

Globalisation and Learner-centred Pedagogies: Some Thoughts

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Responses

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The term globalisation has come to depict the recent global economic, political and social restructuring, and modes by which we now interpret our world (Featherstone, 1996). Jameson (1998 p.56) is one of many theorists who group the various characterisations of globalisation into the “twin, and not altogether commensurate, faces” of hegemonic and universalising economic-political globalism, and the fragmented, diverse and opening cultural form (also Beck, 2000). Within the former, the processes of universalised homogenisation are embodied in widespread neoliberal reform. Everyone, suggests Santos (2001), is integrated into globalism either as included privileged elites, or by the specific ways in which they remain outside the global economy yet provide sweatshop labour, resources and markets. Sociocultural theorisations on the other hand, emphasise the divergence in local adaptations of larger global forces. These adaptations continually challenge dominant values and knowledge, ensuring diversity, fragmentation, and plurality have become the leitmotifs of the global age. Local, regional and transnational movements have enabled the development of innovative social life and radicalised communities (Santos, 2001). Globalisation thus, can be thought of as a complex dialectic of both political-economic and sociocultural transformations, as likely to enhance the particular or the local, as it is the universal or global.

It is increasingly clear that contemporary education needs to be considered in tandem with globalisation as the dominant logic at work, rethinking and reconfiguring the social landscape in which education is embedded. Education and globalisation become mutually implicative categories where globalisation acts as the macro-level sets of forces shaping the conditions for and being expressed within education, and education circulates globalisation. This proposition holds for many aspects of education including the learner-centred pedagogies and their ability to promote improved learning outcomes about which we hear a lot these days.

Tabulawa (2003) notes that learner-centred pedagogies that variously includes *participatory*, *democratic*, *inquiry-based* and *discovery methods* as well as *constructivism* and *student-voice*, share many characteristics most important of which is their common epistemological foundation generally agreed to be that of social constructivism. As a philosophy of knowledge, social constructivism holds that reality does not exist independent of social actors but, instead, historically produced and culturally bounded knowledge enables individuals to construct and give meaning to reality. Hence, social constructivism’s derivative pedagogies encourage: (a) intellectual freedom and autonomy, and creativity, based in the primacy of an individual’s own ability to think reflectively and construct knowledge; (b) democratic decision-making since it demands a collaborative relationship between actors; and (c) high degrees of tolerance and flexibility to co-operatively engage in dialogue and activity with others that builds social understanding. In practice, these pedagogies are often implemented as learner-centred shared control of the learning process through a collaborative and flexible approach that enables students’ autonomy and creativity to develop their own questions and processes for investigation.

I hasten to add that in case this synopsis seems to be an oversimplification, which it is, I put aside the complications of whether one is discussing learning theories distinct from pedagogies, learner-centred

teaching or learning or indeed, the classroom. I have also elided the differences between cognitive (Piagetian in origin) approaches versus/and/or sociohistorical (derived from Vygotsky) approaches with their incongruous difficulties of individual cognition and social collaboration, not to mention how these all differ from newer ideas like complexity theory. For an overview and fuller discussion, readers are directed to Mark Windschitl's essay for which he was awarded the American Education Research Association's (AERA) Presidential Award as the best research review of 2002-2003 as one of any number of articles exploring this field. For their efforts, readers will meet there even more conceptualisations and rhetoric that includes the theorisations of authentic pedagogy, metacognition, conceptual change, alternative conception/misconceptions, and collaborative learning communities. Those interested in pursuing complexity theories of learning are directed to Davis and Sumara (2007).

Instead in the brief space I have here, I want to pose some general questions of learner-centred pedagogies in the context of globalisation that are not so often considered, and share just a few thoughts. Firstly, what evidence do we have that learner-centred pedagogies lead to improvements in learning outcomes or are more effective? This of course, begs another question of how 'improvement', 'effective' or some of their allied relativistic yet neoliberal/managerial notions like 'quality', 'performance' or 'excellence' are conceptualised, assessed or measured. Secondly, what learning outcomes are we seeking to improve and to what ends, and finally, are learner-centred pedagogies in danger of becoming a one-size-fits-all approach irrespective of issues of diversity and cultural context?

On the first question, Tabulawa (2003) argues that the superiority of learning-centred over other pedagogies just simply cannot be justified at present by empirical research. Windschitl (2002) interestingly side steps the very question, preferring instead to cite a book published in 1961 that expressed a belief about what could be possible. One area of evidence we do have about what influences learning outcomes measured as students' test performance comes from the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment's (PISA) triennial survey of 15-year-olds' knowledge and skills in mathematics, reading and science conducted across 57 countries. In choosing to cite PISA, I am mindful of its globalised economic-political and managerial imperatives but this is one instance in which it can work to illustrate a point. The 2006 PISA found that socioeconomic status is still the most significant indicator of student performance, and that the only aspect of pedagogy identified as increasing performance was the length of time spent on task per week. In addition, the countries known for their more traditional pedagogies performed just as well or better within the top group than those countries who favour learner-centred approaches. Nevertheless, the continuing belief in a causal association between learning-centred pedagogies and better educational outcomes that includes student performance has, and continues to, provide a pervasive rationale for their widespread adoption.

On the second question, it needs to be noted that within the educational literature learning-centred pedagogies are usually portrayed as value-free, apolitical and merely technical in their desire to promote better learning outcomes. But the educational enterprise, and the choice of learning pedagogies as part of that enterprise as Britzman (1998) has shown, when coupled to the ideological positioning of social constructivism, is anything but apolitical! Tabulawa (2003) and Windschitl (2002) are two of the few theorists who acknowledge the value-laden nature of learning-centred pedagogies which must necessarily reflect the norms of the Western liberal democratic capitalist systems in which they arose. Progressive visions of education in the liberal humanist tradition have always argued for child-centred educational practices as a means to engage students in active learning. These trace back through Dewey's (1899) 'transformed recitation' to the 18th Century Swiss-French philosopher Jacques Rousseau. For this reason, these pedagogies encode a view about the world (democratic governance within a capitalist economy), the kinds of people (responsible individuals) and society (social citizenship) we want to create through education.

Tabulawa (2003) and Windschitl (2002) differ though, in how they view the inherent contemporary consequences of the politics of learner-centred pedagogies. Windschitl (2002) argues that the democratic

values that are part of learner-centred pedagogies do not in themselves contain a social vision. He also believes that many scholars would have us use them to that end. He does not however, problematise the nature of ‘democracy’ itself, and leaves it as a taken-as-read, benign and desirable construct.

Tabulawa (2003) on the other hand, is more insightful about the various forms of democracy that abound in this global era. He identifies the narrow neoliberal, market-based democracy with all the social withdrawal, radical individualism and competitive marketisation implied, as well as the more broadly-based, humanist participatory democracy. Like Apple (2001), Bauman (1998) and Beck (2000), he recognises that neoliberalism as the ideology of globalisation has helped redefine a version of contemporary democracy as largely synonymous with capitalism, so that consumption becomes the new form of democratic participation, and equity becomes isomorphic with increased consumer choice. Tabulawa (2003) argues successfully that the predisposition, habits of mind and social attitudes conducive to inhabiting a neoliberal market economy can just as easily be actively promoted through learner-centred pedagogies as other types of democratic social life. These include both an individual’s role as an economic consumer in their private lifeworld, and as a global worker for the knowledge economy. The latter requires the ability to work in collaborative teams, to communicate effectively, to question and innovate, and to be flexible and adaptive in the pursuit of competitive economic advantage, while the former also requires the habits of mind of individual autonomy, personal responsibility, and the ability to assume one’s own management as the social sphere contracts.

Hence, Tabulawa (2003), along with other theorists see learner-centred pedagogies as the neoliberal pedagogy of choice for the spread of its doctrines. For example, Spring (2008) quotes Cheng and Yip (2006) who argue that Chinese school officials wanting to prepare students for the neoliberal knowledge economy in Hong Kong and Shanghai saw learner-centred pedagogies that promote the “ability to learn new things, to work in teams, to communicate effectively, to manage oneself, to question and to innovate, to assume personal responsibility, etc.” (p. 34), as essential for their success.

This discussion neatly segues into considering the third question asked of learner-centred pedagogies, that of their rampant global spread. In order for all countries to participate in globalisation as global economic development, they must meet world standards that include particular teaching practices and curricula. Backed by supranational institutions of the World Bank, the OECD, and the WTO, who have actively promoted educational reforms around standards and learner-centred pedagogies, Tabulawa (2003) argues that they have become a one-size-fits-all pedagogical approach, that is, a universal pedagogy believed to work with equal effectiveness irrespective of the context in its promotion of the knowledge economy. For Spring (2008), this has meant the concomitant growth of a standardised world culture of schooling regularly assessed through global comparison of international test scores. These scores can be used by national education policy leaders to organise their national curriculum to meet the standards set by these global tests. The result is the global uniformity of instructional practices and marginalisation and decline of other approaches effective or otherwise (Spring, 2008). However, the rise of counter globalisation discourses like indigeneity and ethnicity are beginning to honour traditional pedagogies and knowledge, and now argue for the development of culturally sensitive pedagogies to extend beyond those that are rooted in Western norms (Tabulawa, 2003). This suggests the need for learner-centred pedagogies to become much more culturally responsive in the future.

There is no doubt that many of us would believe our promotion of learner-centred pedagogies as best practice within the humanist and progressive tradition of education rather than as culturally insensitive fodder for the global knowledge economy. But we need to recognise that there is more to it, and that neoliberal global discourses on education and knowledge economy have coopted humanist visions of active learning within democratic and collaborative environments to its own purposes of human capital development. We are reminded of Gee, Hull and Lankshear’s (1996) point that language and ideas from other arenas give a sense of the benign to global economic development even we relentlessly move into it further (although after the events of the last few weeks – its anybody’s guess as to where we are all heading).

In the meantime, in my own teaching I try to scrutinize learner-centred pedagogies as I do most things, and develop multiple views and perspectives on the topic. It is a way of complicating the discourse which I believe is more apt for the complex global world in which we find ourselves.

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