This is the published version


Available from Deakin Research Online

http://hdl.handle.net/10536/DRO/DU:30055988

Reproduced with the kind permission of the copyright owner

Copyright: 2013, American Educational Research Association
From the
AERA Online Paper Repository
http://www.aera.net/repository

Paper Title  The Transformative Sojourners: International Vietnamese and Chinese Students in Australian Tertiary Education
Author(s)  Ly Thi Tran, RMIT University
Session Title  The Perceptions and Experiences of International Students in Higher Education
Session Type  Paper
Presentation Date  4/28/2013
Presentation Location  San Francisco, California
Descriptors  International Education/Studies, Student Teaching, Teaching and Learning
Methodology  Qualitative
Unit  Division J - Postsecondary Education

Each presenter retains copyright on the full-text paper. Repository users should follow legal and ethical practices in their use of repository material; permission to reuse material must be sought from the presenter, who owns copyright. Users should be aware of the AERA Code of Ethics.

Citation of a paper in the repository should take the following form:
The Transformative Sojourners: International Vietnamese and Chinese Students in Tertiary Education

Background and Objectives of the Paper

This paper aims to explore the changes international Vietnamese and Chinese students make in their journey to negotiate tertiary education. It draws on transformative learning as a theoretical framework to conceptualise students’ transformative experiences and perspectives. It will be argued in this paper that international Vietnamese and Chinese students’ process of negotiating tertiary education is a dynamic interplay between challenges and transformative capacity. Cross-border intercultural experiences are intimately linked to opportunities for self-transformation. The challenges that international students go through indeed foster the conditions for professional development and life-enhancing changes to take place. Given the current lack of theoretical and empirical research on the transformative power of international students, there is a critical need for more research on the transformative characteristics of international students and how to best capitalize on their potential. In this paper, I draw on excerpts from two rounds of interviews with individual international Vietnamese and Chinese students to illustrate the specific ways in which international students have the capacity to transform their own learning and develop life-enhancing skills. The discussion shows that they experience evolution in professional outlook, attitudes and personal qualities through the process of critical self-reflection and adaptation to disciplinary demands in higher education.

The paper highlights the contradictions regarding the discursive practices within the current context of international education export. Host institutions in English-speaking countries seek to project themselves as sites where ‘transformations’ take place. But, in reality, the onus of adaptation and intercultural transformation appears to be mainly placed on international students themselves rather than on academics. In addition whilst theories about international education and the internationalization of the curriculum view transformative learning as being central (Bond 2003; Leask 2005), the majority of the literature on international students’ learning experiences tends to position this student cohort from a problem-based vantage as opposed to transformative learning.

Theoretical Framework: Transformative Learning and International Education

The paper draws on transformative learning as a conceptual framework to unpack the transformative journey of international Vietnamese and Chinese students. Transformative learning refers to a changing process in which learners make meaning and construct reality through revisiting their existing assumptions and moving towards life-changing developments in philosophy and outlook. Cranton (2002), Mezirow (2000) and Taylor (1994) discuss useful perspectives related to transformative learning that can be applied in the context of international students’ changes in personal and professional attitudes and outlooks. Mezirow highlights the relationship between transformative learning and how the lenses through which individuals can view and interpret the world around them can be reconstructed. In a similar vein, Cranton (2002:64) relates transformative learning to individuals’ ability to critically examine their own existing views, be willing to appreciate alternatives and shift the ways they make sense of the world. Thus Mezirow (2000), Cranton (2002) and Taylor (1994) view individuals’ critical reflection on their own perspectives and experiences as instrumental in their transformative learning process.

Existing research also conceptualizes the internationalization of the curriculum as being related to transformative learning. Indeed both Morey (2000) and Bond (2003) highlight transformative capacity in their definition of the internationalization of the curriculum. Morey (2000:28) argues that internationalizing the curriculum should be seen as a process that
involves different levels of transformation rather than a ‘static outcome’. In the model of an internationalized curriculum proposed by this author, a ‘transformed stage’ is the highest level of development in which both international and domestic diversity plays a key role in the internationalized curriculum. Bond (2003) identifies three approaches to internationalizing the curriculum: the ‘add-on’ approach, the ‘infusion’ approach and the ‘transformation’ approach. The add-on approach represents the process of simply adding international or intercultural dimensions to the existing curricula. Infusion refers to a curriculum that provides students with the opportunity to be exposed to international and multicultural perspectives. This approach is more systematic than the add-on and more commonly used. The transformation approach, which is seen as the most advanced approach in internationalizing the curriculum, aims to encourage international and domestic students’ new ways of thinking and making sense of the world, critically examine existing assumptions within the traditional curriculum and construct their reality through the lenses of diverse groups. A study conducted by Leask (2005) also shows that staff and students construct internationalization of the curriculum as being related to the opportunity to be transformed by intercultural interactions.

**Methods and Data Sources**

This paper analyzes how eight Chinese and Vietnamese international students exercise personal agency and mediate their academic writing to adapt to disciplinary practices in Education and Commerce at an Australian university (see Tran, 2007; Tran, 2012). Chinese and Vietnamese international students in Education and Economics were selected for this study. The data was a combination of two rounds of interviews with the students and their own assignments. The methods for data collection include the talk around text with students (Lillis 2001), the positioning interviews six months later and their written texts. With the consent of the students, their first written assignments at the Australian university were collected. These texts would then be used for the students to reflect on their specific experiences of writing them. Each student participant was invited to a one-hour interview in which she/he was asked to talk about the selected text. The talk aimed to engage students in an exploration of their practices of writing these specific texts and how they exercised personal agency to mediate their writing and adapt to their disciplinary requirements. The talk around text (Lillis 2001) was conducted from four to eight weeks after the students had completed these texts. The positioning interviews with the Vietnamese and Chinese international students were conducted six months after the talk around text. The positioning interviews allow space for the students to reposition their views and reflect on any changes with regard to their interpretations and expectations of academic writing they may go through as they progress through their course.

In addition to interview data and students’ written assignments, messages related to student transformative learning displayed through the websites of some universities are also analysed. University websites have indeed emerged as the dominant sources of information for international students on which to select and base their choice of study destination (Nguyen 2007). Through their websites, universities draw on vocabularies that embrace transformative meanings to construct their institutional identity and promote their image to prospective students. This university discourse places international students in a position to imagine they are the ones who have the potential to transform and if they take up the invitation to join the university they will become part of a community which nurtures transformative processes.

The analysis of the data will draw on the theory of transformative learning as a framework to interpret and analyze international students’ aspiration and capacity to be engaged in transformative learning. The following key dimensions of transformative learning identified by Mezirow (1991) and Taylor (1994) are used to shed light on the analysis of international
Evidence, Substantiated Conclusions and Significance of the Study

Engaging in critical reflection

International Vietnamese and Chinese students in this study tended to be flexible in adapting to what they interpreted as the academic requirements of their own discipline. They continuously reshaped their interpretation of ways of constructing knowledge in their discipline through self-reflection and reflection on others’ views. For example, Ying, a Chinese student in Commerce, articulated her approach to mediate meaning and understanding in her disciplinary practices in Australian higher education:

You need to think from other perspectives but not always from your own side to see the things. You must try different angles and sometimes you argue with yourself because you need to tell if your opinion is sustainable or has a standing… I have to evaluate other people's work, that's my critical thinking… You need to argue with yourself. When I write, of course I did argue with myself (Ying, Chinese).

Ying demonstrated a strong sense of self-reflection and critical thinking in her process of negotiating understanding in higher education. She referred to her efforts in raising and answering questions as the ways she argued with herself: ‘Is this valid?’, ‘Is this appealing to myself at least?’ , ‘Do I trust this statement?’ . The ways Ying mediated and constructed knowledge were linked to posing questions concerning the validity and reliability of others' work and re-examining her own perspective. Ying self-positioned as a student who projected an outlook that was not locked in her own circle but instead interacted with alternative perspectives. In particular, the sense of self was shown to be integrative, developmental and evolving. Ying’s illustration emulates Cranton’s (2002) view of transformative learning which is related to individuals’ ability to critically examine their own existing views, be willing to appreciate alternatives and shift the ways they make sense of the world.

Hardship as a condition for transformative learning

The international students in this study indicated that an initial source of challenge and stress could provide the foundation for personal growth and the enrichment of knowledge. For example, Wang, a Chinese student, revealed:

Now I know everything because I went through the process and I gain a lot. I think the big success for me is that now I am confident… Yes, even I have to struggle and I consider the process of struggle as the way to learn things and I don't want to stick to my own ways (Wang, Chinese).

Wang indicated that the challenging process of meaning-making in her discipline led to a consequent rise in her self-belief and confidence as well as in the development of new knowledge. This echoes Brown’s (2009: 510) statement that ‘self-efficacy was therefore the product of the confrontation with hardship’. The process of struggle and negotiation, the development of internal strength and the accumulation of knowledge are positively associated
with one another during the international student’s negotiation of higher education. The student indeed felt empowered after going through this process of negotiation.

In a similar vein, Vy, a Vietnamese student, and Ying, a Chinese student, elaborated on how their initial feelings of being challenged and pressured could be translated into a new capacity to learn and transform their ways of constructing knowledge for their course:

In general, I love this assignment because even though I found it challenging, finally I found that I learnt something from there, the language I learnt it, new words, new kinds of expressions (Vy, Vietnamese).

The whole process you work on writing the assignment, including research, finding the materials and writing is quite interesting, even though you feel pressured, sometimes depressed... I think that's real experience, we learn something… I want to make it interesting and I need to use words with imagination. This is really my understanding of things (Ying, Chinese).

The words ‘struggle’, ‘challenging’, ‘hard’ and ‘pressured’ were used by the students in association with the word ‘learn’ in order to refer to the growth in both personal and academic terms that they experienced as a result of the confrontation with the challenges in constructing and negotiating meaning in their discipline. The examples from international students’ personal journeys of negotiating higher education show that they viewed the hardship that they went through as being positive and rewarding. This is because such hardship helps to enrich their lives, increase their resourcefulness and prepare them to deal with new challenges. This has been argued by Shearer (1994) as one of the important qualities of an ‘intercultural identity’ that international sojourners possess.

**Transformative learning emerging from reflection on one’s own prior experiences**

Cranton (2002) and Taylor (1994) view individuals’ critical reflection on their own perspectives and experiences as being instrumental in their transformative learning process. In this study all the students indicated that they actually drew on their previous personal or professional experiences, either explicitly or implicitly, in their process of constructing knowledge in Australian higher education. However they did not always demonstrate such a validation of prior experiences on the surface of their text due to the understanding that such experiences were not expected in academic writing by their lecturers. Making the links between the theories learnt from the course and their personal experiences could lead to the development of disciplinary knowledge and the change in perspective. This is illustrated by Lin and Binh when they revealed how they drew on their personal experiences in their process of developing knowledge in their discipline during the second interview:

Yeah. While I was reading those experts and those authors… I will justify my own criteria whether it suits my situation, my particular context or not (Lin, Chinese).

Sometimes the evidence from the book is not appropriate in your own context, so you need something from your own to compare with their opinion, you can say that ‘it's nice in other context but in my case, my learners are blah blah..., so it's not appropriate’ (Binh, Vietnamese).

Both Lin and Binh viewed their personal experience and knowledge about the specific context in their home countries as valuable resources to reflect on and be critical of the experts’ opinion. Most students have a personal history, life and professional experience that they can carry with them during their journey to live and study in another country for an extended
period of time. When international students move across national borders and engage in a new learning environment, memories of their life history and past experiences can become vivid and can provide them with a springboard for reflection and building upon. Lillis (2001) refers to this as the voice of experience that international students embrace in their intercultural learning context.

Both international students in the above excerpts positioned themselves as learners who are able to identify the gaps between published research they were exposed to in their study in Australia and what was actually happening in their Vietnamese and Chinese contexts. This finding echoes Taylor’s (1994) comment on the relationship between transformative learning and the development of intercultural competency. From their viewpoint, the participant is not a ‘passive recipient’ of knowledge in the host learning environment but instead appears to be capable to actively negotiate their understanding of knowledge. The students’ capacity to integrate and justify the validation of the knowledge they learn based on their understanding of their own contexts and their personal experiences matches the description by Mezirow (1991: 167) of a transformed perspective as a ‘more inclusive, discriminating and integrative perspective’. However, while Mezirow’s model of transformative learning does not highlight the impact of students’ prior experiences on their transformative learning, this study indicates that international students actually draw on their prior experiences in their process of knowledge construction and perspective transformation in the new learning context.

Conclusions and Significance of the study

Drawing on transformative learning theory as a conceptual framework, the analysis of interview data reveals the contradictions of the discursive practices related to transformative learning and international students within the current context of international education. International students in this study self-position as embracing an aspiration to transform themselves and actually underwent significant moves in their participation in Australian higher education. The process of negotiating higher education is bound to an interplay between challenges and transformative power: the removal from comfort zones and the need to overcome challenges and navigate a plurality of academic demands and values actually creates spaces for international students to undergo fundamental personal and academic changes. It is the challenging and complex nature of the process of negotiating higher education that enables international students to negotiate shifting borders, discover their internal strength and experience movements in their perspectives. This process also provides the springboard for the emergence of the newly-constructed self. This study shows that international students are capable to reflect on their own experiences, appreciate the need for change and plot new strategies to transform themselves personally and academically. Critical self-reflection is identified as being central to international students’ process of mediating higher education.

Within the current discursive practices, universities through their webpages are strategically drawing on the metaphor of ‘transformative learning’ as an attraction to international students. In this sense, international students are other-positioned by the university as having potential to transform in the host learning environment and the university self-positions as creating the environment in which international students can be effectively engaged in transformative learning. The theory of international education also constructs the internationalization of the curriculum as being related to the opportunity for both international and domestic students to be transformed. Ironically in the public domain, international students are often constructed as ‘cash cows’, ‘users of educational services’ or ‘commercial products’. Furthermore, in the literature international students are mainly viewed from a problem-focused vantage. In other words, adaptation-as-problem approach (Kim and Ruben
1988) is the dominant framework shaping the majority of studies on the academic experiences of international students. Also, within the current institutional context, most often the English and learning support unit focuses predominantly on remedying the difficulties international students face while there is an absence of efforts placed on developing specific practices and exploring approaches to validating international students’ potential and their existing but perhaps ‘hidden’ strengths in negotiating higher education. This discourse is contrary to the ways universities attempt to project themselves as sites embracing transformations and other-position international students as being capable of influencing academic practices and transforming their learning.

Based on the findings of this study, I would argue for the need to move beyond the discourse which problematizes international students’ learning to recognizing and reconstructing international students as having the potential to transform their learning as well as their lives. I do not view their study journey as smooth sailing but instead acknowledge that the challenges that have been captured in the literature concerning international students studying in English-medium institutions are part of a cross-border journey and relocation in another country. However, I believe that the process through which international students’ transformative potential is identified and validated should deserve more empirical research and should be added to the current practices where mainly their challenges are highlighted and dealt with. More research is needed to explore their aspirations in relation to transformative learning and in particular the different layers and dimensions of international students’ transformative capacity.

This study also highlights the significance of the past experiences that international students draw on as a springboard for their transformative learning in the host institutions. Therefore, it is critical for academics to learn about their international students’ past experiences and learning traditions and draw on these aspects as valuable resources for facilitating international students’ transformative learning. This is closely associated with academics’ attempts to adapt and change pedagogies and curricula in teaching international students.

In order to capitalize on international students’ transformative power, it is also imperative to identify what represents opportunities for transformative learning in working with international students in specific courses, how to create these opportunities and how to effectively promote them. This aspect should be highlighted in any conceptual framework as well as any toolkit that provides instructions about internationalizing the curriculum. This is a significant step towards ensuring what is promised on university websites in relation to the teaching and learning of international students and what has been theorized as central to international education can be translated into the development of curriculum and pedagogic practices. Those practices that recognize and capitalize on international students as agents capable of mediating their own academic practices will help address international students’ intrinsic motives bound to transformative learning and empower them to negotiate and draw creatively on institutional practices.

References
