

Abstract

Twenty-five years of research have taught us much about the internationalization of higher education. However, in this article I argue that the boundaries of our knowing have been limited by a number of factors. I suggest a need to refocus on creating an alternate social imaginary of the internationalization of higher education through *knowing differently*.

What questions have we asked? What assumptions have driven us to ask them? And what has been the impact on what we know?

How Can We Extend the Boundaries of Our Own Knowing?

Betty Leask

I was reminded recently in an article by Tamsin Haggis in *Studies in Higher Education* (Vol. 34, No. 4, June 2009, 377–390), that what we know about student learning in higher education today is a direct result of the questions we have asked, and where we have looked for answers. And further, that what we have asked and where we have looked for answers concerning student learning has been influenced by our specific purposes and interests, themselves the products of our temporal and spatial contexts. She finds that a focus on a narrow range of possible perspectives and methodologies over 40 years has restricted what we know about teaching and learning today and led to certain conclusions and actions and importantly, *away from others*.

This is relevant to international higher education today for two reasons. First, because some of the teaching and learning research has been focused on matters related to teaching international students, on supporting their learning, and on matters including internationalization of the curriculum. Second, because over the last 25 years, the internationalization of higher education has developed and grown as a field of study, a branch of knowledge that is researched and taught, and about which scholarly papers and essays are published. At this point in time, it is important to consider: What questions have we asked? What assumptions have driven us to ask them? And what has been the impact on what we know?

What Have We Asked? What Do We Know?

We have asked many questions about the meaning of internationalization and what it looks like in practice, and we have explored and discussed a range of different approaches over the last 25 years. In so doing, we have developed our own “internationalization” discourse, culture, and identity. As a growing community, we have discussed at length the meanings, affordances, and limitations of related concepts such as globalization, global citizenship, and intercultural competence. We have coined an abundance of new terms. Consider for example the plethora of adjectives that we have tacked onto the term “internationalization” such as, “comprehensive,” “transformational,” “inclusive,” “intelligent,” “forced,” “intentional,” and “unintentional.” We have researched various

processes of internationalization—for example, “of the curriculum,” “of teaching and learning,” “at home,” “abroad,” and the “globalization of internationalization” itself. We have explored a range of blockers to, and enablers of, internationalization. We have taken positions on many related issues, including for example equity of access to higher education, the recruitment of international students for profit, and massification. And we have concluded that the internationalization of higher education is itself a process that is complex, driven by different rationales, highly context dependent, both ubiquitous and contested, and connected to a diverse range of concepts, ideas, and theories. Our practices and our carefully argued positions have been informed by scholarship and research. So, we can confidently say that after 25 years, we know a lot about the internationalization of higher education, how it is practiced, and the challenges and opportunities it offers individuals, communities, and nation-states. Undoubtedly, there is more to know, and we should continue to undertake research that will inform and shape the future.

But could it be that the questions that we have been asking, the research that we have been conducting, and the conclusions that we have drawn are limited by the individual and collective linguistic and cultural resources that we have brought to the task of investigation and discussion? Have we, by oversight, limited the possibilities of our knowing? What might we gain, as individual researchers and practitioners in this field, and as a community, on turning attention back on the assumptions that we have made along the way, and where those have led us? Let me illustrate my point by discussing one example, a question that researchers across the world, myself included, have spent considerable time exploring over the past 10 years.

How Can We Engage Faculty in Internationalization?

This question has driven large and small research projects. Blockers to and enablers of their engagement have been identified. It has been argued that when faculty do not want to get involved in internationalization activities at home or abroad, it is because they are not interested or lack the required skills and knowledge for international and intercultural work. Various strategies and resources have been developed to arouse faculty interest and develop their skills. Many have been applied and evaluated. And over time, it has become common knowledge among those working in the internationalization of higher education that faculty are the “problem,” a major blocker to internationalization, requiring a “solution.” But a couple of years ago, I became aware that in the university where I was working at the time, La Trobe University, there were faculty who were in fact deeply and meaningfully engaged (for instance working with migrant or indigenous groups), but in ways that were not recognized by the institution as “internationalization.” By positioning faculty as a group as being disengaged, as lacking the motivation, knowledge, or skills to engage, I realized that I was doing them a disservice and limiting the boundaries of my own knowledge. Indeed, it was liberating to challenge that very basic assumption, track it back to its source, and recalibrate my thinking. This has led me, with colleagues, to move from assuming a deficit toward looking for different ways in which faculty are engaged in international and intercultural work. We have found ourselves in different “places,” asking different questions, such as “What does faculty engagement look like?” “How can we recognize and learn from the work that faculty do in internationalization?” and “How can we position faculty as architects and agents of internationalization in our discourse and in our practice?” Exploring the answers to these questions led us to read new literature from a broader range of disciplines and to explore new theories and perspectives on engagement.

But challenging our own assumptions through critical reflection is difficult. Fundamentally, what we know and how we perceive—our epistemological and ontological stance—is imbued with and grounded in ourselves individually and collectively. So being critically reflective strikes at the very heart of our identity. It makes us feel vulnerable and exposed because it not only challenges the validity of what we think we know, but of who we are. In the end, though, it is liberating. It has opened up new theoretical and practical possibilities that can be further investigated. In this regard, it has helped us to become true to our own doctrine as educators, that we must ourselves be learners, critically reflective of our own practice.

And the Broader Field of Internationalization?

So, what about the broader field of the internationalization of higher education? Could it be that the questions we have been asking as a broader community, the research we have been conducting, and the conclusions we have drawn have been limited by tightly held assumptions? How have our responses to the questions we have asked been limited by the individual and collective linguistic and cultural resources that have been brought to the task of investigation and discussion—by who “we” are? As a circle of researchers, we are relatively limited in terms of age, ethnicity, language, nationality, and to some extent gender. And while we have argued for “inclusive internationalization” and the need to engage with “the other,” to what extent have we ourselves been inclusive and actively sought out new ideas and new ways of approaching research in our field? Are we ideologically homogeneous? Have we become too comfortable in our own cultural milieu? Have we engaged deeply enough with the ideas and perspectives of scholars who are “not like us”? Have we silently acquiesced to, through insufficient critique of, a neoliberal rationale for the internationalization of higher education? What would be the impact on the future of the field if we were to examine our individual and collective epistemological and ontological assumptions, and find them wanting? What would it mean to the future of the internationalization of higher education if in the next 25 years we were to refocus not only on knowing *more*, but on knowing *differently*? On creating what Rizvi and Lingard, in their book of 2010 on *Globalizing education policy*, call an alternate social imaginary?

So, I return to the questions that Haggis posed, but I ask them about the internationalization of higher education. What questions have we asked? To what extent do these questions reflect our own assumptions and value positions? How can we extend the boundaries of our own knowing? ▲

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