Student Agency in Pedagogical Change in Transnational Education in Africa

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to examine the role of students in pedagogical transformation in African based TNE programmes. The author reflects on his experiences working as a teacher in a TNE context in Ghana. These reflections are triangulated with students' feedback and experiences of other TNE lecturers in Ghana. Analysis was done thematically. The study shows that African students and guardians have high hopes about TNE programmes. However, differences in pedagogic cultures between source and host countries sometimes affect desired outcomes. Therefore, institutions exporting education often undertake a transfer of student-centred learning approaches to the host institutions where students are already accustomed to teacher-centred learning cultures. However, student agency appears to be overlooked in the pedagogical change processes. The study outlines reasons why student agency is crucial in the success of pedagogical change in TNE in Africa and recommends approaches to incorporate students.

Keywords

Transnational Education, Student-centred Learning, Pedagogical Change, Student Agency, Higher Education in Africa

Introduction

It is known that Transnational Education (TNE) offers an easier and cheaper path to acquiring foreign degrees. To ensure that the value of degrees obtained in TNE arrangements is same as those acquired at the main campus, managers often set and enforce standards that are uniform across all campuses. This practice generally referred to as equivalence is defined by Clark et al (2016, p. 367) as "a measure of quality determined by maintaining defined educational standards for qualifications in all locations." Equivalence is aimed at ensuring

that what is being taught (curriculum) and how teaching is done (pedagogy) at foreign campuses are the same as what is done at the main campus. Pedagogical practices are transferred from the main campus to the foreign or host campus. While the role of teachers in this pedagogical transformation exercise is generally documented as crucial (e.g. Clark et al 2016, Bordogna 2018, Tran et al 2021, Keay et al 2014, Bovill et al 2014) the contribution of students to the change process appears to be largely overlooked. In the African context this challenge is even greater given the disparity between the ubiquitous teacher-centred pedagogy as against the student-centred approaches practiced in institutions exporting TNE to the continent (Tabulawa, 2013).

I discuss in this piece reasons why student agency is necessary for any successful pedagogical change in TNE contexts in Africa and propose ways to involve students in this exercise using Ghana as a case. Student agency in this context refers to the ability of students to act with purpose (Nieminen and Tuohilampi, 2020). It derives largely from the Constructivist theory of learning which posits that students do construct their own understanding of what is being taught them based on their experiences and knowledge from previous learning (Byrne and Butcher (2020). In effect, both student agency and student-centred learning appeal to the creation of space in the teaching and learning process for students to play a major role in their own learning. For example, Lancaster University adopts a constructivist-student-centred approach to learning – giving students active role in their learning. On the contrary, in Ghana teaching and learning from basic school to the university are largely teacher-centred – with learners often taking a passive position in the classroom.

As a teacher trained in the teacher-centred Ghanaian education system and later 'reoriented' to teach within the context of student-centred British education in the Lancaster University (LU) and Lancaster University Ghana (LUG) TNE, the arrangement got me interested in the teaching culture here. Considering that about half of the student population at LUG is non-Ghanaian African, there was opportunity to examine the implementation of student-centred pedagogies to students from teacher-centred environments. I focus on the role of students because as a teacher I enjoyed robust training and orientation to teach in the British education context but realised that the same attention was not necessarily given to students. I also observed in the literature that this was not unique to my experience here but generally in the discussion of TNE implementation there was a tendency to focus on elements like quality assurance, curriculum, pedagogy and sometimes on teachers but much less on the role of students (see for instance Bordogna 2018, Caroll 2014). I argue that the implementation of the student-centred learning style in African-based TNE arrangements is likely to be much more successful and easier with active student involvement.

Transnational Education in Ghana

Byrne and Butcher (2020, p. 3) define transnational education as "the delivery of degrees in a country other than where the awarding provider is based." TNE usually comes in different forms and largely described as a complex concept as it is used to describe different arrangements and may involve one or more of the following:

> arrangement leading to the establishment of (a) collaborative arrangements, such as franchising, twinning, joint degree, whereby study programmes or parts of a course of study, or other educational services of the awarding institution are provided by another partner institution. (b) non-collaborative arrangements, such as branch campuses, offshore institutions, corporate or international institutions (UNESCO and Council of Europe, in Bordogna, 2018).

While higher education institutions in Africa are said to have the lowest participation in TNE (Nnazor 2018), the trend appears to be improving in the last few decades. In Ghana, for instance, about 27% of tertiary institutions have had a form of TNE collaboration (Ghana British Council, 2019). The greater majority of TNE programmes are ran under collaborative partnerships. The focus of this study is on Lancaster University Ghana (LUG) and Webster University Ghana (WUG), two of the very few non-collaborative TNE institutions in the country. LUG is a branch campus of Lancaster University (LU) and runs the latter's programmes in Ghana. In my Politics, Philosophy and Religion (PPR) Department, for instance, we teach modules that are taught at LU leading to the award of BA Politics and International Relations. Our students can take one year of their programme in Ghana, move to LU for the second year and return to Ghana for the final year. Pedagogically, teaching and assessment mirror the LU style. The goal is that students at LU and LUG acquire the same value for their degrees. Thus, LUG provides a classic example of a non-collaborative TNE system.

The factors that motivate the choice of TNE programmes over local programmes in Ghana are varied. Owusu-Kumi et al (2019) found three core reasons for the choice of TNE programmes in Ghana. Firstly, students view TNE qualification more rewarding in terms of salary. Secondly, employers prefer graduates with TNE qualification from popular international universities as they view those graduates to have superior performance. Finally, students and parents have the conviction that TNE programmes have good content, delivery and learning experiences. The findings of Owusu-Kumi et al were largely similar to the conclusions of Owusu-Agyeman and Amoakohene (2020) albeit with expanded respondents including academic staff and management. They found the motivations for enrolment in TNE

in Ghana to be the belief that TNE enhances students' learning experiences through diversified and reflective curriculum using highly rated pedagogical approaches. The authors again found that lecturers reported enhanced pedagogical skills and knowledge of cutting-edge quality assurance and assessment processes. The overall implication is that TNE offers students and guardians opportunity to acquire the value of foreign degree in a cheaper and convenient way. The practice at LUG gives credence to this assessment by the authors. Having passed through the Ghanaian education system and comparing that with what is being delivered at LUG, I can attest that students at LUG have access to better learning opportunities than those at the mainstream system. This is not to say that the quality at the Ghanaian universities is lower. LUG students enjoy smaller class sizes, better student-teacher ratio and better access to resources and learning facilities. The system at LUG also makes teachers more responsive and accountable to students and authorities. All of this culminates in advantages to the student at LUG, therefore, giving them superior value compared to their colleagues elsewhere.

However, TNE implementation needs caution. As noted by Naidoo (2015), TNE can play into the existing unequal relations between the world's global North and South. Mostly source institutions are in the North and host institutions and students are found in the South. If not well managed, this could be problematic as it could easily degenerate into a tool for exploitation. Polomaa and Szelényib (2019) contend that three outcomes usually sprint out of TNE partnerships between institutions in the North and South. First, they refer to the idea of colonisation where institutions in the Global North transfer to the Global South mainly Western values to the detriment of indigenous knowledge and norms. Secondly, Polomaa and Szelényib use the term hybridisation in reference to integration of cultural values and practices from the Global South and the Global North. The final possible outcome, according to the authors, is the survival of indigenous culture, knowledge, and values. I see the analysis of Polomaa and Szelényib as a spectrum such that one outcome could escalate to another. For instance, a TNE programme may start with an outcome that preserves indigenous knowledge but this could transition to hybridisation depending on practice over time. This means that TNE managers need to make continuous and deliberate effort to achieve the value of TNE education without compromising indigenous values. As I will argue later, a socio-cultural approach to pedagogy in TNE arrangements is helpful in achieving a balance between preservation of indigenous values and knowledge on one hand and achieving the benefits of TNE on the other hand.

Approaches to pedagogical change in Africa

Though Tabulawa (2013) does not discuss TNE, his work remains arguably the most comprehensive evaluation of pedagogical change in Africa. Tabulawa defines pedagogy as the act of teaching and the ideas, values and theories that inform how teaching is done. This definition effectively makes pedagogy a value-laden rather than value-free activity. An exercise aimed at pedagogical change does not only seek to change how teaching is done but also the socio-cultural values informing a particular kind of teaching. Therefore, since teaching does not take place in a sociological vacuum, changes to it must be sensitive to the social, cultural, historical, political and economic contexts of teaching and learning (Tabulawa, 2013).

The socio-cultural approach contrasts the rather popular technicist method where change is exclusively focused on the technical aspects of teaching and learning. Such an approach assumes that once the teaching and learning environment is transformed and teachers are adequately oriented to execute the new approach, change will take place. However, Tabulawa argues that like a transplanted tissue that gets rejected by the human body, any change process that is not sensitive to the pedagogical environment, including students, stands the possibility of rejection. Efforts at introducing student centred learning pedagogy to Africa since the 1990s have failed and transmission-teacher-centred approaches continue to be practiced, because, according to Tabaluwa, the implementation approaches over the years have heavily focused on the technical aspects overlooking the socio-cultural dynamics. Tabulawa's perspectives about pedagogical transformation in Africa provide a context to examine the pedagogical change in TNE in Africa and the role of students in the process.

At LUG, all teachers are enrolled in LU's Postgraduate Certificate in Education Practice PgCEP. I took this programme in my first two years working at LUG. It was a great learning experience as it transitioned me from teacher-centred thinking into student-centred thinking. I adopted a nurturing approach to teaching rather than transmission which I had experienced as a student. At LUG, lecture rooms are carefully prepared with small classes. The average classroom takes 20 students and the setup encourages discussion and interaction. As teachers, we are taught how to engage students in and out of the classroom in ways that promote critical thinking, a major aspect of student-centred learning. These facilities set LUG apart as model higher education institution in the country. It makes teaching and learning easier for both teachers and students.

One would expect that the academic environment at LUG should make the adoption of student-centred learning easier and faster. However, it does not appear so. Student's

acceptance of the teaching style seems too slow to reflect the investment made by the university. Many of the students appear to be oblivious of the elements of student-centred learning. It appears to suggest that our approach lacks student agency. It seems to me that if students were to be prepared as is done with teachers, the pace of growth of student-centred learning would be faster.

Why Student Agency Matters in Pedagogical Transformation in African-based TNE Arrangement

Students who get enrolled on TNE programmes in Africa are usually coming from schools where teacher-centred pedagogy is predominant. In effect, what they know from pre-tertiary experiences are likely transmission approaches. They come to the table with their own experience of what teaching and learning must look like and they often do not expect this to change in their new studies (Schendel et al 2023). These views expressed by first-year undergraduate students at Lancaster University Ghana are instructive:

> I prefer the teacher should come and teach for me to understand then if I have any questions I may ask just because I will know better about what the teacher is saying (LUG Student One).

On the contrary, a colleague in the same class has a different view:

> I prefer the teacher to ask us to contribute to a discussion. This is better because everyone will have a chance to speak and explain how they understand the lecture. Corrections can be made (LUG Student Two).

The opposing views of how students want the classroom to be are shared generally by the students interviewed. This shows that students already have an idea of how they want their classroom to look like and given the chance, they can contribute to building and maintaining good student-centred learning practice.

Secondly, students are major stakeholders in their own learning and must be major participants in how their learning is organized. Interestingly, the philosophy behind student-centred learning is constructivist; meaning students can construct their own learning experience when properly guided. Yet in the quest to implement this approach, student agency is sometimes overlooked – quite dialectic. Meanwhile, like the idea of tissue rejection, students stand a higher chance of rejecting new pedagogical practices they are not familiar with if they are not incorporated properly into the transformation process.

Finally, students need reason to do what is expected of them. Often, students are ready to embrace student-centred learning but need reason to do so. While teachers are also ready to guide students, they often do so at the individual level. For instance, a Webster University Ghana teacher reported that he took his own initiative to "introduce them [students] to the concept in my first class". This individualised method is not effective because students do not see a uniform approach to the change process. Approaching this at the department or university-wide level is useful.

How Students Can Be Involved In Pedagogical Change In African-Based TNE

At the TNE management level, the need to involve students in the pedagogical change must be acknowledged. It should then be followed by policies to motivate students and teachers to embrace the new pedagogy. For instance, assessments can be structured to reward student-centred learning activities by way of grades. These may include marks for active participation in class and inclusion of activity-based assessments such as presentations, debates and moot court activities in major assessments. This gives both students and teachers reason to engage in student-centred learning. At LUG, for instance, assessments are in the form of written coursework and sit-in exams. At the same time, students are usually reluctant to undertake activities that do not contribute to their grade buildup. It would be good to dedicate at least ten percent of the assessment to activity-based exercises to incentivise students to be active learners.

At the host campus institutional level, a shared teaching culture can be adopted at the university level which involves all stakeholders in the teaching and learning process. Adopting and implementing pedagogical policies at the institutional level prevents students from rejecting the change attempted by the teacher (Schendel et al 2023, Tabulawa, 2013). There should be a unified institutional strategy to prepare students to embrace student centred approaches. This could be incorporated into orientation programmes and first-year curriculums. Tabulawa used the concept co-construction' to refer to the interdependence that can be forged between the teacher and the student to bring about the desired change. It also empowers both the teacher and the student to work together toward a commonly agreed objective, therefore rendering the change process easier.

At the classroom level, teachers can create reasons for students to engage. A conducive environment with diverse and creative activity encourages students to engage. In my undergraduate classes, one of the strategies is to ask students to take a specific reading with

specified reasonable page limit and share their views on the module's Moodle forum. The page limit is important because, sometimes teachers give readings to students without marking out the important pages they should focus on, especially if it is long material. The length of the reading required could encourage or discourage students. My observation is that undergraduate students would take pre-class reading seriously if they are asked to share their thoughts by critiquing the reading through the Moodle Forum. However, their response would rather be lackadaisical if they are asked to take a reading without the opportunity to share their thoughts, even if they knew there would be a class discussion. I asked my undergraduate students why they tend to take Moodle Forum readings more seriously than normal reading. Below are responses from four of the students:

> "Reading when you are asked to contribute is easier because it is like an assignment I am doing" (LUG Student Two).

> "I think a bit more importance is placed on the discussion forum readings because unlike normal class readings, feedback is required from everyone within a specific time" (LUG Student Three).

> "I think it is because I know that our own answers will be seen by everybody" (LUG Student Four).

> "I feel so good, because I was able to bring out my own ideas about it" (LUG Student Five).

It is clear from the responses above that all my students needed was recognition. Students would engage if they were sure their contribution would be regonised and appreciated by others. In my Foundation classes, students are highly enthusiastic about debates, individual and group presentations, seminar discussions and other activity-based exercises. It is so because they love their colleagues and teachers to recognise their works. Since these activities automatically create audiences and are rewarded in grades at the Foundation level, student activity has high morale.

Conclusion

Students are ready to embrace student-centred learning but they need a reason to do so. The reasons could come in different ways – reward in grades or orientation to understand the approaches and importance of student-centred learning. Unfortunately, both are beyond the power of the teacher. As a teacher, I can only go as far as the curriculum and assessment requirements permit in terms of grading. On the part of orientation, I could also speak about

it in my class and enforce it in my class. If same consciousness is not in the next class, the result is low. I see about 80% of student-centred learning being implemented at LUG. The remaining 20% probably lies with a formalised and institution-wide system for student incorporation into the process. This can start from the orientation level and continue within the first year of studies. In addition to giving students reason to patronise student-centred learning, this approach also enforces accountability on the part of the teacher.

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