Academicus interculturalis? Negotiating interculturality in academic communities of practice

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Structure and agency of cultural diversity in (international) higher education have to be addressed with a critical perspective on international mobility and practices of international academic teaching. In order to overcome naïve assumptions about intercultural developments on the individual and the organizational level, sociological analysis should address the intersection of both levels. The concept of academic communities of practice is introduced as an appropriate level for analysing the process of negotiating interculturality in institutions of higher education. Based on this approach, a conceptual typology model is presented to illustrate four different types of intercultural orientations, each one characterizing a prototypical strategy of intercultural organizational development and corresponding social reflectivity.

Keywords: internationalization; cultural diversity; intercultural learning; organizational learning; community of practice

Introduction

Cosmopolitan professionalism in the (international) academic field is neither self-evident nor mere rhetoric of educational policy but an ambitious vision for negotiating interculturality as an act of intellectual growth in modern academia. It is suggested here that any analysis of interculturality in higher education has to focus on interaction patterns of academic practices and the negotiation of cultural meaning. Inspired by sociologists such as Anthony Giddens, Steven Turner and Pierre Bourdieu, and ideas that have initiated a ‘practice turn’ in social theory (Schatzki, Knorr-Cetina, and Von Savigny 2001), this perspective is crucial for analysis of social and organizational effects of internationalization.

Social and cultural practices can be analysed at different levels: the micro-level of individuals, the meso-level of organizational actors, and the macro-level of social structures, institutions and policies. This paper addresses the issue of interculturality on a meso-level of community-based interaction and professional identity formation within organizations of higher education. Conceptual aspects of formal and informal collective organizational learning processes are discussed as institutional reactions towards increasing cultural diversity with regard to their potential for developing a cosmopolitan academic culture (Appiah 2006; Hunter, White, and Godbey 2006). Interculturality is conceptualized in two complementary ways: (1) on an abstract level, as an interpretative precondition of social practice that manifests and embodies itself.
in perpetual negotiations of (cultural) meaning; and (2) on a pragmatic level as a conceptual approach for institutional development.

First, linkages between the surface process of increasing international mobility and the deeper processes of internalized perceptions and attributions of cultural diversity are to be discussed. It is not just the simple increase of international contacts, but subtle intercultural impacts on the social meaning that are likely to challenge the cognitive and evaluative interpretation of given cultural routines, power structures and professional conditions for academic staff and faculty members. Further, Etienne Wenger’s concept of ‘communities of practice’ (Wenger 1999; Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder 2002) is introduced as a helpful heuristic background for analysing formal and informal learning processes that encompass people’s professional duties. Finally, a typology of intercultural orientations in international higher education is offered here as a conceptual link between the micro-level of individual learning and the meso-level of organizational development. This typology addresses the institutional embeddedness of internationalization, cultural diversity and the individual reflectivity of cultural meaning.¹

The discursive formation of cultural diversity in higher education

Much of the research in international higher education deals exclusively with structural meta- or even mega-trends, such as the quantitative mobility flows, monitoring of graduation rates, or the role of institutional policy and strategic networking in an international higher education market. A recent special issue of the *Journal of Studies in International Education* (Vol. 11, No. 3/4, 2007), edited by Hanneke Teekens and Hans de Wit, provides a good overview of current research perspectives. Much of the current research focuses on institutional case studies or the assessment of student adaptation to new cultural environments. Many of these studies take a normative position when presenting examples of so-called intercultural good practice. In their attempt to encourage intercultural learning, many case studies have weak theoretical foundations, simplistic understanding of intercultural interaction and a somewhat naïve belief in the interventional power of change management in organizations. Conceptual difficulties and questionable causations about the effects of international education arise when personal attitudes, achievements and behaviour on the social micro-level are mixed-up with macro-phenomena such as globalization, internationalization or Europeanization.

Two discourse streams on cultural diversity should be differentiated: international mobility and domestic multiculturalism. The vital argument for advocating international mobility as a driver for intercultural learning is that ‘international experiences’ are considered crucial to unlock a hidden reservoir of intellectual and personal growth which – in this notion – is difficult to be found or to be generated without being mobile (Paige et al. 2002). In contrast to this mainstream idea, some authors accentuate the need for a more critical view on the motives and effects of expanding international education (Grünzweig and Rinehard 2002). Evaluation studies about effects and outcomes of mobility programmes usually value the personal development of participants more highly than the academic achievement, but they also tend to overemphasize subjective self-assessments of students (Jahr, Schomburg, and Teichler 2002; Teichler 2002). What has been raised critically about the idealistic connection of academic research and academic teaching seems equally true for the self-assessment of intercultural development through internationalization: “Much of the policy debate