

Invisible Intersections: Cultural and Disciplinary Diversity Among Faculty in the International Classroom

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Abstract

Scholarly literature on the international classroom frequently emphasizes the importance of making implicit beliefs and norms explicit in order to equalize all students' ability to succeed. However, faculty members from varying cultural contexts may not share the same underlying norms, values, procedures, and educational standards. Likewise, faculty members may differ in educational and disciplinary backgrounds. This study uses interviews to assess the experiences and academic norms of faculty members teaching in the interdisciplinary English-track of the Media and Culture Studies BA at Utrecht University in the Netherlands. This study finds that the effects of both discipline and culture function invisibly and most participants overestimate the degree of agreement between faculty members about core elements of the curriculum. As a result, we suggest that it is necessary for departments to actively foster awareness of disciplinary and cultural norms and to seek consensus between teachers across the curriculum.

Keywords: *international classroom; faculty; diversity; interdisciplinarity*

1. Introduction

Scholarly literature about the international classroom frequently emphasizes the importance of making implicit beliefs and norms explicit in order to equalize all students' ability to succeed (Carroll, 2005). If students come from many different cultural, linguistic, and academic backgrounds, they may also have different assumptions about core academic competencies and procedures. In international classrooms, pedagogical procedure thus must be taught explicitly to equip all students with the knowledge needed to comply with the educational norms of their institution.

However, this literature less often considers diversity among faculty. The notion that teachers can more explicitly and consistently explain disciplinary structures and local academic norms

to students assumes that they have a shared, stable, and coherent understanding of the disciplines and academic culture in which they work. In other words, most models of international education assume cultural differences between students, but not between faculty. Likewise, most models of interdisciplinarity assume an interaction or borrowing between two or more stable disciplines, but do not account for instability within disciplines themselves or national and cultural differences in how disciplines are understood or constructed. Yet, in an international, inter-, trans-, or multidisciplinary program, faculty may struggle to present a coherent vision of shared academic values for international students to understand and rely upon throughout their degree trajectory. Unevenness and disagreement between teachers in the same program may undermine students' ability to adapt and construct a coherent interdisciplinary perspective.

This study assesses the experiences and academic norms of faculty members teaching in the interdisciplinary English-track of the Media and Culture Studies BA at Utrecht University in the Netherlands (known as MAC). Higher education in the Netherlands has been rapidly internationalizing, adding English programs at both the BA and MA level. Recent debate on internationalization has led to a critical examination of English language programs in Dutch universities and the experience of students and staff in these programs. Through faculty interviews, the MAC program in Utrecht provides a useful case study as it integrates traditional humanities, digital humanities, and social sciences approaches taught by an interdisciplinary, culturally diverse faculty to a multi-national student body. Thus, this study seeks to understand how disciplinary and cultural backgrounds intersect in teachers' experiences of the international classroom. We find that the effects of both discipline and culture function invisibly and most participants overestimate the degree of agreement between faculty members about core elements of the curriculum. As a result, we suggest that in the context of what Machura calls "superdiversity," it is necessary for departments to actively foster awareness of disciplinary and cultural norms and to seek consensus between teachers across the curriculum (2021).

2. Method

In order to gain better understanding of teachers' own implicit beliefs and academic perspectives this study utilized ethnographic interviews. As argued by Michrina and Richards the humanistic tradition of ethnographic interviewing enables the interviewer to enter the interviewee's worldview (1996). They further argue that by maintaining full openness to new information ethnographic interviewing attempts to transcend cultural differences and the interviewer's preconceptions, making this method a good match for cross-cultural research. In particular, Frank and Langness emphasize that the dialectic between self and other in ethnographic exchange elucidates both the opacity of cultural difference but also the hidden layers of the interviewer's own mind (1981). As a result, Behar notes that the particularity of the ethnographer is also inescapably part of an ethnographic inquiry (1999). This project benefits

from this bidirectional focus partly because the interviewers are both also academics from different disciplines working at Utrecht University, with their own migration histories. Both Kustritz and Hacopian are originally from the United States, but Hacopian was trained in the USA and Germany and Kustritz trained in the USA and UK. Because norms function as a largely invisible and implicit backdrop to everyday life, the juxtaposition of cultural and disciplinary positions within the context of an ethnographic exchange in this study facilitates making these normative assumptions visible for both the interviewees and interviewers (Michrina & Richards, 1996).

The parameters and protocol for this interview project were developed in connection with the Utrecht University FEtC-H (Faculty Ethics Committee of the Humanities). The study population includes all teaching faculty members of the MAC program. Because university staffing is a matter of public record, care has been taken to report results holistically and limit linking details that together may inadvertently identify individual participants. The exact number of faculty members varies per year depending on staffing levels and changes in the student population. For the purpose of the study the number of available, relevant staff was approximately 45 and the number of interviews completed was 23. Although statistically slightly less than half of the total population is a high proportion, it is not appropriate to generalize ethnographic data, which precisely seeks to better understand the particularity of lived experience. As such we position our findings as suggestive but not definitive and the beginning of a conversation both within the department and within the scholarship on the international classroom regarding the interface between an international student body and a culturally and disciplinarily diverse academic staff.

Semi-structured interview questions were chosen to maintain the balance between the shared focus necessary for the interviewers and interviewees to compare their cultural assumptions versus the openness necessary to protect a genuinely ethnographic encounter with cultural alterity. Thus, for comparative purposes some of the same themes were introduced in nearly all interviews, including a request that participants reflect on their understanding of some of the core competencies of the program tested in the BA thesis (that is research question, academic relevance, method, etc.). However, to maintain room for participants to shape the interview process and introduce genuinely new themes and concerns the interviewers may not have foreseen the interviews were conversational with no set structure and primarily utilized open questions with spontaneous follow-ups.

3. Outcomes

Results of the interviews clustered around two themes: the invisibility of disciplinary and cultural norms, and lack of consensus between colleagues about academic skills. One of the most interesting phenomena during the interviews was the difficulty some participants had in reflecting upon or even defining their own discipline(s), the disciplines most central to the MAC

program or the Media and Culture Studies department, and differences between the domestic and international classroom. Although many faculty members eloquently commented on issues of interdisciplinarity and the international classroom, others found these questions challenging or silencing. There are both procedural and structural reasons for this silence. First, all interviews depend on rapport and can be undermined by mismatches in personality and comportment. It is entirely possible that the protocol of individual interviews rather than a series of interviews over a longer span of time impeded the development of trust with some participants. Secondly, the mere act of noticing cultural differences may, under some circumstances, be positioned as culturally insensitive or xenophobic. This impediment may have led some participants to deny noticing any difference between domestic and international classrooms, while it resulted in a pattern of disclaimers from other participants with a structure like: “I’ve noticed that Italian students tend to –well, not all Italian students, of course ...” Further, the professional identity expected of professors, especially in the neoliberal academy, requires both constant growth and “professionalization,” but also absolute competence with no limitations or weaknesses (Hall & McGinity, 2015). As such admitting to problems in their classes or the MAC program may have been experienced as a professional threat for some participants. Of course, there may also be no confounding effect related to the study procedures and this result could indicate a frequent lack of time or inclination to reflect upon the role of discipline and/or culture in pedagogy. However, regardless of the reasons, the lack of awareness or direct denial of problems and differences also undermines opportunities for change and improvement.

Fewer explanations related to the procedures of the study help to explain difficulties some participants experienced in reflecting upon disciplinary and interdisciplinary identities and boundaries, yet they are indicative of cultural differences in disciplinary formation. In his article “Debating Disciplinarity” Post argues that disciplines construct a barrier between acceptable and unacceptable knowledge practices via several institutions (2009). He names academic departments, scholarly societies and associations, peer-reviewed journals, and the prestige hierarchy between publishers. However, Post writes from within American academia and does not explore the specific institutions that construct and legitimate disciplinarity in other cultural contexts. In the humanities in America grants have almost no importance within the formation of disciplinary priorities or career progression, whereas in other international contexts national grant funding models like the NWO in the Netherlands or SSRHC in Canada, or intranational granting such as the EU-level Horizon program, are central to the selection of research topics and scholars’ promotion to higher ranks within humanities fields. When such granting systems strongly drive the hiring, tenuring, and promotion processes, they may fundamentally supplant the institutional role Post identifies in disciplinary formation (2009). This may be even more starkly different within the Dutch context as grants also determine most PhD positions and topics, and institutional pressure to adopt “open science” practices often prioritizes open access

publishing, disrupting the disciplinary and disciplining role of the prestige hierarchy between journals and publishing houses. As a result, disciplines form themselves very differently in various international contexts and may not always function as the most important structure of academic life or identity.

A second significant area of interview findings cluster around teachers' broad agreement about problems with student language levels and writing skills and disagreement over the definition and importance of key components of the curriculum. Yet, there is a curious lacuna between these two topics regarding broad lack of reflection on the cultural and disciplinary training required to meet the standards of Dutch academic writing and classroom speaking in the humanities. As is common in the academic literature on the international classroom, most teachers noted that international students who are non-native speakers of English often struggle with expressing themselves in speech and writing but, with some exceptions, most also felt that language instruction is not the job of subject-specific professors in a university setting (Machura, 2021). Because only a few participants were first-language English speakers, many also expressed reservations about their competence to teach or extensively correct students' English, as also noted by Machura (2021). Although many participants commented on the difference between grammatical issues in English and the ability to write well in an academic setting, many expressed or demonstrated difficulty in disentangling these two domains.

Further, participants overestimated the extent to which they understand, teach, and assess core components of the curriculum, including academic writing, in the same way as other colleagues in the MAC program. Participants' definition of core graded components of the BA thesis varied significantly as did their approach and standards when introducing these elements in class. Likewise, there was no broad agreement in their characterization of characteristics of "quality academic writing," and only a few participants commented at length about differences in how academic writing is taught in various disciplinary and national contexts. In other words, for many participants the elements of academic writing and central tested competencies of the program functioned as an invisible system of norms they assumed was shared with other colleagues, but in practice these varied significantly. Colleagues trained in or with significant research or teaching experience in other countries commonly had a greater awareness of variations in academic writing styles transnationally, likely because these cross-cultural academic experiences made their own norms more visible.

This dynamic was exemplified by one participant who explained quality academic writing as containing "those well-known ingredients from the '*Schijf van Vijf*.'" For those who are not familiar with the "*Schijf van Vijf*," it is a writing guide designed by Media and Culture Studies faculty member Professor Eggo Mueller in 2005, referenced widely but rarely directly taught throughout the department's curriculum. Because the title is a pun on a Dutch dietary guideline analogous to the "food pyramid" in the American context, it has been translated with some distortion into English as "The Five Question Pie Chart." Although the document circulates

freely online under a creative commons license, it is distinctly not “well-known” or commonly utilized internationally or even at other universities in the Netherlands or other departments within Utrecht University, apart from the sister program in Communication and Information Sciences. Likewise, its writing advice is distinctly Dutch, as many other national traditions of humanities media studies scholarship do not use a research question or method section. The classification of the “*Schijf van Vijf*” and its distinctly Dutch mode of writing as “well known” functions as what Warner would call the kind of normal that is not only statistically average but normative – a kind of slippage that normalizes nationally and disciplinarily contingent standards as universal (2000).

4. Discussion

Lack of curricular consensus may ultimately result in an absence of accountability for the care of international students at a departmental and institutional level. Participants, for example, reflected a widespread attitude demonstrated in existing research on instructors who teach international students in English track programs. This research reports that faculty frame the problem in terms of the student: when asked which challenges faculty face, instructors answer in terms of student deficiencies (Jin & Schneider, 2019, p. 91). Despite these deficiencies, faculty often indicate minimal interest in helping students with language skills, or in learning more about pedagogical methods for teaching linguistically and culturally diverse students (Chen, 2019; Jin & Schneider, 2019). Some instructors may even “resent” being asked to adapt teaching practices for linguistically diverse students (Jin & Schneider 2019, p. 85).

Existing literature identifies faculty indifference to cultural and disciplinary differences as a catalyst for confusion among native and international students alike. Yet, the confusion is greatest for international students. Research reports that international students tend to experience “greater adjustment difficulties and more distress” than domestic students (Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007, p. 29). Indifference toward their needs results in a neglect of care for international students in the international classroom, as well as a lack of accountability for international students within the academic structure of the university.

Yet, the very notion of care for international students also appears to be a cultural concept. Different cultures and subcultures frame the needs of international students differently. For American universities, research from the late 1970s and early 1980s recommended cultural sensitivity, awareness of communication differences and policy interventions for international students (Perkins, 1977; Dillard & Chisom, 1983; Surdam & Collins, 1984). Research also indicates that faculty members who are multilingual, immigrants, or have worked long-term in international tracks are aware of international students’ needs and willing to adjust their instruction to accommodate them (Chen, 2019; Jin & Schneider, 2019). Among our participants, these same groups of instructors often described teaching in the international classroom as an

opportunity for cultural growth and exchange. Accordingly, these participants reported that they provided extra help to international students and drew on international students' cross-cultural knowledge to enrich the curriculum.

Faculty can be taught the necessary competencies for the international, interdisciplinary classroom. Training can increase the capacity for self-reflection, communication across cultural and disciplinary forms of difference, and awareness of instructors' academic norms and the role these play in the educational process. Consensus building would require instructors to agree on cross-cultural disciplinary tenets and practices. While some may experience consensus building as a threat to academic autonomy, practice indicates that disciplinary consensus is necessary for both interdisciplinary teaching and collaboration (Repko & Szostak, 2020). Finally, consensus building among faculty can increase faculty cohesion and effectively improve the experience of both international and interdisciplinary students.

5. Conclusion

Considering faculty in international programs as heterogeneous and culturally diverse is a new approach. Likewise, the literature on interdisciplinary teaching rarely considers how disciplines (and thus interdisciplinarity) are formed differently in various national and institutional contexts. Bringing these two innovations together is necessary to understand interdisciplinarity within Dutch universities wherein both student and staff are increasingly international, and yet academic and cultural norms still function largely invisibly.

Crossing international boundaries often also involves crossing disciplinary boundaries, since the development of disciplines is culturally bound and depends on specific (national) institutions. As a result, a faculty with staff trained in different countries will likely understand their academic and disciplinary norms and standards very differently. The study urges us to consider interdisciplinary and international teaching as an intersectional matrix, as these modify each other within a diverse academic community.

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