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## **Discursive Constructions of International Education: How University Lecturers 'Talk' about International Students**

### **Abstract**

There is seemingly no end to the difficulties that can arise in the international classroom. Stories abound about issues such as silence, students' reticence, learner autonomy (or lack thereof), which seem to suggest an unsuccessful transfer of academic knowledge and skills across tasks, contexts and cultures. The current paper will neither offer another problem for us to ponder, nor another solution to the proverbial us-them divide. Instead we shall explore the possible frames of reference that underpin this appreciation of 'the problematic Other' in the international classroom. Our central argument is that 'the problematic Other' in international education, here personified by international exchange students, is discursively constructed by university lecturers and students. Among the discursive constructions we see as particularly problematic are those of knowledge 'transfer' and 'gap' which are consequently examined and deconstructed as part of our discussion. Instead we propose that the new discursive constructions of knowledge 'transformation' and 'asymmetry' be used. Our initial presuppositions concerning 'discourses of deficit' are tested in the analysis. Through an examination of qualitative research interviews with lecturers involved in international teaching, we demonstrate how the problematic discursive constructions of 'gap' and 'transfer' can be found in the way lecturers talk about their students, but also how at least some respondents embrace the more inclusive idea of transformation. This leads to a concluding discussion in which we suggest that a change in the way we talk and write about international education and students can result in a heightened sensitivity when it comes to understanding and appreciating the practices of 'the problematic Other'.

### **1. Appreciating the Other in the International Classroom**

There is seemingly no end to the stories of difficulties in the international classroom. Issues include silence in the classroom (Briskin 2000; Liu 2002) students' reticence (Cheng 2000; Jackson 2002), learner autonomy (Ho/Crockall 1995, Tange/Jensen 2012) and unsuccessful transfer of academic knowledge across tasks and contexts (Volet 1999). One prototypical example is the tendency observed among Chinese exchange students, whose use "of proverbial sayings (chengyu) to back up their arguments" in written assignments was perceived by local, American students "as a sign of incompetence" (Günther/Luckmann 2001: 67-68). What in a Chinese academic environment was seen as an institutionalized marker for 'good education' became in the American educational setting symptomatic of the complete opposite. Because they were visiting a 'Western' university, the Chinese students' practice of using proverbs to back their claims was deemed undesirable. In other words, it would seem that the Chinese students in question had uncritically translated a practice of supporting arguments by means of proverbs.

However, the reasoning behind the Chinese students' conduct seems reasonable enough, given that they were operating within a setting that appeared familiar to them, namely academia in general and the classroom in particular. Needless to say, the exchange students were aware that they had moved from China to the U.S., and that a physical move between continents was likely to cause change in terms of cultural values, norms and expectations. Yet there are equally many signs that might tempt the Chinese students **not** to change their general frame of mind and to as-

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sume that the international classroom is somehow common ground. Let us take a look at the international classroom from the Chinese students' point of view: First, the exchange students meet what is obviously a university setting. The host country and its people may seem alien, but the phenomenon of a 'university' is something that the students recognize from their home country. Second, the host institution is inhabited by persons acting in the capacities of teacher and learners. Again they are roles already known to the exchange students. Third, the format of education will often resemble what the students know from previous studies, with lectures, course curricula, written assignments, and exams. Finally, both home and host universities enjoy the privilege bestowed by government bodies of being allowed to confer upon students an academic degree. Given these similarities, it is perhaps not altogether surprising that exchange students slip into university mode, as it were, and continue doing what they presumably do best, namely conforming to the academic practices that they have internalized during previous socialization processes at their home universities.

The problem is that looks can be deceiving, and that the entire university set up may therefore constitute a 'faux amis'. Even in an increasingly globalized world each and every university is still embedded in its own unique history; it is a product of unique idiosyncrasies and particular local, regional, national and institutional ideologies (Bourdieu 1988, 1999). With this in mind it can hardly come as a surprise that misunderstandings occur between students and lecturers despite deceptively similar structures. One way to approach this high risk of mutual misunderstandings within international education, we suggest, is via Parsons' 'double contingency' (Parsons/Shils 1951). Double contingency is an elaboration on the relational phenomenon that when interacting with another party, the 'I' recognizes the Other **and** at the same time realizes that the Other recognizes him/her. What Parsons' principle thus implies is that in the process of recognizing the Other there are mutual expectations; that is, the 'I' has presuppositions towards his/her Other while at the same time presuming the Other to have expectations towards him/herself (Parsons/Shils 1951). To return to our case of the international classroom we feel quite comfortable assuming that both parties in this relationship will expect the presumptions of the Other to conform to their own expectations (Tange/Jensen 2012). In the classroom encounter between the exchange student and host university students and lecturers, both parties will thus presuppose that regardless of obvious dissimilarities, the institutional setting provides a common ground, a sort of neutral and unmarked space. A consequence of this is that both parties are likely to be less sensitive towards cultural and other differences than is prototypically the case in intercultural encounters. This means that as a meeting place, the international classroom is almost inevitably predestined to become a site for unmet expectations, which can be equally unsatisfactory and frustrating to both parties, albeit for different reasons and with different implications.

In the case of the exchange students one such far-reaching consequence is what we call 'the power of place'. Due to the fact that the host university holds the privilege of determining what counts as desirable academic behaviour, exchange students have little choice but to assimilate if they want to succeed within their new environment. In comparison, there is no pressing reason why host university students should learn from the practices of the international students given that all learners are evaluated according to host university norms. In effect, this means that the host university students and faculty are prone to form a dominant coalition that consciously or unconsciously unite in a mutually beneficial endeavour to conserve the status quo. This contrasts with the position of the exchange students who face an uphill battle on two fronts: On the one hand, they are being forced to re-evaluate their identities as students, which can be intellectually as well as emotionally challenging. On the other hand, they are attempting, simultaneously, to adhere to an unfamiliar academic mind-set. Meanwhile the host university students are encouraged, directly or indirectly, to construct or maintain for themselves a position of academic and intellectual dominance. This, we take it, for all intents and purposes, is an undesirable pedagogical point of departure for all parties involved.

Thus, we suggest that if this underlying mutual misunderstanding is to be dealt with and perhaps even remedied, one place to start is by re-interpreting central aspects of the discourse on international education. In our view such a re-interpretation invites a closer look at the way that actors perceive and talk about the Other in international education. Accordingly, we shall now turn to an examination of the discursive construction of Otherness.

## 2. On the Discursive Construction of the Other in the International Classroom

Our underlying understanding when discussing and analyzing the discursive construction of the Other in the international classroom is that language, knowledge and power are inextricably linked (Foucault 1974). However, discourse in our view does not only refer to discursive formations but also to empirically situated practices of interaction (e.g. Bourdieu 1977, Goffman 1983). Discourse not only permeates but indeed structures our mental representations as well as the discursive construction of ourselves, the Other, and the world that we inhabit (Gergen 1985). With this as our point of departure, we propose to take a closer look at two examples of the discursive construction of Otherness used for interpreting the pedagogical problems that arise within the international classroom. The two examples are ‘transfer’ and ‘gaps’.

### 2.1. From Transfer to Transformation

Conflicts in international education arising from perceived differences in values, norms and expectations are commonly appreciated and addressed as problems of **transfer** (e.g. Volet 1999). This understanding stems from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century’s ‘transfer of practice’ idea which suggests that the more alike the situation of learning is to the subsequent situation in which the learned is to be used, the more likely the transfer is to be successful (Thorndike/Woodworth 1901). In more recent years, this notion of transfer has become associated with behaviorists such as B. F. Skinner, who presented learning as a one-way flow of knowledge from teacher to student. Part of this idea is that similarity, in a socio-cultural, linguistic and demographic sense, is a central parameter in order to achieve an effective diffusion of knowledge (Rogers 2003 [1962]). When adhering to this interpretation of transfer, three problems arise: Firstly, if transfer depends on a similarity between the parties involved (Rogers 2003 [1962].), then transfer in the international classroom is predestined to fail because of the socio-cultural, linguistic and demographic differences that are bound to be there. Secondly, the term *transfer* stems from the Latin ‘trans + ferre’, to carry across, but as any constructivist learning theory will tell there is nothing to be carried across (e.g. von Glasersfeld 1974). Instead learning is to be considered an active personal and social process of constructing knowledge (Kastberg et al. 2007). Finally, transfer is always perceived to be unidirectional. For reasons stated above, the exchange student inevitably ends up as the target of the transfer, and this means that the international classroom **cannot** become anything other than an arena for a contest in which the outcome is given in advance.

What we propose then is to step back and take another look at what is at stake in any learning situation. To this end, Aristotle put forward a statement which rings as true today as two and a half millennia ago, namely, that education is preparation for some worthy activity (Davidson 1900: 169). In essence: the purpose of education is for those that we educate to acquire skills, competences and knowledge that enable them to successfully undertake problem-solving endeavors outside of the classroom. Even if the complexity of educational problems has been gradually unveiled and qualified since the days of Aristotle, this is the underlying value of any learning activity and, as such, has been at the forefront of the debate from Plato to Piaget. However, since transfer seems to be uncontestedly integrated with the idea of transferring contents much akin to the credo of the early behaviorists, we opt for the introduction of an alternative discursive construction, namely that of ‘transformation’. We do so in order to stress that the action taking place in the inclusive international classroom has more to do with a constructive transformation of the individuals who inhabit this space than a mechanical transfer of knowledge. Needless to say, advocating

a transformational appreciation of learning implies that we acknowledge that there are different types of learning (Bateson 2000: 279). What from a systems theoretical point of view Bateson (2000: 301) refers to as 'Learning III' and defines as a "profound reorganization of character", has found wide-spread acceptance and is today typically referred to as 'transformational learning theory'. A key theorist in this tradition is Jack Mezirow (2000: 7) who characterizes learning as an activity "by which we transform our taken-for-granted frames of reference (meaning perspectives, habits of mind, mind-sets) to make them more inclusive". Key words in the paradigm suggested by Mezirow (1997, 2000, 2003) include critical reflection, an application of theory to practice, the transformation of learner and teacher perspectives as well as the discourses that are attached to such positions. When applied to our field of international education this has several implications: First, critical reflection in an international learning environment invites an engagement with knowledge in a broader sense, taking into account the fact that international exchange students bring new theoretical and empirical insights, which can be used to challenge the default acceptance of particular national or Western European paradigms found at the host university. As a result, international education can facilitate a learner position of 'double knowing', encouraging students to establish connections between various epistemological and academic traditions (Singh 2005, Tange/Kastberg 2011). Second, the question of applying theory to practice requires careful thinking by the lecturers who frequently have to deal with the variety of learning styles and experiences that is a consequence of students' socialization into diverse academic and institutional cultures. In order to make sense for all learners, course literature and contents will thus have to be applicable to very different everyday contexts and situations, which has motivated some scholars to push for an 'internationalization' of course curricula (Leask 2005, Haigh 2002). Finally, Mezirow (2000: 7) emphasizes our need to question the "taken-for-granted frames of reference" that we encounter in education. The message is that we have to be open towards new perspectives and discourses, accepting that the purpose of education is **not** to confirm what we already 'know' within a particular academic or institutional environment, but to scrutinize our 'canons of knowledge' and compare them with alternative traditions. Only then can we ensure that 'transformation' may occur for all parties involved in the exchange. To return to our example of the international exchange student, what s/he will thus learn from a six months' stay abroad is not so much contents (i.e. transfer of curricula) but rather the interactional skills that it takes to explain his/her own practice and to engage in a critical dialogue with the academic conventions and knowledge traditions of the host university. The rationale behind this is that in the course of a five-year university program a six months' stay at another university should not and indeed **cannot** radically alter the core of a student's knowledge but it may alter his/her perception of alternative approaches to teaching and learning. In short, exchange students could have read the same books at their home institution, but staying at home would prevent the process of transformative, intercultural learning that is likely to occur as a result of their immersion into another academic culture.

Continuing this line of criticism, the transfer seems to favor an implication-like and equally mechanical credo along the lines of: The greater the similarities in class the better the rate of transfer. But where transfer is unquestionably unidirectional, i.e. always from the host university to the exchange student, transformation is not merely a matter of 'dressage' of (supposedly obstinate) exchange students but rather a question of mutual concern to all parties in the international classroom. Accordingly, we propose that the uncritical and unidirectional notion of international education as transfer be discursively replaced by an idea of knowledge transformation.

## 2.2. From Gap to Asymmetry

This, in turn, leads us to the next discursive construction, which is that of the knowledge 'gap' said to exist between exchange and host students. This is often attributed to the exchange students, and summed up by Stiegler and Hiebert (1999: 10) as follows: "Students' day-to-day experiences are mainly determined by the methods most commonly used by teachers within a culture. Cross-cultural differences in these commonly used methods are what we have termed the 'teach-

ing gap”’. The idea of the gap depicts that on a mono-dimensional scale there is some kind of void between two or more parties, which can be defined in terms of wealth, education or knowledge. The existence of a gap between positions thus contrasted is often seen as an expression of imbalance where it is assumed that one of the parties holds a privileged position vis-a-vis the Other. Such a view is for instance well-known from the ‘knowledge gap theories’ (e.g. Thunberg et al. 1982). Whereas we do not want to underestimate the ‘power of place’, which endows the host university student and faculty with an initial upper hand, we feel that it is this uncritical acceptance of the ‘gap’ that discursively constructs and maintains the situation. One connotation of ‘gap’ in this critical sense seems to be that both parties have internalized and appropriated **the idea of the gap as well as its implications**. As long as discourses of deficit (Candlin/Chrichton 2010) are employed, this means that the Other (in this case the exchange student) is discursively constructed as being in a sort of a priori knowledge deficit (Kastberg/Ditlevsen 2010). This helps consolidate a hegemonic discourse on the part of the dominant coalition.

However, all other things being equal, we feel quite confident in assuming that the average exchange student is no worse off interculturally or academically than the average host university student. The ‘gap’, then, is a phenomenon constructed locally by the host university actors. This gives us the opportunity to subsume our critique of the discursive construction of ‘gaps’ in relation to two themes: A dominant perspective and the ‘power of place’. First, we are, as discussed in the initial section, dealing with a perspective that is extremely powerful because it is associated with the academic system represented in our case by university lecturers acting in their capacity as legitimate ‘carriers’ of knowledge (Bourdieu 1988). The lecturers’ perspective is dominant because they enjoy the privilege to choose and employ methods of evaluation befitting their own *genius loci*. Realizing that any method employed not only generates data, but in fact also produces and maintains the reality that the method presupposes (Law 2004), we have come full circle. Embedded within the privileged perspective is the second aspect, the ‘power of place’, which, for reasons discussed in the initial section, strengthens the dominant position of the university lecturers, as guardians of the existing order, and, potentially host university students because of their familiarity with the academic system (Bourdieu 1988).

So if, for all intents and purposes, a discourse of ‘gaps’ is counterproductive, how then may we acknowledge and discursively construct the differences that are unquestionably present in the international classroom in a way that may facilitate productive learning environments? We suggest that we actively and consciously take our point of departure in these differences, albeit explicitly **not** from the perspective of the ‘gap’ but from a new perspective of ‘asymmetry’. Geometrically speaking, asymmetry occurs when something is “not identical on both sides of a central line” (according to Webster’s Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language (1989 edition)). The concept of asymmetry thus refers to a lack of sameness on the two sides of a dividing line. In contrast to the gap, it is noteworthy that the two sides feature a point of contact; that they are not distant and separate, but co-dependent in as much as an asymmetric relation can only exist when its two constituting elements are recognized by and recognize one another. Important at this point is also that neither form holds a privileged position; they are both responsible, as it were, for the asymmetry. In the sense that no one side holds a privileged position this, in turn, implies that asymmetry is a relation and *not* an evaluation; the two sides jointly form an asymmetric relationship. This, then, is where we may return to the double contingency presented in the introductory part of this paper; as we now see, acknowledging asymmetry means that both parties involved accept the different position of the Other. This, in turn, makes the double contingency in question a **double** double contingency or a second order double contingency (Kastberg 2011).

Summing up, we propose that rather than trying to change the semantics of ‘gap’ and ‘transfer’, as well as the implied meaning that gaps are best remedied by transfer, we propose that differences be constructed discursively in alternative ways. In essence this involves a re-interpretation and re-evaluation of the underlying problem of **differentness** within the international classroom. So what if we turn the tables on these assumptions, and look upon transfer not as a matter of content

but of people, stating that what we seek to transform is not skills, competences and knowledge, but the people who give these words meaning. In addition, we suggest that international educators embrace the idea of asymmetry by acknowledging differentness in the international classroom not as a barrier but as an impetus for familiarizing oneself with skills, competences and insights that lie beyond the scope of one's own knowledge horizon. Yet a precondition for the establishment of this inclusive view on international education is a deconstruction of the ideas currently used to characterize international students. In consequence, we now turn to an analysis of discourses employed by lecturers involved in international teaching

### 3. Research Design and Methodology

The present analysis draws on material collected as part of an investigation into university lecturers' experiences with international education (Tange 2010). For this study a total of 34 interviews were conducted with lecturers at five Danish university faculties, covering the academic fields of engineering, business, life sciences, social science and humanities. Data collection was initiated in spring 2007 and took place over a period of three years. Institutions were selected on the basis of their proportion of international students, which in all cases amounted to between ten and fifteen per cent of the total student population. At some institutions, international students were found in some programs mainly, while in others they were spread more evenly across different study programs and courses. This is reflected in our sample in the sense that we have in some faculties many respondents from one particular department or teaching group, while in others we have a greater range of subjects represented.

At each research site the initial contact was made through gatekeepers in the universities' International Offices and Study Administrations. The advantage of working through organizational insiders is that they can often provide access to employee networks as well as in-depth knowledge about internationalization at their institution. Gatekeepers were informed about our principal selection criteria, namely that we were looking for non-professional English users (i.e., not a native speaker or graduate in English) engaged in international teaching. They might then provide us with a list of lecturers whom we could contact directly, or send out a mail asking people to volunteer for our enquiry. Once the first respondents had volunteered we employed a 'snowballing' technique (Bernard 1995), asking lecturers to name colleagues whom they considered relevant for our study. The final sample counted 34 lecturers, representing different demographics, i.e. age groups (35 to 65), academic positions (assistant professor, associate professor, professor), teaching experience (international as well as general), and academic fields. Thirty respondents were Danish, three were Germans and one was Swedish, but all foreign staff knew enough Danish to partake in a conversation in this language. All interviews were originally conducted in Danish and the excerpts used here have been translated into English by the authors.

The ensuing interviews were conducted at respondents' institutions, lasting between 45 and 60 minutes. They were semi-structured in nature (Kvale/Brinkmann 2009) and took as their point of departure an interview guide which organized questions under the customized headings of **organizational position, past experiences with international teaching, involvement with international education, experiences from your most recent class, lecturers' language and teaching skills, and students' language and learning skills** (Kvale/Brinkmann 2009). Data processing was carried out simultaneously with the interviewing process to allow for a continuous integration of emergent themes into the interview guide. The authors scrolled through the text transcripts with a view to identify recurrent or new themes, and, where relevant, formulate questions that might test whether a specific issue was unique to the single respondents or of a more general nature. Once data collection had been completed, interviews were subjected to a second, more thorough analysis, which involved a coding of statements and organization of key passages under the overall headings of language, culture, knowledge, and organization (Spradley, 1979, Attride-Stirling 2001).

Once the four core themes had been established, Nvivo software was used to create a tree diagram for each of these. In accordance with the research design questions of **form** (i. e. academic disciplines, institutional cultures, faculty and level of study), **manifestation** (qualifications, expectations, learning method and approach to study), influence on **specific teaching activities** (i. e. lectures, group work, supervision, exams), and **strategies** to overcome knowledge asymmetries (i. e. explicit communication, establish symmetry and socialization) were focal points. Most important in relation to the current paper are theme three, teaching activities, and theme four, strategies, which together allow for an identification of how respondents appreciate and thereby contribute to the discursive construction of international students as Other in the international classroom. The material thus selected provides the empirical platform for the subsequent account. One objection to our analysis might be that it is founded on a study of Danish university settings exclusively. However, establishing whether or not the Danish examples presented here can be said to be generalizable lies beyond the scope of the present paper.

## 4. Findings

In the initial section we highlighted how two discursive constructions prevail when ‘talking’ about international education, namely the ideas of ‘gap’ and ‘transfer.’ In the analysis we shall now examine to what extent they are reproduced in the discourses employed by Danish lecturers when interviewed about their international teaching experience. Our first analytical theme relates to ‘gap’ and ‘transfer’ as ‘discourses of deficit’ in international education (Candlin/Crichton 2010), highlighting the extent to which the image of international exchange students as passive receivers of knowledge prevails in Danish academic culture. Given our concern with the alternative constructions of ‘asymmetry’ and ‘transformation’, however, we shall dedicate the second part of our analysis to this topic, underlining how lecturers’ discourse can change as a result of international learning and teaching experiences. This leads to a concluding discussion in which we ask what the implications of our analysis might be for the development of international education into a transformative learning experience for students and staff alike.

### 4.1. Theme 1: Knowledge gaps and transfer

The literature review has established that lecturers recognize differences between educational cultures, and that they have a tendency to assess these against a benchmark based on locally defined norms and traditions. Consciously or unconsciously, this prompts many to characterize exchange students as ‘lacking’ in terms of academic knowledge, methodological skills and a general understanding of what constitutes ‘good’ classroom behaviour. In his research on Australian universities, Singh (2005: 10) observes how university staff commonly perceive exchange students as “empty vessels” or “sites of English language deficiencies”. This shows that the discursive construction of the ‘gap’ is not solely a Danish phenomenon, but one that transcends national boundaries. As we saw in the previous discussion, however, the ‘power of place’ prevails, which means that lecturers’ norms reflect their local linguistic, cultural and institutional backgrounds, and that any gaps that they mention inevitably refer to aspects that are considered important to educational culture at Danish universities.

One important ‘gap’ that respondents mention relates to students’ academic insight. Particularly at Master level, lecturers expect to build on knowledge that students have acquired earlier in their studies, and find it frustrating when confronted with learners who apparently ‘lack’ the theoretical and methodological foundation expected. Some accept that this is an inevitable outcome when a growing number of students are no longer recruited from the local institutional bachelor programs that traditionally qualified learners for the Master programmes. Others refer to the idea of similarity, stressing that the exchange students ‘miss’ something essential:

Those who created most problems were really the Poles and those Eastern Europeans who weren’t very good at English, and who were not academically good either. And who came from a culture char-

acterized by repetition or reproduction of knowledge, and who had not necessarily had to learn to formulate [knowledge]. (lecturer, Life Science)

Interestingly enough, academically under-achieving groups are frequently also accused of linguistic inadequacy. This tendency can be found in interviews across disciplines, suggesting that Danish lecturers find it hard to differentiate between language and academic problems. Hence it is possible that the perceived ‘gap’ relates to students’ inability to communicate scientific knowledge rather than a lack in academic capacity per se.

Equally significant are ‘gaps’ identified in relation to students’ familiarity with Danish teaching style, which is in many ways similar to the problem-based learning approach to tertiary education (e.g. Boud 1985). Across faculties, respondents agree that this approach is central to Danish university tradition, and that it presents an obstacle to many international students. “It takes more effort to communicate what exactly we want”, a lecturer from Business observes, and a similar impression is conveyed by a respondent from Humanities, who recalls how international students have approached her asking: “[wh]at is a ‘free’ assignment?” Several underline how there seems to be a peculiarly Danish style of problem-solving which learners coming in from other educational cultures seem to lack. A lecturer reflects on this discrepancy, highlighting the contrast between Danish independence and foreign students’ apparent need to be told everything:

When we are abroad teaching, or they come here, what we usually experience is that we seem to have a very Danish way of approaching education. You know, that it is okay to discuss matters, and that it is fair enough to ask questions, and that we may challenge [them], just like they may challenge us. In this respect they – from a Danish point of view – follow orders, and can’t you just tell me how it is? Then I shall think afterwards. But give me some input and I shall act like a parrot. (lecturer, Business)

The factor used most frequently by respondents to explain international students’ methodological ‘gap’ is the belief in the teacher as academic authority that the lecturers associate with exchange students. Joking about Danish informality, several respondents note how local students could benefit from the company of the polite French or Germans, but it is also clear that many draw a parallel between the respect received from exchange students and less desirable student conduct such as a lack of critical thinking, an unwillingness to engage in dialogue, and a focus on knowledge reproduction rather than creation. Once again we see how students from neighbouring countries such as Germany or Netherlands are singled out because they behave “almost like the Danes”, while students from Southern Europe, Eastern Europe or Asia are presented as “difficult”. One respondent from Social Science observes: “Also this thing, in South Europe and Asia, it’s absurd, you reproduce. You do as the professor says . . . The critical perspective on what is central and what is not, assessing things, they have not always been brought up with that.” When viewed from this perspective the international students’ knowledge gap can be filled only if they accept their need to assimilate to the local learning style and in the process throw out whatever methods they have acquired at previous stages of their education. Rather than dismissing such observations as symptomatic of Danish ethnocentrism, we claim that respondents are reproducing what seems to be a global way of talking about international education, namely the ‘discourse of deficit’ that we identified in the initial part of our discussion. When in the interviews we ask teachers to compare international and Danish classes, it is perhaps inevitable that they mention problems related to the greater diversity of cultures and languages. Yet our data shows that this is not their only way of talking about internationalization.

#### **4.2. Theme 2: Acknowledging Asymmetry**

By accepting as a point of departure that ‘gaps’ and ‘asymmetry’, ‘transfer’ and ‘transformation’, may all feature in the way that teachers talk about international education, we have established a reading position that enables us to decode the often contradictory statements emerging from the interviews. In one part of a conversation one might thus hear a respondent comment on foreign students’ ‘gaps’, while elsewhere s/he will describe international teaching in positive terms,



stressing how it may facilitate a deeper understanding for local and exchange students alike. One respondent observes:

I'd say the young people who have the basic linguistic skills to listen, a few bits, scientific bits, to hang on to – they don't really need to have exactly the same way of thinking as we do, as long as they have some kind of worldview that can be used. Then I think – then it is my experience that it can become enormously enriching, or one of those, Aha, [learning situations]. An experience that - hey, this really moved us. (lecturer, Social Science)

This, we take it, is a discursive construction not of 'gaps' in need of filling but of asymmetries and students' possibility for transformation. From our analysis we can deduct three elements characteristic of such a discourse: Firstly, lecturers acknowledge that knowledge asymmetries exist in the classroom; secondly, they attempt to remove home student advantages; and thirdly, they implement a practice of polyvocality, inviting all learners to contribute to a common pool of knowledge.

As an example of a discursive recognition of knowledge asymmetries, a respondent offers the following reflections on her students' academic capacity:

[You hear] many have criticized the international students, like the Danish students criticize the international students for not being good enough, for lowering the standards. And similarly, teachers will also think like this. And this is not my experience at all. I have never experienced this. Well . . . they have other learning strategies at times. Not just personally, but also, how can I put it, their background or the customs surrounding education where they come from. But that does not mean it is poorer, but only that it is different. (lecturer, Humanities)

Once they accept the equal validity of local and exchange students' approaches, the next step towards transformation is to establish a pedagogic practice that provides all students with the same opportunity to participate in learning. Several describe how they take internationalization into account as a positive factor when they develop course curricula, choose course methods and themes, and plan classroom activities. Yet such open-minded internationalism requests a renegotiation of norms and values that colleagues and program convenors may see as an inherent part of the institution's educational culture. For will the creation of a truly global learning environment not demand an abandonment of any 'Danish' way of thinking about higher education? A lecturer from Social Science observes:

The question in relation to internationalization is that we have to – well, will we invite people to enter and partake in the Danish learning tradition, or does this require that we make international courses? It is not the same thing . . . Firstly, it will – well, I recognize this, for it is part of our [Danish folk] high school way of thinking, right, and [my university] is actually, whether we like it or not, a part of that tradition.

In consequence many are pragmatic about the question of home students' advantage, accepting that one can and should not remove all aspects of Danish educational culture. In fact, some insist that an important part of the exchange students' learning experience is to sample what is to them an alternative approach to learning.

While our findings indicate that truly inclusive international education seems very hard to achieve, many lecturers are engaged in the development of classroom strategies that bring out students' different knowledge resources and thereby create a sense of international learning. Such an inclusive approach may be characterized by as 'transformative' in the sense defined by Mezirow (2000: 7) because teachers shift their frames of reference from a national to an international outlook, asking students to discuss a universal theme or theory from indigenous regional and cultural perspectives. By so doing the individual learner discovers how course contents and curricula can be applied to his or her local context as well as any differences from and similarities to the interpretations voiced by students from other parts of the world. A respondent suggests that this principle of polyvocality can be extended to include students' academic cultures, encouraging all learners to explain at the beginning of the course where, educationally speaking, they are coming from:

Sometime I have actually considered making a short session, and I think I have even done it once, where I say: how does a typical day at school or at university look for you? So what is it you do? What kind of form, what working form do you have at your universities? . . . So that everybody realizes that they are coming from different traditions. (lecturer, Life Science)

More than anything the lecturers who in the interviews ‘talk’ along the lines of ‘transformation’ rather than ‘transfer’ are characterized by their willingness to bring out the diversity in the classroom and to discursively present resources for knowledge-sharing and learning. What is equally clear is that the creation of an international learning environment is hard work, compelling teachers to address issues such as varieties of English, the ‘relevance’ of cultural knowledge, and the benefit of combining different approaches. If teachers are not prepared to make the effort, one respondent notes, international courses will consolidate rather than remove barriers.

## 5. Discussion and Implications

By combining a theoretical discussion of acknowledged practices in the international classroom with qualitative data collected from university teachers, we have examined to what extent lecturers’ ‘talk’ can be said to rely on an idea of ‘transfer’ rather than ‘transformation’ and thereby discursively contribute to the construction of knowledge ‘gaps’ rather than ‘asymmetries’. The analysis provides examples of themes that respondents have brought up in relation to mixed student groups, suggesting that while some lecturers continue to be immersed in a ‘gap’ discourse, others recognize that international education can become a transformative experience for students and staff alike. Our analysis further shows how some lecturers have sought to facilitate interaction and integration across cultural, linguistic and knowledge boundaries. Based on these accounts, one can deduct three principles that are central to our argument, namely 1) **the identification of differences**, 2) **the development of strategies to create symmetry** between knowledge systems, and 3) **the building of awareness about the roles and resources** in an international classroom. Needless to say, if we view these three steps as an incremental progression they could be seen as a sort of road map to transforming the views, not only of the Other (in our case international exchange students) but of all parties involved in the classroom encounter.

Our first principle concerns the need in international teaching to **identify and communicate the differences** that lecturers encounter in the classroom as well as an awareness of the extent to which such issues may stem from mutual misunderstandings. Traditionally, researchers have explained this with reference to linguistic and cultural diversity but as pointed out by Marginson/Sawir (2011) this has substantiated rather than challenged the predominant way of ‘talking’ about the international student as a deficient Other in need of ‘transfer’. Instead we have highlighted the importance of factors such as students’ disciplinary knowledge, methodological awareness, learning styles and classroom practices. If we want to establish a truly inclusive approach, it is important that lecturers contribute to awareness-raising by explicitly ‘talking about’ the mutuality of knowledges and in so doing challenge the hegemonic principle of a single, locally based knowledge system. From the host institution’s point of view, a possible first step is to ask lecturers what student practices they observe in international classes, and whether they perceive any of these to be a barrier to learning. In other words, we need to consciously recognize the **double double contingency** present in all such encounters.

The second principle addresses lecturers need for **pedagogic strategies that can help them establish symmetry across the multiple knowledge systems** that they meet in international classes. In the interviews, respondents were asked about their teaching methods, and some of the most common practices were explicit communication about course requirements and expectations; activities drawing on the multiple perspectives learners bring from their home countries or institutions; discussion exercises that encourage all students to speak, and a deliberate foregrounding of the fact that students represent diverse linguistic, academic and cultural backgrounds. An interesting example of such inclusive practices was found in one international Master program where a declared principle of symmetry had motivated the decision that all students start at a theoretic-

cal and methodological point zero. In consequence, lecturers had developed a project module that relied on competencies that neither home nor incoming students were likely to have encountered elsewhere. This, in turn, implies that it might be possible to establish a neutral learning platform in the international classroom.

Finally, a strategy of ‘transformation’ rather than ‘transfer’ builds on a third principle of **awareness-raising among staff and students of the roles and resources** found within the international classroom. Several respondents relate that students are unconscious of the competencies possessed by themselves and their peers, and when asked to form project groups, they will seek out individuals who seem familiar to them (e.g. from the same country, course or speech community). If they want to change this practice, teachers have to recognize and even name the vast variety of knowledge resources that they see in their classes, highlighting to students how their learning benefits from taking these into account. Hence an inclusive approach demands that lecturers help students strengthen their capacity to register and work across differences, and, in so doing, develop both their interactional and intercultural competencies.

An acknowledgement of knowledge asymmetries present in international education opens up the possibility for establishing a level playing field in the classroom. Needless to say, for this practice of recognizing asymmetries to have an effect, the approach needs to be sanctioned not only by the parties immediately involved in day-to-day classroom activities, but also by the relevant levels of university management and administration. An important first step might be to attempt to affect the change in discursive strategies suggested in our literature review. First, such change implies that one party in the international classroom will no longer be constructed as being in a state of deficiency, embodying a ‘gap’ that needs filling, as it were. Second, differences would no longer be constructed as a priori problems that would have to be remedied but rather as resources that may become the impetus for mutual learning. Unlike the idea of the ‘gap’, which is basically motivated by the perception that the apparent knowledge vacuum is only filled ‘when the Other has become like me’, the notion of asymmetry suggests that there is no gap to be filled, no assimilation to strive for. In the asymmetric relation the two parties may – and are in the course of interaction likely to – adjust to one another. As a result, the asymmetric relation may develop into a dynamic relationship featuring progressively less asymmetry, but only if both parties accept the responsibility of addressing their respective differences in a non-evaluative fashion. This, in other words, is not a process of unidirectional assimilation but one of mutually learning about and accepting the knowledges of one’s respective Other(s). One possible outcome of such academic ‘conviviality’ (Gilroy 2005) could be that all parties involved agree to disagree. This, in turn, would not necessarily lead to pedagogic meltdown, but rather, in the ideal situation, to greater intellectual maturity among host as well as exchange students.

## 6. Bibliography

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