

TES Special Issue on

Cross-Cultural Learning: Capacity Building and Environmental Assistance

Introduction by Gustavo Ribeiro

This volume deals with field work by researchers from five institutions of higher education in Denmark (namely Roskilde University, Copenhagen Business School, Technical University of Denmark, Ålborg University and The Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts) linked under the so-called Danish University Consortium for Environment and Development (DUCED). It documents their involvement in research and joint courses in the following countries: Thailand, Malaysia, South Africa and Botswana. Such experiences have engaged collaborations and partnerships across cultures – North-South and have presented a number of challenges and limitations as well as new spaces for learning. In putting together the texts that make the present volume, the contributors engaged in a debate about what were the valuable aspects of this cross-cultural academic experience, which could be shared with other researchers and educators. In that vein, the material contained in this volume focuses on a number of issues emerging from such encounter, and questions, lessons and reflections thereof.

The problematic nature of the cross-cultural and trans-disciplinary collaborations described in this volume have led to questioning relationships between South and North on the basis of knowledge exchange and associated power vectors.

On the one hand, contributors to this volume (namely Wangel et al.) provide a detailed description of teaching programmes undertaken under the DUCED-LUCED collaboration and reflection on the lessons learned through the implementation of such programmes. These accounts introduce guiding concepts such as capacity building and environmental assistance which indicate the status of Denmark as donor and other LUCED members (Thailand, Malaysia, South Africa and Botswana) as recipient countries and denote the asymmetrical nature of the programme in question. The fact that joint courses have been conducted in recipient countries – prompting the request by members of staff from Malaysia that joint courses be conducted in Denmark – is one illustration of such asymmetry (Wangel et al.). Another example hinges on the confrontation of study methods – the Danish academics promote problem-based learning, whilst their LUCED counterparts mostly base their teaching practices on the teacher as an authority imparting knowledge to her/his students (Wangel et al.).

Both examples indicate the existence of grey zones in relationships engaged in the learning programmes described here and challenge clean-cut cultural definitions. The methodological discussion mentioned above shows the inappropriateness of an East-West dichotomy and brings to the fore temporal issues concerning exchanges in cross-cultural practices: is the implementation of a pre-68 teacher-centred learning model any more or any less Eastern than problem-based learning?

An article by David L. Chandler in WIREED (12th March 2004) describes an expedition organised by

NASA to Atamaca. “40,000 square miles of brutal wasteland in northern Chile,” “the driest spot in the driest part of the driest desert on the planet” and “Earth’s best proxy for Mars” are some of the terms used by Chandler to describe Atamaca. In this inhospitable landscape, we find bioengineer Elizabeth Lester collecting samples of soil that may contain microbes. Lester wears a white Tyvek clean room jumpsuit so as to avoid contaminating the site with bacteria taking a ride on her body and garments. The sight of Lester at work makes Chandler think of an astronaut on the surface of Mars. In Lester’s own words: “I couldn’t really feel the ground... It did feel pretty much like a spacesuit. Usually out in nature, you’re there, but with the suit there’s this serious barrier.” Collecting bacteria samples show the extremes the researcher has to go through in order to avoid contamination of the site and how a device for preventing contamination – the Tyvek jumpsuit – acts as a barrier between the researcher and the object of study. When referring to research of social practices, going around wearing a spacesuit would be a sure way to quickly contaminate the object of study (that is those very practices) and finding anti-contaminating alternatives seems like hopeless attempts. Is it possible to BE there without contaminating the field? Is the field not already contaminated? In other words, does it make sense to talk about purely Eastern and purely Western forms of knowledge production? A more promising approach is to embrace contamination. In a context where cognitive practices influence and contaminate each other, the emergence of hybrid entities becomes thus increasingly relevant.

On the other hand, contributors such as Funder and Ribeiro undertake a more frontal challenge of the cognitive practices implemented through the research and teaching programmes in question. These authors present a number of takes on knowledge: as in acquisition of, appropriation of, exploitation of, production of, sharing of, exchange of, trade of... Each of these cognitive practices involves a power dimension and each is represented in a transaction involving Danish and local (recipient country) researchers, teachers and students, urban communities, authorities, NGO’s, etc in different permutations.

The locus of the field in the recipient country and the removal of the Danish academic in a research or a teaching programme from the donor country to the recipient country are built-in structures to the cognitive practices in question as is the process of objectification of the interviewee through the interview or even through the split second snapshot. Funder discusses in his paper the structuring of the field prior to study and asks: If the field is already structured by Western rationality and labelling when we arrive, how are we to even see the implicit categorizations we make, and how are we to avoid reproducing them?

It may be argued that this structural asymmetry and biased knowledge-flow be seen in the broader context of development aid and that the questions raised in relation to the learning programmes described here have thus much broader scope and implications.

In some cases explicit opposition was voiced by organisations in recipient countries to a type of research, where information collected from local communities is used for a publication or thesis, with no direct benefits for community members who have devoted their time in sitting through interviews, discussing environmental problems with researchers, etc. (For further details see Ribeiro et al., 2000)¹.

The issues of ownership, appropriation and exploitation involved in the above arguments raise concomitantly questions about relationships between information and knowledge introducing the view that original knowledge is produced on the basis of local information and data – knowledge is in that sense an informed synthesis and is thus seen as an original element, which is not only based on socio-cultural events, but which is also a tool to their formulation.

Jeppesen presents in his paper a more detailed discussion on the creation of knowledge with reference to a critical realistic approach and provides a perspective with which to view some of the issues raised by the other papers. Still, we are inclined to look at heteronomous conditions which prevail in cognitive practices. Funder does so by looking at the impact of strategies of intimacy to knowledge acquisition: what type of knowledge

becomes available through such strategies and what are their pitfalls?

Ribeiro on the other hand looks at knowledge as cognitive capital which is traded amongst those involved in informal economic activities, officials, tourists, consumers.

Note

- ¹ Ribeiro, G., Diaw, K., Andreasen, J. (eds.) (2000): *Community development in Thailand: The case of Community Organisation Development Institute (CODI) and the DANCED supported UCEA project*. Report on a visit to Bangkok and Chiang Mai in November 2000. Under ENRECA Project: Community Initiatives and Democratisation of Planning. Unpublished report