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Creative Dissent and Constructive Solutions:
What Contributions Does Bakhtin Make to
Our Understanding of Transnational Education?

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Abstract

Creative dissent takes many forms, including generative tensions arising from collaborations involved in dialogue and critical reflection on practice. From generative tensions arise constructive solutions that derive from, and build upon, multiple perspectives; they are expressed in socially constructive contexts that respect otherness and that strive to facilitate shared understandings.

The notion of dialogicality (Bakhtin, 1981, 1984, 1986) is pivotal to creative dissent and constructive solutions; it is fundamental to transformative education that has its aim as the mutual enrichment of learners, teachers and shared social contexts. This paper argues that Bakhtinian ideas, particularly dialogue and creative understanding, are fundamental to transnational education. The writers articulate the ways in which key elements of these concepts manifest themselves in the educational experiences offered to students at the University of Southern Queensland, a university committed to transnational education. The paper illustrates some of the challenges and opportunities in the shift from rhetoric to lived reality for students and teachers in an increasingly globalised world. Transnational education epitomises constructive solutions that arise from creative dissent.

Introduction

Like all contemporary universities, the University of Southern Queensland is undertaking an ongoing process of (re)visioning, focused on its perceived distinctive and vital contribution to the state, national and global higher education sector. A key element of that process is its stated vision of be(com)ing "Australia's leading transnational educator", which entails:
- operating on a nation-wide basis;
- extending or going beyond national boundaries;
- operating in more than one country;
- involving persons of many nationalities. (Retrieved May 23, 2005, from http://www.usq.edu.au/resources/university+assembly+september+2.pdf; see also Reid, 2005; Smith, 2005)

At the outset of this paper, it is appropriate to state that, as academic staff members of the Faculty of Education at the University of Southern Queensland, we recognise the Vice-Chancellor's prerogative, in consultation with other members of the university community, to outline one or more

visions that seek to encapsulate and convey the university's range of activities and aspirations. Moreover, the vision of be(com)ing "Australia's leading transnational educator" seems appropriate, given the university's longstanding status as an effective provider of face-to-face education in regional Queensland and of distance and online education throughout Australia and internationally.

Existing policy and practice at the University of Southern Queensland cater successfully for a large and diverse group of students across the world. This diversity pertains to language and culture, as well as occupation, though students are all engaged with education in some way. Of interest is the increasing number of staff who have some background in language and culture/multiculturalism and who have worked outside Australia or whose first language is not English. Postgraduate students today have the option of being on campus but the majority are situated off-campus with substantial numbers overseas.

Importantly, as noted by Knight (2003), transnational education has been part of the educational experience for many years in the delivery of programs to international students in a range of ways, e.g., distance education, off-shore and on-shore face-to-face delivery and particularly in relation to the business of English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students (ELICOS) facilitating access to tertiary (and other) programs. It is only now that this work has become more intensified and competitive, with a wide range of educational providers all vying for a niche in the global business of education. Those experienced in international education are already aware of the current key drivers for the 'new' thrust and conceptualisation of becoming transnational providers of tertiary education.

We argue in this paper that the Russian philosopher of language Mikhail Bakhtin is potentially helpful in our project of engaging in such a conceptualisation in the context of the University of Southern Queensland. In particular, Bakhtin's (1981, 1984, 1986) concepts of dialogue and creative understanding frame and inform our approaches to our respective courses and programs in ways that facilitate the movement from creative dissent to constructive solutions. It is this movement that provides transnational education at the University of Southern Queensland with its strongest prospect for be(com)ing a lived reality rather than an aspirational rhetoric.

The paper is divided into three sections. The first section articulates a conceptualisation of transnational education through the lens of Bakhtin's thought. The second and third sections deal with one crucial element each of transnational education and the postgraduate offerings of the Faculty of Education at the University of Southern Queensland. The second section analyses the place of dialogue in the Masters level course "The Reflective Early Childhood Practitioner". The third section examines the intended shift from outsidedness to creative understanding in the Masters level course "Research Methods in Education". The paper concludes by reflecting on the implications of Bakhtin's concepts on the one hand and the Faculty's postgraduate offerings on the other for the possibilities for transnational

education in moving from creative dissent to constructive solutions in an Australian contemporary university.

Transnational Education Through a Bakhtinian Lens

In attempting to conceptualise transnational education, the traditional ideas and values that constitute participants' existing views of *Self* (inside views) as opposed to the views of those with whom we may work transnationally (*Other* or outside views) need to be challenged. This challenge can be mediated by constructivism, critical theory, performativity and transformational learning to create and rearticulate notions of transnational pedagogies within a new ecology of learning. Kostogriz's (2004) notion of a transcultural model of spatiality is pertinent to this mediation. His model is based on Bakhtin's (1986) concept of dialogue between *Self* and *Other*. Kostogriz (2004, p. 6) states:

> [T]his model of dialogical interaction acquires particular significance in multicultural conditions because it imagines transcultural space between cultural binaries as asymmetrical and, at the same time, as a possibility of constructing differences through the critical reconstruction of self.

In one sense, there is acceptance of this proposition but this acceptance needs to be contextualised by the recognition of transcultural literacies as a space where:

> …people seek to articulate new identities and meanings relevant to their altering cultural circumstances [where] these textual practices are features of transcultural becoming and semiotic innovation; [where there is acknowledgment that] they are not English literacy but literacies in English. (Kostogriz, 2004, p. 8)

It may be argued that transnational education gives rise to the notion of borderless education, yet it may also be conceptualized as across borders (Knight, 2003). Within the discursive struggle between these different views of transnational education, *monoglossic* centripetal force of current requirements for communications to be in standard English compete with the centrifugal force of an existing but emergent transnational *heteroglossia* (Bakhtin, 1981) of ongoing dialogue across borders, among cultures and within and across the different education stakeholder groups whose language, culture and motivations may be different. In the current context, it would seem that any reconceptualisation of transnational education must be enhanced by a focus on heteroglossic space – and also on dialogue and creative understanding, as the next two sections of the paper demonstrate.

Dialogue and Reflective Early Childhood Practitioners Studying in a Transnational Context

> Utterances are not indifferent to one another and are not self sufficient; they are aware of and mutually reflect one another. These mutual reflections determine their character. Each utterance is filled with echoes and reverberations of other utterances to which it is related by the

communality of the sphere of speech communication. Every utterance must be regarded primarily as a response to preceding utterances of the given sphere. (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 91)

There has been a shift in thinking in education and other related fields towards greater recognition of the collective nature of knowing. Greater attention is being paid to social and cultural influences on learning and the construction of knowledge (Rogoff & Lave, 1984; Vygotsky, 1978). Recent perspectives acknowledge the social origins of thought and language and the dialectical nature of learning within a dynamic context. Vygotsky (1978), for example, described learning as a complex, dialectical process, characterised by periodicity, unevenness of function and qualitative transformation through the inter-twining of external and internal factors. He focused on the historically shaped and culturally transmitted psychology of humans, arguing that humans are active, vigorous participants in their own learning. He identified speech or language as one of the key tools in the learning process.

Similarly Bakhtin (1981) was concerned with speech activity that was contextualised historically, institutionally, culturally and individually. He believed that the intersection of differences in thinking in the course of social interaction can lead to mutual meaning and understanding – the social construction of knowledge. He insisted that the immediate social situation and the broader social milieu determine the structure of a dialogue. He argued that dialogue and the resultant texts that are created can be understood only within their specific and varied social contexts. It is within this paradigm that transnational education fits: dialogue and knowledge construction across borders that contribute to and are enriched by the tapestry of diversity.

The course "The Reflective Early Childhood Practitioner" is a Masters level course that is taken by students from around the world. They study in their own cultures and contexts, using a mixture of print-based materials and online discussions. The underlying philosophy of this course is that teachers' work should always be the result of action that is informed by critical reflection undertaken at both individual and collective levels. The proliferation of narrative studies of early childhood teachers' work in different educational settings and the frequent use of narrative as an educational research tool provide a means by which early childhood teachers can document and develop richly textured pictures of their specialised teaching work. By critically examining their own work, early childhood practitioners can question taken-for-granted assumptions of professional practice, search for and unearth the assumptions that are embedded in daily teaching practice and seek deeper understandings in their own professional practice. This course, therefore, engages students in critical analysis of existing narratives pertaining to teachers' work, the application of educational research tools to critical reflection, the linking of educational theory to pedagogy and the philosophy of teaching and the composition of personal narratives that examine their own taken-for-granted assumptions embedded in their everyday work.

Social interaction, engagement in conversation, debate, creative tension, questions and divergent perspectives among the students working online all provoke the development of opinions, understandings and new positions. There is little doubt that people learn from one another as there is also little doubt that interaction among individuals can lead to new positions in each person's thinking. However, this interaction is always influenced by the social, cultural, political and philosophical agendas that are brought by the individuals. So, as Casey (1993, p. 7) says:

> …we engage in dialogue…while we listen, we continually make judgements on what we see or hear; we make sense through a process of selection and rejection. What we select and reject very much depends on who we are, who is speaking to us, what they say, how they say it, where and when we are listening.

The roles of communication, language and voice in learning and enculturation have been theorised by Bakhtin (1981). He developed notions of languages and 'social speech types' which provided a means for identifying the organisational principles of human communication within sociocultural settings. Among the social speech types, he included social dialect, characteristic group behaviour, professional jargon, languages of generations and age, generic languages, languages of the authorities and languages that serve the sociopolitical purpose of the day (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 262). Further, he wrote of 'dialogicality' in human communication: any utterance by an individual was but a link in the chain of speech communication. He commented:

> Language lies at the borderline between oneself and the others. The word in language is half someone else's. Language is not a neutral medium that passes freely and easily into the private property of the speaker's intentions. It is populated – over populated – with the intentions of others. (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 294)

As learners, the early childhood practitioners engage in conversations across cultures and countries and can be regarded as being in what Wasser and Bressler (1996, p. 7) called "the interpretive zone [which] is the crucible where [learners] sift, sort and consider the meaning of their…work". They proposed the notion of the "interpretive zone as the intellectual realm" in which reflective practitioners work when they engage in conversations with one another. In the interpretive zone, they bring together their different kinds of knowledge, experience and beliefs to forge new meanings through the process of the joint learning journey in which they are engaged. They use the "interpretive zone" to refer to the collective interpretive processes. They wrote (1996, p. 13): "It is in a zone that unexpected forces meet, new challenges arise and solutions have to be devised with the materials at hand".

The students who are undertaking study in "The Reflective Early Childhood Practitioner" course engaged in the following conversation:

| **Topic:** Default Topic | **Date:** 9 March 2005 11:36 AM |
| **Subject:** e-DG contrib 2 | **Author:** XXXX |

As I study the readings I become more and more amazed how little things that you don't think much about have such significance for how children will learn later in life. In terms of reading abilities (reading 1.1) it is frustrating to know that some parents spend a lot of time with their children before they start school and others spend very little. The Early Childhood teacher becomes the one that influences and shapes the way those particular children will learn. It becomes even more daunting for teachers in this case to provide the right kinds of experiences for these children. There needs to be some way to reach parents earlier (before their child starts school) and make them more aware of the importance of reading with their children from a very early age. Parents should be giving their child every possible advantage in their education.

Reply Forward

| **Topic:** Default Topic | **Date:** 11 March 2005 3:06 PM |
| **Subject:** Re:e-DG contrib 2 (parent involvement) | **Author:** YYY |

XXX, this is something that amazes and frustrates me as well. I have children come to my class who have never been read bedtime story, don't have colored pencils at home or have never used scissors. I worry about what they must be doing to fill in their day.The issue is even more dangerous here in Hong Kong as the Chinese culture works on the principle of the "age of innocence" before 6 years of age and the "age of understanding" when the child reaches 6. During the age of innocence children are not considered to have the intelligence to understand, so are therefore let run wild. The day they turn 6 it all changes and they are expected to act with respect and discipline. They are taught to be respectful of their elders and parents and do as they are told through shaming and, what western cultures would consider, physical abuse. It is difficult to work with children in this culture as they have very different expectations put on them when they are with their Australian kindergarten teacher from when they are out in Chinese society. It can be very confusing for them. I don't accept the idea of the "age of innocence". I believe children need to be respected and guided towards what is expected of them, and are capable of understanding and interpreting from before birth. Children are impressionable beings who adsorb every influence, shaping them into the person they are. I am concerned about the way some parents and teachers do not have the child as the center of their considerations when they interact with them. It seems some teachers and parents are more concerned about the room being tidy and all hands being clean than if a child is showing their creativity or developing their social skills. I only hope that more E.C. practitioners learn how to reflect, use research and consider the child, as we are learning in this course. YYY

| **Topic:** Default Topic | **Date:** 13 March 2005 1:38 AM |
| **Subject:** Re:e-DG contrib 2 (parent involvement) | **Author:** Z |

Hello YYY,

Your comment on this issue is very interesting to me. As a Chinese, I agree with you about the physical abuse in China is viewed differently from western countries. Most parents think that the child is theirs, so how to educate him or her is their business, and beating children seems to be a good way for parents to educate the child. I hope that will be changed soon.

But I think more and more young parents realize the importance of early childhood education, they teach their children to read, write or behave well before children go to school. The situation is changing better and better. Yes, there are still some parents who are not well-educated do not know the fact of teaching children before they go to school, or they do know , but they have no ability to teach their children (those parents occupy a big percentage). I think this situation exists in everwhere, but maybe it seems worse in the developing countries. The parents will involve in their children's education more and more, it is just a matter of time.

Anyway, I think it would be hard to teach in a different culture, especially your students come from all over the world.

The above is just what I saw about parents' involvement in Chinese culture from my view.

Z

Topic: Default Topic   **Date:** 18 March 2005 5:07 PM

Subject: Re:e-DG contrib 2 (parent involvement)   **Author:** YYY

Hello Z, I was very interested to hear your comments on parent's ideas on raising children in China. Do the parents of the children you teach get involved in class? Is there room for them too if they want?

▷

Reply Forward

Topic: Default Topic   **Date:** 18 March 2005 9:37 PM

Subject: Re:e-DG contrib 2 (parent involvement)   **Author:** Z

Hello YYY,My situation is different from other public schools in China, because I am working in an international school and teaching Chinese as a second language, so the parents are not Chinese. Most of them try their best to be involved with their children's studying, but their Chinese level does not allow them to help much. Some of them choose to study Chinese with their children together, not in my classroom though.
Also I think the involvement for Chinese parents is different from the involvement in western countries, it could be considered to be rude for parents to ask to stay in the classroom for whatever reason. In most of Chinese public schools, they do not allow parents to enter into the campus. But parents do get involved in their children's education after school time. Especially right now, every family only has one child, the parents pay much more attention to the education.
I hope I made myself clear to answer your quesitons. If you have more question, please leave a message, I'd love to discuss with you. Z

Topic: Default Topic   **Date:** 24 March 2005 5:28 PM

Subject: Where in China are you?   **Author:** YYY

I go to China quite often and wondered where you are? Maybe we could meet up for tea one day? YYY

Reply Forward

Topic: Default Topic   **Date:** 25 March 2005 6:23 PM

Subject: Re:Where in China are you?   **Author:** Z

Hey YYY,
Currently I am in suzhou which is very close to shanghai. Email me to let me know when you are going to head this way. My email address is

Cheers,
Z

This exchange is well situated in the constructivist philosophy. It is in keeping with the notion that knowledge is a social construction and reflects Bakhtin's (1981) concept of language as socially and historically constructed, where multiple voices converge and diverge, where different perspectives are traded, where people negotiate with a view to constructing and interpreting shared meaning in a dialectical relationship. These are crucial elements in transnational education.

Creative Understanding and a Transnational Approach to Teaching and Learning Educational Research Methods

Another vital component of transnational education is the capacity to locate creative dissent about and constructive solutions to living, learning and working in the early 21st century in terms of the dialectical relationship between 'Self' and 'Other' (a point also developed above). Or to express this idea another way: the great challenge for the contemporary world is to enact and celebrate one's own lived experience while understanding that such experience is as contingent and situated as that of any other community or culture in the world. Engaging this challenge effectively and transformatively is a key requirement if that world is to be(come) peaceful and prosperous. Moreover, transnational education has a vital role to play in dissent and its solutions being creative and constructive rather than unimaginative and destructive.

Morson and Emerson (1990), Bakhtin's first biographers, used a linguistic example to explain the operation of 'outsidedness', the conceptual pre-requisite of his notion of creative understanding:

> *To realize and develop the potential of a language, 'outsidedness'–the outsidedness of another language–is required. That outsidedness may lead to an exchange in which each language reveals to the other what it did not know about itself, and in which new insights are produced that neither wholly contained before.* (p. 310)

According to Bakhtin (1986), recognising difference was a means of furthering the end of promoting multivocal dialogue among participants in a social encounter. This kind of dialogue is the enactment of creative understanding, which is the leap of comprehension that occurs when we achieve new learnings about others and ourselves through our interactions with those others (Danaher, 2001b; see also Danaher, 2001a, Chapters Three and Four).

Similarly, for Morson and Emerson (1990, p. 53):

> When one person faces another, his [*sic passim*] experience is conditioned by his 'outsidedness.' Even in the physical sense, one always sees something in the other that one does not see in oneself. I can see the world behind your back…

Although the bases of 'outsidedness' could vary considerably, including "personal, spatial, temporal, national, or any other" (p. 56), "outsidedness creates the possibility of dialogue, and dialogue helps to understand a culture in a profound way" (p. 55).

Like "The Reflective Early Childhood Practitioner", "Research Methods in Education" is a Masters level course that is studied in both print and online versions by students located around the world. The online discussion lists, the feedback on summative assessment and the current course redevelopment are all designed to highlight the course and the subject matter with which it

deals as contested terrains in which multiple understandings of what and for whom educational research is and should be struggle for expression and voice through ongoing debates about research paradigms, methodologies, methods and techniques.

This reference to the research methods course as a dialectical, dialogical and discursive struggle confirms and makes explicit the crucial point that establishing the course as a site of outsidedness and creative understanding is neither easy nor automatic. Indeed, the course coordinator's role can be analysed as the interplay of competing pressures and tensions between exciting possibilities and disempowering constraints in relation to creative dissent and constructive solutions in the course. On the one hand, and despite implicit resistance from some students' and some references' taken-for-granted assumptions, the emphasis is on knowledge co-construction and engagement rather than on information reproduction and rote learning. This is essayed through an encouragement to view particular research issues and methods through the lens of the specific questions and situations that they are intended to address. This approach resonates with the focus on knowledge as a social construction highlighted above. It articulates also with contemporary understandings of the paradigmatic and post-paradigmatic deconstruction of research methods (Somekh & Lewin, 2005) and with an approach to research ethics that is situated and embodied (Piper & Simons, 2005; Simons & Usher, 2000).

On the other hand, several factors militate against the course's promotion of outsidedness and creative understanding. One such factor is the constraints imposed by the form and structure of any distance and online education course, particularly in relation to summative assessment items (Moore, Harreveld & Danaher, 2005). Another factor is the course's – and the degree's – English language requirement. While many students speak a diversity of first languages, the only language used in the course prescribed textbook, study book and selected readings, in the aforementioned summative assessment items and in the online discussion lists is English. A third factor is that similarly the Western cultural and philosophical tradition is privileged in the materials provided to students as a basis for engaging with the course. While it is hoped that future course iterations will place more emphasis on students using the online discussion lists and the assessment items to gather a broader array of research methods readings, they will still be limited by what is publicly available.

This interplay between enabling and limiting factors presents "Research Methods in Education" with a dilemma. If its teaching and learning approach is to enact and facilitate transnational education by means of the dialectical, dialogical and discursive relationship between outsidedness and creative understanding, there is considerable scope for maximising the liberatory potential of online technologies (a point also made below) in order to present educational research methods as an appropriate and ongoing struggle in which dissent can be creative and solutions can be constructive. However, this scope is counterbalanced by a number of empirically grounded and institutionally imposed restrictions that require careful negotiation and

thoughtful engagement. In a sense, of course, that same counterbalancing is what confronts educational researchers seeking to plan, conduct and publish research that resists and transforms, rather than merely replicates, the *status quo*. At the same time, it constitutes something of a 'clear and present danger' to the course's possibilities as terrain on which transnational education might grow and flourish.

Conclusion: Creative Dissent and Constructive Solutions in Conceptualising Transnational Education

The recent work of Michael Singh and his colleagues at the University of Western Sydney has been instructive in articulating and portraying the philosophical and practical problems to be resolved if international education is to avoid being an agent of neo-colonialism and neo-conservatism (see for example Singh, 2002, 2005; Singh & Han, 2005; Singh & Li, 2004; see also Danaher, 2005). These problems were encapsulated in terms of the possibilities and limitations attending online education:

> Online educational work offers opportunities to investigate a shared agenda around educational change and globalization, students' sense of identity as knowledge producers, and their imaginings of a transnational learning community with all of its richness and complexity. These online pedagogies, however, are often initiated and sustained through real world, offline conditions. (Singh & Han, 2005; retrieved May 23, 2005, from http://www.irrodl.org/content/v6.1/singh_han.html).

The focus of this paper has been on our respective and shared efforts to conceptualise and implement transnational education in ways that engage and celebrate this "richness and complexity", rather than replicate "real world, offline conditions" that are disempowering and marginalising. At the same time, it is appropriate also to state our awareness of the current and potential threats to such a vision being more than a rhetorical device.

It can be said that a form of transnational education exists already in practice worldwide, but it is not appreciated and the majority of players are not attuned. Currently those who see themselves in international education would be likely to argue that their involvement is transnational. Yet our view of transnational education – informed by Bakhtin's influential thought – conceives transnational education in particular ways, centred on transnational pedagogies, transcultural literacies and transformational culture.

Indeed, Bakhtin, with his respectful rendering of the Self-Other relationship, his optimistic commitment to *heteroglossia*, his focus on dialogue and his conviction that outsidedness can lead to creative understanding, provides not just the conceptual framing but also the final word in this paper. In addition to the ideas cited above, we contend that transnational education can be the site for moving individually and collectively from creative dissent through creative tensions to constructive solutions – from situated theory to engaged praxis – in the context of transnational education in the postgraduate offerings of one faculty of education at one Australian contemporary university. From that

perspective, we believe that Bakhtin (1986, p. 7) evoked courageously and powerfully both the *raison d'être* for and the *modus operandi* of transnational education predicated on such creative dissent and mediated through such constructive and potentially transformative solutions:

> In order to understand, it is immensely important for the person who understands to be located outside the object of his or her creative understanding-in time, in space, in culture. For one cannot really see one's own exterior and comprehend it as a whole, and no mirrors or photography can help; our real exterior can be seen and understood only by other people, because they are located outside in space and because they are others.

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