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How do we develop pedagogical approaches that embrace different ways of knowing and being?

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Abstract
There is no such thing as 'a view from nowhere'. We all view the world and phenomena in it from our own situated socio-cultural-historical locations. However, when we teach, we somehow assume a single epistemic location, a single worldview, a single vantage point—the dominant Western one. This assumption is so entrenched in our education system and pedagogic practices that we are rarely conscious of it, let alone question it. How do we expand or transform our epistemic frames to embrace other worldviews, other modes of knowing and being...? How do we look at views from elsewhere? How do we give up claims to a superior view? We offer some reflections from our experiences of teaching from a different location, China.

Keywords
epistemic diversity, local knowledge, pedagogy, higher education, internationalization, China

'The Tao that can be named is not the Tao' — Lao Tzu, Tao Te Ching

Moments of epiphany

It is customary to start with an introduction to the topic at hand. We, however, would like to start with an introduction to how we came to reflect on this topic...

Sylvia

It was my first time teaching a module on business ethics at the LU-BJTU campus in Weihai, China last year. It was my first time teaching in China. I was still navigating what were to be my new cultural surroundings and ways of living for the next couple of months, even as I was getting to grips with a new teaching-learning environment. This wasn't an entirely new situation for me because I am an Indian immigrant ordinarily living and working in the UK. In one of my introductory sessions, I asked a question to get my students to engage with the module from their personal experience: can you explain what 'ethics' means to you with some examples? (or something similar). One of the students offered the example of sticking chopsticks vertically into a bowl of noodles. She said that this way of sticking chopsticks resembles the way incense sticks are burnt at funerals, and therefore not appropriate. I was struck dumb for a moment because I certainly wanted to encourage my students to feel free to come up with their own views, but at the same time, I couldn't really process this example. I remember saying to her, as politely and encouragingly as possible, that this was a good example of 'etiquette' maybe, but not 'ethics'. In my own head, I marked her response 'wrong'. It was clearly 'wrong' from the epistemic frame[1] that I was seeing the world from, teaching from—the Western frame. But is it the only frame? Only legitimate frame? (Grosfoguel, 2013; Morreira et al., 2020; Banerjee, 2022) What about the frames of knowledge through which my Chinese students saw the world...? How could I open up to these and other frames in my teaching instead of writing off perspectives or experiences that did not fit into a universal 'Western' frame?

Christine

I have been teaching at the Weihai campus and living in the New Area of Nanhai since 2018, as flying faculty for LUMS and now Deputy Academic Dean. Transition is a permanent state: globally between Bailrigg and Weihai campuses, nationally as China transitions from peasant pasts to globalised futures, and locally in Nanhai, transitioning from a rural agricultural and fishing past towards that of a cosmopolitan future (Shepard, 2015). Transition continues into the academic space. My first lecture in the first week of September 2018, was a history of management theories and models, contextualised within UK historical, cultural, and economic moments. Usually there is an 'ah ha' moment as students link the two, recognising how context, for example the Second World War, influences management theories. However, the students in Weihai showed little engagement. Over a cup of tea, as I was discussing the lecture with a colleague, suddenly the light dawned. Why was I expecting these students to engage with Western history in the same way that Western students would? I had created a situation where the students could not respond, not because they couldn't understand, but because their foundational knowledge was different to mine.

Main and sides

Our shared epiphanic accounts illustrate how our pedagogic practices are deeply rooted in the Western knowledge system. The student's example of chopsticks in Sylvia's account might reinforce a Western view that non-Western knowledge is not scientific or rational. Sousa Santos (2007) refers to an 'abyssal line' whereby knowledge produced in the West is deemed universal, scientific, objective, whereas on the 'other' side of that line lies superstition, ethnoscience, tradition, and similar terms one does not associate with 'legitimate' knowledge as such. Christine's account spotlights the ease with which we often view the Other, particularly Chinese students, as 'passive' (Ryan, 2016), rather than reflexively considering how our Western-centred teaching has rendered the students 'unable to respond' (Brookfield, 1995). The historically entrenched colonial privileging of the Western knowledge system, whereby the few in some countries authorize for the rest of the world what does and does not count for knowledge, has grave implications for educational contexts including how we approach global learning, internationalization of the curriculum, and so on (Morreira et al., 2020; Grosfoguel, 2013; Muzio, 2022; Stein, 2020).

The answer is not simply to include or serve some local knowledges into the mix as side dishes to a main course. That would mean that we in the West could continue to view the world through our own validated frames. The bits on the side could continue to remain invisible or could become peculiarities like 'exhibits in a museum' (Haigh, 2009: 271). The critical challenge and one that does not come with any easy solutions is to expand or transform our epistemic frames such that we view the world from inside of the local, the way the locals view it… rather than from outside of it with our dominant Western frame (Ahenakew, 2016; Stein et al., 2023). In this scheme of things, the Western frames are just as provincial as any other (Sousa Santos, 2007). How do we even do this?

'Other' possibilities

We started this essay with a quotation from an ancient Chinese text. Its confusing and elusive message is hard to pin down even on multiple readings. However, many Chinese texts tend to allude or hint at something beyond the literal words. Instead of description, clarity, and directness, what is conveyed is suggestive, circuitous, indirect, and symbolic (Chia, 2003). These texts use aphorisms, parables, paradoxes, and poetry to invite the reader/student to introspect and grasp the core insight (Wu, 2011; You, 2010). They are not interested in representing, categorizing, and labelling the world as Western systems do… rather the point is that 'when ideas have been understood, symbols should be forgotten' (Kao-seng Chuan, in Chang, 1963: 43). This hopefully captures the enormity of the challenge we spelt out earlier: What would it mean for us to enter this local mode of knowing and being? To try to grasp knowledge in this seemingly passive way? (though very far from passive!). How do we better understand the Chinese student who grapples with the logocentric[2] Western knowledge system with named categories like 'ethics' and 'etiquette'? How do we understand how she interprets history told through Western eyes? How do we see the world through her eyes?

We do not claim answers…. What we do claim is that the way forward must surely start with a radical openness to Others' ways of knowing/being… (Stein, 2020). There is a possibility of disruption to our own epistemic frames in this process but part of the success of this process must lie in the very possibility of disruption. Experiencing life from a position of global and local transition has led to something of that disruption in our internalized frames… our reflexive

encounters with Other modes of knowing/being in the classroom made us conscious of the imperative to approach difference on reciprocal and response-able terms (Barad, 2007; Haraway, 2016)… rather than on terms that took Western hierarchies and categories for granted.

Notes

1 Epistemic frame is the lens (or system of knowledge) through which each of us views and makes sense of the world from our own socio-cultural and historical position.

2 Logocentrism captures a key feature of the Western philosophical tradition whereby language is privileged as a means of directly accessing and representing objective truth or reality. This presupposes the belief that such an objective truth/reality exists; the way to it lies in the clear expression of language using reason, logic, and so on.

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