its own terms. In addition, Hine argues that online social interactions should be seen ‘as textual twice over: as a discursively performed culture and as a cultural artefact, the technology text’ (p. 39). This duality calls for multiple analytical frames and in some way addresses concerns surrounding the spurious authority of ethnographic accounts (Coffey & Atkinson 1996).

Of particular importance to this paper, the study was conceived within a critical realist frame (Bhaskar, 2002; Outhwaite, 1987) which asserts that there is a layered reality ‘out there’ independent of our interpretation. In summary, the premises for a critical realist ontology rely on a stratification of reality that asserts firstly the reality of potentials or tendencies inherent in objects or actors (*what is possible*); secondly the existential reality of any social event or practice, and its ‘intransitivity’ (Bhaskar 2002, p.9) or independence of any theoretical interpretation of such (what is, *what happened*); and thirdly, the reality of the empirical event which is observable in some way (*what can be sensed*). The contribution of Bhaskar was to create an ontology for open systems such as society, in opposition to the closed systems of scientific

experimentation that failed to cater for complexities that could not be controlled. In an open system, coexisting forces may work together or counteract each other, and inherent tendencies may or may not be realised in an actual event:

The capacities that objects and agents possess as potentials, which may or may not be drawn upon or activated, exist in a field of many different objects and agents, each with diverse characteristics and capacities... in 'open systems', so that even when a capacity... is exercised, the intended consequence ... may not come about. (Stones, 1996,p.30)

This ontology is also opposed to the more extreme social constructionist assertion that reality exists only in our interpretations, rejecting any ontology of a reality that can be known objectively, independent of a ideological standpoint (Schwandt, 2000; Crotty 1998). For critical realists, there is a reality of potentials and events that is enacted in complex social dimensions, which will thus be difficult to isolate, grasp or capture empirically, but is no less real.

Introducing the case study

The case study unit (hereafter 'Unit A') was one of 10 core units offered in a 12 unit Master of Business Administration, all offered in on-line mode with no on-campus requirements. For many students, according to their introductory postings, it was one of the first MBA units undertaken; for others it was one of their last. Pre-requisites for admission to the MBA program included an undergraduate degree and work experience in a managerial role. Like all other Australian universities, MBA studies at University A attracted full fees, as opposed to the government-subsidised fees charged for undergraduate study.

The university's business faculty, like many others in Australia, has forged a number of off-shore partnerships with selected educational institutions in Asia and the Pacific. Unit A was offered simultaneously to: a pool of 'domestic' students; a cohort of 'international' students enrolled through a private Malaysian institution; and a cohort of 'international' students enrolled through a Chinese university. Their category of 'domestic' student included individuals who enrolled in the course independent of any partnering arrangement. This included many students who lived in close proximity to the university, but also other students located elsewhere in Australia, expatriates, and one enrolment from the US. To further complicate categories, it became evident that some students enrolled at the Malaysian institution were in fact citizens of China, who had temporarily relocated to Malaysia for the purposes of their study. In addition, many of the students at the Malaysian partner who were Malaysian nationals, were of Chinese-diaspora backgrounds. Thus the label of 'Malaysian' students when used in this paper, refers to their location and enrolment through the Malaysian partner, not necessarily to their cultural affiliation, which was more typically Chinese.

Arrangements for course delivery to the Chinese and Malaysian 'international' cohorts differed, being customised according to the different contractual details negotiated between the partnering institutions. With the Chinese university, Australian lecturing staff habitually travelled to China in person to delivery intense face-to-face sessions. Under these arrangements, the Chinese cohort were not required to participate in the on-line mode, though they were encouraged to observe the on-line

discussions. Thus this group of international students were effectively invisible in this ethnographic study of the on-line interaction, and invisible to, or separate from, the domestic and Malaysian cohorts. In contrast to the partnership with the Chinese cohort, the partnering relationship between University A and the Malaysian private college was in its early days. The Malaysian college operated across a number of campuses and employed their own tutorial staff to assist in the delivery of the Australian university's unit. These tutors did not participate in the online discussions, and were also in effect 'invisible' to the on-line ethnographic study. Unit A was the first time the Australian and Malaysian institutions had articulated in this fashion. This group of 37 students were a designated 'pilot' group trialling the online delivery interface prior to larger scale enrolments planned in future semesters. These students were included in the same online discussions as the 'domestic' cohort and staff expectations were that these students would receive no differential treatment.

At the outset of the unit, there were 144 students listed in the course database, including 37 enrolled through the Malaysian partner institution. By the time groups were allocated for the first assessment task, there were 92 active students, active, that is, in terms of making postings to the shared discussion space. 83 students participated in these assessable first group discussions. By the second assessable group discussions, 90 students were allocated to groups, and 79 participated, 29 being students enrolled via the Malaysian partner. The online interactions and course materials were managed within a popular commercial courseware platform, which offered monologic space (the standardised 'announcements' feature), open dialogic space for teacher-moderated interaction (discussion fora), and restricted dialogic space for small peer-group interactions. Two assessment tasks required online participation in allocated small groups, and peer evaluations of these contributions.

The unit's content was structured into 6 thematic modules, with online course notes and associated readings, some in electronic format linked from the course site and others in hard copy purchased from the university bookshop. The course was formally staged over 13 weeks with a mid-semester break of one week half way. However, interaction continued regardless, and the course site was 'alive' and busy over a period of 19 weeks in total.

To demonstrate how the negative and positive potentials of cultural difference were constructed, were factored into the design, and influenced/informed the conduct of the unit, I will be drawing on interviewⁱⁱ data with the lecturer and educational designer, and pertinent online postings, to illuminate the ontological levels of cultural differencing in this site, that is, what was possible, what was empirically evident, and what happened. The next section provides an orientation to the pedagogic design of the unit, and how courting cultural difference and avoiding cultural difference were both part of the design.

Avoiding cultural difference in the design

When interviewedⁱⁱⁱ prior to the unit's commencement, LA did not intend to adapt the curriculum, assessment or the online pedagogy in any way for the Malaysian cohort. Where the Chinese partner had negotiated face-to-face teaching periods and were dealt with separately, the students from Malaysia by design were to be treated in exactly the same way and in the same forums as the 'domestic' students. When

probed on this decision, LA outlined a number of rationales to support this decision. Firstly, he expressed some scepticism of cultural learning style theory as warranting adaptation:

R: ... the international student cohorts, are you predicting any difference in the way they'll engage with the course?

L: ... No doubt there are cultural differences there but I don't know what they are, and so rather than classify one cohort, say the Chinese, as likely to be as willing to reveal or make comment as a typical Western student, but whether that means we shouldn't encourage them to do that because ah, you know, the stats say that's their cultural, ah, you know, preference versus encouraging in what is known to be a Western degree ... (IntLA1)

Secondly, in his opinion, the academic knowledge provided through this course was international in its scope, albeit biased to reflect Western dominance in the research literature, and not a highly localised version that needed adaptation:

R: ... Now going back to how you select from a large literature for the course, enrolling international students, has that affected the way you consider what you might and might not select?

L; Um, no, because I've always had the view that an MBA should be an international course. I refuse to set Australian texts, I feel they're inappropriate. Um, and so, what typically then happens, you have an American text which is written for an international audience which the particular one I use is[...] This one has made an attempt over ...] it's made an effort over the years to get ah broader in its examples. Typically, of course, the research, the formal research, is mainly almost exclusively Western based, um, but it's not just American. Australia doesn't get too many mentions, but I just figure that's entirely appropriate. You know, it's not a dominant research thing.

R: So you're saying that management as a discipline has an international focus, or a sort of cosmopolitan um aspect ?

L: Mmmm, yeah, mmmm. (IntLA1)

Thirdly, he felt that the non-Western student is in effect desiring and buying the unadulterated, unmitigated, 'pure' or 'authentic' Western experience:

L: ... and I'm certainly conscious of not being, you know, imperialist in thinking here but the marketability of an MBA in Chinese, and they tell us that, is that they want a Western degree. (IntLA1)

This consumer demand renders the adaptive, accommodating curriculum/pedagogy at odds with good customer service, that is, the culturally sensitised design would offend. These rationales in effect produced an expedient pedagogical design of 'cultural sameness', that is, avoiding any cultural differencing in the design of non-differentiated experiences and expectations for the cohort enrolled through the Malaysian partner institute.

But what other potentials existed? The instructional designer, in her interview, pointed out the coexisting rationale for, and possibility of, tailoring the curriculum to better reflect the students' particular worlds:

D: What we've been doing with our Chinese, we've got a Chinese lady here, who acts as an interpreter and researcher for us ... and she's been looking up a lot of Chinese case studies for us on the Internet, and I'd like to see her perhaps do the same for Malaysian case studies, so people have got relevant case studies to look at, if they're not working in a business environment where they can use case studies. [3 turns omitted] [...] I think that we need to you know, have as much information as we can that is relevant to their area, their context, and that takes a bit of research on our part, but you see, only a few people are taking up that option.

As the unit unfolded, this design to avoid potential cultural differencing was both challenged and endorsed by the international student cohort. Three particular incidents will be outlined in brief below. The first two challenge the design: one where an international student protested at the Western bias of the selected curricular materials; and a second incident where a Malaysian student complained about the software's undifferentiated treatment of Chinese names by default settings. The third incident endorses it: the Malaysian students protested that their assignments were being marked by employees of the Malaysian institution, not of the Australian university. Each incident is briefly portrayed with reference to participants' statements made in the online interactions, interviews and emails.

Incident 1: The biased international curriculum

In Week 2 of Unit A the lecturer (hereafter 'LA') made a posting (A111) that formally welcomed the Malaysian students, and celebrated their participation as a first for University, that '*marks our "coming of age" as an international online provider*^{iv}.' He highlighted the potential and expectation for student subsidy of the curriculum: '*It will be wonderful for students in this course to gain from interacting with managers operating in different countries and different cultures.*' Finally, he invited the Malaysian students to comment on '*how the course appears from a Malaysian perspective.*' Thirty-nine minutes later, in the newly created Thread E, the first posting (E1) is made by a Malaysian student. Under the title, '*Management styles in Malaysia – the best of both world [sic]*', the student offered an account of the difference between Western and Asian management styles – the former constructed as task-oriented and individualistic, the latter more harmonious and group-oriented. Malaysia, he then suggested, has '*a blend of approaches*' due to the presence of (Western style) global corporations, and (Asian style) local companies. He concluded with the challenging comment: '*I noticed that the bulk of the research and management literature are written by Western writers, including our recommended text ... I hope [Unit A] from [University A] will offer a mix of both views so as to present a more holistic approach to management.*' LA responded one day later with a posting (E2) denying that one style is being promoted, agreeing that a holistic approach is necessary, and '*challenging*' the student's polarised binary of Western vs Asian, with the added explanation: '*By "challenge", of course, I mean "open up for discussion and critical analysis"*'. He ended with a call for '*mutual respect ... and to*

be open to questions and constructive suggestions from those who have views different from our own whether for cultural or other reasons.'

LA later reflected on how carefully worded this posting was, and the delicate balances of potentials at play:

A sensitive issue raised by a Malaysian student. I saw it as touching on cultural bias. I noticed I originally had the word 'Western' first in the subject line and altered it to put 'Asian' first. I wanted to assure the student about lack of bias but to not surrender my authority to 'challenge' (note how I later added an explanation of the word – again my new awareness of cultural issues). I also used the posting to remind all students to respect diversity. (ChLA1)

In the final interview, LA addressed this challenge to his design of cultural sameness, by explicating his approach to accommodating diversity in pedagogical and assessment design, rather than in expert curricular selection:

LA: ...all through it they can draw on their own experience. All the assessment enables them to do that and to comment on each other through their own filters. So, I believe that way I'm catering for everything without making special accommodations for that particular cultural difference or other difference (InLA2).

This series of moves prompted by students drew issues of cultural differencing to the empirical surface as a contested curricular/instructional matter and also as a regulative matter in terms of managing cultural sensitivities through an ethic of respect.

Incident 2: Naming the problem

In Week 3, a Malaysian student emailed LA to complain about sporadic access to the course website, signing off with a three part Chinese name, [DEF]^v and the subscript 'student from Malaysia'. LA's response addressed the student with "Dear [D], Am I correct in assuming you prefer to be called by your surname or do you prefer [EF]?", signing off with his informal first name. The student's reply, addressed formally to 'Mr. [surname]', explained the Chinese naming conventions, then contrasted this with the variety of practices produced in the unit's web interactions, whereby the author of each posting is identified in the header automatically from fields entered in the student administration software:

In Malaysia, it is common to call people (especially the Chinese community) by the surname. For instance, my colleagues and friends call me "[D]". But as far as the [Uni A] website is concerned, I am called "[D]", "[E]" and in the discussion group "[DF]". Hope they don't call me "Harry Potter" next! (just a joke, Sir). In summary, I prefer to be called "[D]" but I would like to be listed in the discussion group as "[DEF]".

The email dialogue continued, with LA explaining how confusion can arise, and apologising for the error in entering his name, but raising the issue of hybridised practices:

Thanks for clarifying your name. I have had enough contact with Chinese people to understand the convention of using the surname. However, like many Australians I get confused about whether a Chinese name is presented in traditional format ([DEF]) or in 'Western' format ([EF D]). The University's system has been erroneous in entering the names of some of our Malaysian students. My apologies for the incorrect entry of your name - I have arranged to have it corrected.

In an announcement (An11) in the beginning of **Week 4** LA posted naming instructions for the benefit of the whole student group:

Incidentally, the convention for Chinese names is to put the family name first. Thus, in Chinese format my name would be '[BA]' and you would call me [B]. If you are unsure, I'd suggest you ask your fellow students how they preferred to be addressed.

Elsewhere, another Malaysian student introduced himself (A136) with reference to the confusions growing around naming conventions:

My name is [KLM], but in the [university A] discussion pages I have been listed with all sorts of names. Initially it was [KM]. After I requested for a correction, it became [KK]. In the [log on] page, I am greeting as [L]!

He signed off as [K].

By Week 12, LA attempted to address this problem systematically with an email to university management requesting urgent consideration of how non-differentiated IT systems and online course platform misrepresented these students, alerting them to the variety of naming practices employed by students, and the potential for cultural offence impacting on their business: *'I see it as important for our future as an international provider'* (EmLA). Thus the plan to treat domestic and international students in the same way, through the undifferentiated, default settings of fields in the courseware and administrative software, came to produce a degree of interactive trouble, offence, protest and confusion.

Incident 3: Cultured assessment

In Week 9 and 10, it became evident to the Malaysian students that their assignments were being marked by local markers, employed by their local institution, not by the Australian staff. The instructional designer suggested that the distinction was part of contractual negotiations between the university and the Malaysian partner institution, and was only inadvertently made known to the students involved. A Malaysian student asked: *'When will we Malaysians know of our assessments? Is a local examiner involved in the markings?'*(F158). This was echoed by another Malaysian student. Early in Week 10, another posting (F171) by a third Malaysian student picked up the argument of needing prompt feedback to inform the next assessment, with the added suggestion of relative disadvantage:

I was wondering whether you might have an idea as to when we Malaysian students will be able to obtain our results to the first assignment ... I am

concerned as if it is released any much later, we will not have the advantage of reading the examiner/marker's comments, which I would consider invaluable in ensuring we do a better job in our second assignment...

These postings seemed to express a sense of exclusion and distancing, a feeling of being 'othered' or of being marginalised by the delays in receiving formative feedback from their first assignment. In an announcement, LA eventually explained the delay in the return of first assignments to the Malaysian cohort:

Unfortunately, the turnaround time for marking of the first assignment for Malaysian students will be 3 weeks rather than the 2 weeks I was aiming for. It is taking more time than I expected for examiners to courier the marked assignments to me for moderation prior to returning them to students. You will all still have feedback in time for the second assignment. (An 27)

This provoked protests over the fact that they weren't being treated in exactly the same way as the domestic students.

DA: ...and there's been quite a lot of flack coming email to us from the Malaysian students.

R: Alright, so this is coming behind the scenes?

DA: they feel hardly done by, but the funny part about it is, when we are doing the moderation of these assessments, the Malaysian students are being marked more severely by the Malaysian markers than we would have liked. Isn't that interesting? LA noticed that. (1 turn omitted) ... see they wanted to be a quality Australian product, and ah, they felt that that wasn't good enough to be marked there, but the reality was that they were tougher markers anyway. (ChDA1)

LA reported undertaking a careful moderation process, which necessitated couriating hard copies of marked assignments between localities, thus delaying the release of results. By LA's account, the Malaysian markers were also harsher in their written comments/criticism, to the point where he felt he had to soften the comment. By DA's account, the Malaysian markers were harder to impress.

Discussion

The complex cultural politics that surrounded these three incidents demonstrate *in situ* efforts to manage the negative potentials of cultural difference. In the first incident, in which the non-localised 'international' curricular selection was challenged as biased and insufficiently diverse, the lecturer upheld his design of an undifferentiated curriculum with ample opportunity for students to differentiate it elsewhere in the pedagogic and assessment design. In the second incident, the non-differentiated treatment of three-part Chinese names by the software's default settings turned out to be offensive and problematic, a potential that in LA's view needed urgent systemic management. However, in the third incident, a behind-the-scenes differentiation of assessment processes was equally challenged on the grounds that the Malaysian students did not want to be treated any differently, and felt disadvantaged by the differencing. In this incident the students effectively endorsed the design of avoiding cultural differencing.

Courting cultural difference in the design

In contrast to the design to avoid differencing, an additional important aspect of the design of the unit interaction, in particular the small group assessment tasks, was the conscious intent of the lecturer to purposefully mix the Malaysian and domestic students. This conscious design aimed to facilitate a cross-cultural exchange of ideas and issues, and to provoke some recognition/experience of cultural difference, as the lecturer explains:

I do my best to actually construct cohorts, sub-cohorts, groups , for discussion that reflect some diversity across the obvious ones of gender, country of origin and so on, because I think there is learning value for people in being exposed to different ideas (IntLA1)

This design reflects the construction of cultural difference as positive potential referred to in the literature review above. By their introductory postings and interviews, domestic and international students also relished this potential. For example, an introductory posting from a Malaysian student expressed a sense of anticipation of the group interaction as a resource for learning:

I look forward to interactive sessions with my fellow coursemate and learn from all of you (Posting A123)

As it turned out, the planned cultural mix was not possible for the first small group assessment task, because enrolment procedures for the Malaysian students, with their added layer of partner institution processes, had been delayed. This also delayed their access to the course website. As a group, they were granted an extension in time, and allocated to their own small groups to allow participation in this reviewed time frame. However, the lecturer pursued his strategy of cultural mix in allocations for the second small group assessment task, and successfully so in his reflective opinion:

I was particularly interested in um how using the small groups, in particular having them culturally diverse, that might stimulate some discussion of exactly that, that somebody writes it clearly from their own perspective, but with their own attempt at analysis of what's going on here, and other people, I was hoping, and I think in some cases they have, they've given quite different insights into "Wow, I wouldn't have seen it that way", and "have you considered this?" and that enriches their understanding and broadens their perspective on their own situation. I think that's a particular strength, and I was just trying to figure out how can we ensure that everyone at least has that opportunity. (IntLA2)

The optional whole class interactions also included all students. The element of 'cultural mix' and insights came not only from international students, but also from the diversity within the 'domestic' student group.

In a footnote, Bernstein talked of the middle class's 'hidden subsidy' (1971, pp. 57-58) of the school curriculum. Following Bernstein, I will term this aspect of design '**student subsidy**' of the curriculum, in that the lecturer has purposefully designed

such interchange to vicariously provide, or enrich, aspects of the curriculum. The term 'subsidy' also connotes a sense of financial transaction that befits these expensive settings, and the way in which cultural difference within student groups has been used as a marketing ploy in Australian MBA promotion^{vi}.

Another significant feature of LA's design of the small group discussion was his version of the business discipline's pedagogical tradition of heuristic case studies. Rather than using classic case studies produced by high status academies, LA's assessment tasks required students to produce their own case study narratives, drawing on real and hypothetical scenarios in their own work situations. These case studies were discussed in the small groups before each student submitted their case study and analysis for assessment. Thus each student's work was hopefully enriched by the insights provided by group members, that is, by mutual student subsidy. The array of case studies inevitably produced descriptions of workplaces in diverse settings.

Two particular features of the course as it unfolded will be outlined in brief below to demonstrate how the positive potential of cultural difference in student subsidy was evidenced and managed. Firstly, in the open class discussions, one 'domestic' student, resident in Australia but 'from' Papua New Guinea, made an effort to continually subject the universalist claims of the curricular material to the cultural filter of her knowledge and experience of the PNG business community. Secondly, the case studies presented by students displayed a growing awareness of global/local connections and cultural relativities.

Incident 4: Cultural filters on the content – glocalisation in process

In Week 2, a domestic student 'from' Papua New Guinea now resident in Australia made a posting (B58) that outlined the 'wantok system' of common goals and practices, and asked whether this constitutes an organisation, despite its lack of formal coordination. This was the first of many such postings by this student in the weeks that followed that problematised the claims and concepts presented in the unit material by considering how they may or may not apply to the culturally different settings in PNG she has had experience in.

In Thread G, Week 7 saw an active discussion on the module content by a small group of students who moderated the discussion themselves, building from and responding to each other's postings about scenarios of motivation in the workplace. One domestic student (G21) describes the '*few occasions where there have been problems*' in her management of others '*...because of cultural differences or the like where I have needed to do some learning to find out what were the status drivers and motivators for that particular culture and person.*' In the same posting, the student also claimed: '*I have never known anyone to appreciate working in any organisation where their only motivation was the fear of losing their jobs and they constantly work on the edge with the fear of losing their jobs.*'

This postings sparked a reply (G22) from the aforementioned student '*originally from Papua New Guinea*' (A96), who continues her theme of problematising theoretical concepts and frames presented in the unit by applying her cultural filter and relativising the transparent context of the previous posting:

I believe this may be the case in the western culture oriented organisations, particularly Australian (as that is where you have based your argument). In PNG though, and working as manager in various organisations, I have seen and have come across a lot of employees that kept going/working because they feared losing their jobs. There are some very 'dictatorial' managers working up there and you have no choice but to keep working as you are the only 'source of bread winner' for your family. So maybe in this case, motivation is not a necessity. People keep working to satisfy practical needs (that are in a lot of cases regarded very vital for survival) faced by people in underdeveloped countries such as PNG (and maybe others). My argument is there is 'no heaven' anywhere.

She continues with an account of an international management firm promising motivational schemes for 'expat occupied positions', but no tangible evidence of such on the ground. She concludes by asking for the group's input: *'In such a situation, what would be the best approach providing that PNG is very cultural oriented and again I touch the 'wantok' system? ... what best advice can you guys give me?'* Her account of cultures, in contrast to the preceding student's, was much more an account of entanglement, resistances, power relations, and complications beyond the challenges of cross-cultural communication.

This exchange provoked two domestic students to reflect on work experiences with indigenous workers in different settings and the challenges to their assumed work practices these settings provoked (G23, G24). The student writing from a PNG perspective then draws this thread together in a form of summary posting (G25) that introduces the term 'global managers' in terms of: *'If you can live and work in these sorts of cultures, I believe you can work anywhere (in the world).'* Thus this student with the 'natural' indigenous identity (SIA7) constructs herself simultaneously as the global cosmopolitan. In a following posting (G33), a domestic student attempted to 'de-culture' the topic by reducing it to a matter of individual preferences - *'As individuals we are all different and therefore we are all motivated differently'* - or of circumstance: *'I believe this area relates closely to the personal relationships within a company'*. To this, the student from PNG posed the dilemma of the worker in the economic context of PNG, *'Jobs are hard to come by in PNG'*. Again, she had insisted on broadening the parameters of the instructional focus to take account of the wider social setting and how that can impinge on workplace/management practices. Her sustained efforts in problematizing the textbook theories could be read as a form of resistance to, or protest at, their professed culture-neutrality; an attempt to provoke representation of her contexts and identity in the curricular material; or more positively as a contribution of 'student subsidy', enriching the insights available to the student body. It could also be interpreted as a form of 'glocalization' - taking the purportedly global body of management disciplinary knowledge and 'localizing' it within the contexts she is familiar with.

This student's persistence in putting cultural considerations on the table and uppermost throws into relief the absence of any similar contextualisation by other domestic students of their claims/points. This tendency produces in effect a transparent 'default' setting for some (Western, English speaking) contexts and an effect of 'othering' by naming those for whom the default does not apply. The fact

that these cultural insights are coming from a ‘domestic’ student, that is, from the diversity within the default setting, questions the sustainability of such imagined defaults in the context of increasing co-existing diversity.

Incident 5: Relativization over time

In Week 13, towards the end of the unit, LA entered an established dialogue between a domestic and a Malaysian student regarding dynamics of power and age in workplaces, and asked: *‘is there an effect of age and assumed wisdom? Are there cultural differences in this?’*(H19). This provoked a domestic student to give his view on how different power bases operate, as a 24 year old: *‘These principles operate irrespective of age, atleast in an australian context. In Malaysia and in asia in general where power distance is higher than in Australia this may not be quite as true.’* This construction of comparative ‘power distance’ draws on a frame by Hofstede (1980), that typifies different cultures by a set of four dimensions referring to work-place values. This is an influential frame popular in the discourse of ‘cross-cultural’ competence and communication, which offers a didactic way of knowing, interpreting and predicting the Other, but assumes/imagines internally homogeneous, mutually exclusive worlds. What is of interest here however, is the reflexive way the student has used the ideas to relativise his claim, and restrict it to the Australian context. He is beginning to de-centre his own standpoint, and see other possibilities.

Another domestic student joined the conversation at this point, and offered a homily from Sir Robert Menzies regarding knowledge and wisdom. He includes in his posting an aside addressed to the international student who has been active in this conversation: *‘([name] – he was an elder Australian statesman 1894-1978).’* (H23) Similarly, this was a small, simple but significant gesture orienting to the international student’s different background/setting, and yet including that student in the conversation. This could also be interpreted as the process of relativization – coming into a heightened comparative awareness of self and other through interaction and conjunction (Robertson, 1992, p.27).

An exchange ensued between domestic students, one of whom referred to “Mr Chips”: *‘It reminds me of “goodbye mr chips”. By the time mr chips was at a a stage of vast wisdom acquired through his life experiences his body was to old to carry on.’* (H28) This posting offers a contrast to the inclusive H23 in that the cultural reference it makes to a dated (British) fictionalised character offers no briefing for people outside the community that might be expected to know this text. The transparent defaults are still in place for this student.

Discussion

The preceding two incidents have highlighted how the design of student subsidy to maximise cultural differencing can pay off in terms of enriching the educational experience. However, there were aspects of this design for student subsidy that in effect backfired – producing more deleterious effects such as cultural offence, interactive trouble or ill feeling. Two illustrative incidents are outlined in brief: a domestic student complained about the standard of English of the Malaysian students; and a student reported floundering in regards to protocols surrounding Chinese names.

Incident 6: Language complaint

A domestic student, who described herself as *'born in Zimbabwe, but have lived in Australia since I was 3. My parents are South African, but I definately identify with being Australian (whatever that is!)*' (SFA2), participated in a three stage email interview^{vii} after the unit had run its course. She became aware of the presence of international students in the unit interactions *'by their names and coversation over the [platform]'* (InSA2), and felt that they added to the learning: *'I think it was great, they added their cultural dimension to the conversation when issues were being discussed which made me think from a different point of view to our own culture'*. However, in regard to the assessable small group discussion, she expressed impatience with, and a sense of injustice and resentment over, having to deal with the non-native English of the international students:

R: What are your reflections on using online learning internationally? Do you see any pros or cons in general, or regarding this course in particular?

SA10: I love the international contribution, however I think many of them are not on the same playing field. Part of our assesement was to post our own case studies, and some of the language used by some international students was atrocious. We discussed these at our study group to try to help each other out to understand what they were trying to say. I thought it was quite unfair to us, and could not see how those students (international)were allowed to do this course with such poor english. However there where others whose english was acceptable and their contributions were very wise and definately contributed to my learning. (SInA2)

She reported purposefully not adapting her language to facilitate their participation:

R: Given the emerging language problems, did you find yourself adjusting your language in any way when interacting with the international students?

SA2: I don't think I ended up adjusting my language really, but I thought very hard about it before I wrote something. I remember writing a complicated word and wondering whether they would understand it, and decided to use it any way, because if I didn't, I wasn't helping them to advance their english skills. I reasoned that if they didn't understand it they would find out what it meant.

She continued to express this competitive and injured sense of fair dealing when it comes to broader issues of globalising the university:

R: You've chosen your local university, and have what sounds like a very proactive local study group. Do you see any tensions between having your local university also being a global provider? Are there any risks attached to this?

SA10: There could be. The international students or even interstate students could perceive that we have an advantage by being able to drop and talk to our lecturers. Plus in my last course the international students got live lectures which we didn't for the same course, I know lots of our students didn't agree with that. I believe our uni should be more vigilant about the help that the international students are receiving.

This empirical window into the participant's subjective realm allows us to understand some of the undercurrents, stresses and tensions in the 'internationalised' or globalising university as lived out. This student wanted a local university, not a global provider, and felt that her needs and rights were being impinged upon, compromised or marginalised by consideration of the international students. She could see the advantages to herself in their inclusion, but for her, equity should be interpreted as demonstrable and transparent equality, not through accommodation or circumstantial adjustments. Thus respect accorded to the cultural Other is read as a displacement, or de-centring of her 'local' experience.

Incident 7: Protocol problematics

This final incident builds on the history reported in Incident 2 above, and the cumulative interactive trouble over the social practices surrounding Chinese names and their hybridised forms. When reflecting on the course in general in his email interview, one domestic student nominated '*some difficulties in language communication. & understanding correct forms of address*' (InSA10) as a disadvantage when using online learning internationally. In the second small discussion group task, groups were purposefully allocated to include both domestic and international students from the Malaysian institution. This student was observed to make an initial effort to explicitly ask how people in his group wanted to be addressed, but received no explicit response as such. What is more, students in his group did not go on to sign off their postings with any informal name, but left it to the software generated header, or used their full three part name. When asked about this in the second stage to his interview, he elaborated:

A10: Yes, the second group experience provides a good illustration of the 'con' issues wrt online cross-cultural communication. I am not sure if asking for direction was somehow offensive. I was particularly confused by the different forms of address and in the end tried to avoid using any name at all. Further, the lack of visual/body language makes interpretation more difficult.

There are two aspects to this last reply to highlight. Firstly, his well-intentioned, culturally sensitive approach met with no feedback, textual or bodily, so he has no way of confirming or denying the cultural offence he is imagining. He is worse off than he started. Where he approached the communicative setting with good intentions, he is left questioning what damage he has done. Secondly, his 'confusion' stems from the variety of competing briefings and examples students were given regarding the Chinese naming protocols over the life of the unit. Take for example, the disjuncture between the first two introductory postings by Malaysian students, in the early stages of the unit. The first student offered the domestic student a briefing in the social conventions surrounding Chinese names:

'My name is [ABC] and I am a Malaysian Chinese living in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Most of my friends call me [C] (It's my surname/family name and it's common in Malaysia to call a Chinese by surnames.)'(A106)

However, this introduction was immediately followed by another introduction (A108) by a Malaysian student, who notably contradicted the previous advice on Chinese

name conventions: *'My name is [DEF] but people usually address me as [E].'* These were followed by other Malaysian students using Western given names, and domestic students sporting exotic, non-Western names. The uncertainty produced in these accounts, is probably valuable learning for globalised times whereby cultural scripts will continue to be disrupted, diluted, mixed, fractally differentiated and invented. The regrettable aspect is that the student subsidy effect in this experience of internationalised education was to render this student less confident about handling the cross-cultural communicative environment than when he started.

Discussion

The four incidents above have explored the cultural politics at play around the design of courting cultural difference. In the first two, the design seems to have achieved the curricular enrichment hoped for, though there are other possible readings. The last two incidents demonstrate how courting cultural difference can also backfire in terms of increasing resentments, and unsettling scripts and protocols.

Conclusion

This paper commenced with a focus on the competing cultural potentials of globalisation processes and the role of the internationalised university in progressing such relations. It also highlighted the popular dreaming of cyberspace as potentially an inclusive colour-free realm above and beyond cultural politics. The empirical account given above would however suggest that cultural identities are not left at the virtual threshold. What markers there are in the textual means available, such as names, labels for nationality and ethnicity, and linguistic competency, are amplified and intensified in the absence of others means. They are made to do a lot of work in networked relations and carry meanings/ significance which are scrutinised, disputed and/or imagined at times. Similarly, the global/local tensions in internationalised education were shown to not resolve in an either/or outcome, but rather coexist in mutually antagonistic yet productive relations, that is a both/and outcome.

From the description above, I have tried to demonstrate how the design of the course embraced both avoiding and courting aspects of cultural differencing in its design. Like all best laid plans, the designs were both challenged and partially realised in the complex cultural politics within the case study unit. They may seem small incidents, but it is in the minutiae of such ephemeral interactions and their electronic gossamer of relations that our global networks are being woven. Such accumulated interactions in both their patterning/unevenness, and their attractions/repulsions, will constitute globalisation as it is being played out.

The study was based on the critical realist ontology of Bhaskar, with its recognition of potentials/tendencies as shaping forces in the open system of social relations. Within the set of potentials, some will be realised by actual events, others will be suppressed or counteracted. Nested within the actual set of events, are the set of empirical events which are able to be observed and recorded by the social scientist. Carspecken's critical ethnographic frame recommends the production of dialogic data, such as interviews, to access subjective and normative ontologies not evident in the process of data collection. Through the windows of such interview data with participants' reflections and elaborations on what happened and what could have happened in this case study unit, we were able to see into these other ontological spaces.

Both this methodology and the theoretic field acknowledge that we are dealing with open systems, and that it is impossible to study processes such as globalisation in a petri dish. The point of the analysis is that it would be overly simplistic to think that these potentials could have been simply foretold then averted/maximised by designing against/for particular cultural potentials. In these times of globalisation, we can not control for other, coexisting and contradictory potentials. Nor can we control for how the various individuals that participate in, and constitute, any social situation will approach and interpret events, through what culturally interested lens, or from what culturally imbued position. By linking students distributed across the globe we are plugging into both a diversity and an intersection, in that these sites are already plugged into each other through a variety of cultural flows. We will encounter both difference and sameness because ‘we have entered into an altogether new condition of neighbourliness, even with those most distant from ourselves’ (Appadurai, 1990, p.3).

Robertson (1992, p.41) uses the term ‘meta-culture’ to refer to the culture of culture, that is, how we are habituated to think about, and with, the concept of ‘culture’:

Metacultures ...constrain conceptions of culture, mainly in terms of deep-rooted, implicit assumptions concerning relationship between parts and wholes, individuals and societies, in-groups and out-groups, and societies and the world as a whole. .. They also shape the different ways in which ... substantive culture will be invoked and applied to ‘practical action’.

In the education profession, we are in the habit of thinking about, and with, ‘culture’ in a way that constructs generic countable categories of culture, located in a way that often maps conveniently on to nationality. Robertson argues that social science’s enchantment with the idea of homogeneous national culture has blinded us to global culture processes. In effect the concept of ‘culture’ is operating under erasure, to use Derrida’s term, explained by Hall (Hall, 1996b, p.2) as operating ‘... in the interval between reversal and emergence; an idea which cannot be thought in the old way, but without which certain key questions cannot be thought at all.’ We are left using this superseded concept because we don’t have the next one ready. So how can we re-design our meta-culture to better deal with the conditions we live in and to better inform the conditions we work in?

I would like to conclude with the purposefully provocative suggestion that it is time to re-examine the widely held ethic of ‘*mutual respect*’ that LA invoked in his announcement following Incident 1 reported above, on the grounds that it sustains a redundant meta-culture. To me, ‘respect’ carries the connotation of a wariness that acknowledges the existence of negative potentials. It implies a hypersensitive radar, alert to potential offence, conflict or miscommunication. Respect could also be read as managing such negative potentials by containment through the tactic of not scratching or troubling that potential – like dancing side by side without touching each other. Such polite avoidance can work to sustain nostalgic and imagined notions of mutually exclusive worlds even while the actors are embroiled in the processes of undoing these worlds’ separation. It may be time to revisit and test the ‘fact’ of cultural offence potentials. While we carefully avoid such engagement, we could be concocting differences that do not exist, or that no longer apply. The unexamined ethic of ‘cultural respect’ fails to engage with the new conditions of entanglement, the

enthusiastic selling/buying of cultural goods we are all engaged in, and our mutual consumption of each other. Maybe we need to imagine a new rubric such as ‘cultural collaboration’ that would better reflect an ethic for being ‘together-in-difference’ (Ang, 2001, p.5), that is, of dancing together interlocked in some mutual embrace.

An ethic of mutual respect also seems inadequately equipped to cope with the cultural politics emerging since the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001. Jaeger and Burnett (2003) report how more sinister potentials have been read into online course provision for international students in the US, and how this potential has been managed by legislation making it illegal for an international student resident in the US to participate in online mode courses, for fear of this providing a front for other activities. How adequately does a discourse of ‘respect’ deal with the horrors of the attacks, and the following horror of (in)discriminatory labelling of national and religious groups as potential terrorists?

Cyberspace is not colour free, but it need not have the added artificial colouring and preservatives of nostalgic constructions of cultural identities. ‘In short, the very notion of what is here and there – what is familiar, what is strange – has to be reconfigured in the modern world’ (Iyer, 2000, p. 283). While faced with, and party to, the erosion of definitive cultural scripts about ourselves and others, we may need new ethical guidelines for these new slippery times of globalisation.

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ⁱ Data collected for this ethnographic study includes:

- the text of all the 2152 postings made in the course's website,
- a 'primary record' log which equates to field notes, documenting how interactions, themes and topics unfolded over the 19 weeks that the unit's website was active.
- dialogical data, being semi-structured interviews with the lecturer and educational designer involved in the unit, conducted before, during and after the unit's duration.
- email interviews with 6 students conducted at the end of the unit.

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- emails forwarded voluntarily by the lecturer pertaining to decisions and events affecting the unit.
 - course documentation, marketing brochures, and press cuttings to access the contextual environments.

ii Conventions used for interview transcription include:

- ... for pause, tailing off, or cuts in selections reproduced.
 - [] for glosses to protect identifying details
- Names have been replaced by identity codes.

iii Interview questions for the first interview addressed: curriculum selection and design; knowledge of the students and their diversity; pedagogic design decisions; assessment design decisions; online mode issues; constraints on design; student support mechanisms; and professional role articulation:

iv Data bites taken from online postings have been carefully reproduced, without any changes to the author's formatting or typographical errors, as these can produce their own effects in their reading.

v To protect student identities, I have used letters to indicate the three parts of a Chinese name. This allows the issue of cultural practices of selecting and sequencing parts of the name to be demonstrated.

vi For example, an advertorial covering Australia's MBA offerings ("Future's now very clear – World MBA Tour – A special advertising report", *The Australian*, 8 November, 2001, p.24) in which the cultural diversity of the domestic and international student body is constructed as an asset and good business sense:

A cheaper way to achieve international exposure is by choosing a business school with a large cultural mix of students or through distance education. This will provide international business contacts. ... Australian business schools place strong emphasis on a balanced mix of students from a broad diversity of cultural backgrounds and work experience.

vii Email script has been reproduced as received, no correction of typographical errors, but with the addition of identifying codes for who contributed the text. All the email interviews started with the same questions as below, then diverged through reference to comments in their reply, or through probing their observed activity in the online interaction:

- What were your motivations behind choosing this course, this university, and online mode for your study?
- Describe the setting from which you would access the course, for example: sitting at home? work? What were your surroundings? Times?
- Did you have contact with any people beyond the bulletin board and electronic group discussions regarding the course?
- How were you made aware that there were international students participating in this course?
- In your opinion, how did having an international student group affect the course in any way?
- What are your reflections on using online learning internationally? Do you see any pros or cons in general, or regarding this course in particular?
- Were there any aspects of the curriculum, teaching/learning or assessment that were unfamiliar or challenging for you?
- How would you describe your own interaction patterns in the online discussions and bulletin board compared to other students?
- Were there any particular postings you made that were particularly significant for you in some way?
- Did you use the [platform] email function at all? If so, to whom and why?