

KEEPING THE PROMISE TO TRANSNATIONAL STUDENTS – DEVELOPING THE IDEAL TEACHER FOR THE TRANSNATIONAL CLASSROOM

Associate Professor Betty Leask EdD, M. Applied Linguistics, Dip Ed, BA.
University of South Australia

Transnational or 'offshore' programs are an increasingly important area of international activity in which many universities are currently engaged. They have, in the past six years, quickly moved from a 'cottage industry' (a few programs in a few locations) to 'core business' (an important component of the academic and business landscape). This paper draws on two small qualitative research projects conducted in Australia, Hong Kong and Singapore in 2003 and 2004-2005 into student perceptions of the ideal teacher for the transnational classroom. The research showed that transnational students have clear expectations that the academic staff who work with them will have certain characteristics and argues that providers have a responsibility to ensure that their staff display these characteristics – that this is an important component of the unwritten 'contract' that students have with the Australian provider. The paper also discusses the implications of this argument for academic staff development.

INTRODUCTION

Transnational programs are an important part of the landscape of Australian higher education. Growth in the number of universities, the range and number of programs and the number of students involved has been rapid to the point where Australia is clearly a world leader in the provision of transnational education. These are predominantly undergraduate programs (64%) taught in Hong Kong and Singapore (see Murray 2005, slides 11-12). Models of delivery are varied but whatever form the delivery takes, transnational programs are complex sites of intercultural engagement. They are based on institutional contractual arrangements which are in themselves sites of intercultural interaction. However, no matter how well contracts are negotiated and written, they are highly dependant for success on the relationships that ensue between staff and students. This paper explores the expectations of transnational students in relation to transnational teachers, those who represent the academic institution, and the implications of this for academic staff development.

The paper draws on qualitative research conducted in two small research projects conducted in Australia, Hong Kong and Singapore in 2003-2004 and 2004-2005 which provided insights into the expectations transnational students had of their teachers and how these might be developed in academic staff. Literature reviews spanning the internationalisation of higher education including the curriculum, professional development in higher education and transnational teaching and learning were conducted. In the first study which investigated constructions of internationalisation at the University of South Australia, a small number of sixteen staff and students involved in a business program taught transnationally by UniSA (with a local partner in Hong Kong) were interviewed. The interviews were part of a case study seeking understanding of the relationship between transnational teaching and internationalisation through the analysis of a variety of information from a range of sources (Berg 2001, p.225). They also elicited a variety of information of relevance to transnational teaching and learning. In the second study conducted in 2004-2005 questionnaires were sent to over 100 students and staff and follow-up interviews were conducted with sixty-one

students and staff. Fifteen essential and desirable characteristics of transnational teachers (understandings and abilities) were identified through the literature and tested through the surveys and interviews with transnational students and Australia-based and offshore-based staff involved in postgraduate and undergraduate programs across a range of disciplines in different locations. The characteristics were ranked by the research participants as either 'essential', 'desirable' or 'not relevant'. Four themes and three guiding principles related to the professional development of academic staff teaching Australian programs offshore were identified as a result of this process. The implications of the research findings for the professional development of academic staff teaching Australian programs offshore were then explored. The result was a description of content and the development of resources within a professional development framework for offshore teaching staff inclusive of both Australia-based and offshore-based staff (Leask, Hicks et al. 2005).

This paper summarises the results of what students had to say in the two research projects and discusses the importance of this if we wish to keep our promise to transnational students – where that promise is defined as their expectations of the teaching staff.

KEY UNDERSTANDINGS AND ABILITIES OF TRANSNATIONAL TEACHERS

In the first research study conducted in 2003, four Hong Kong students studying an undergraduate Business degree offered by an Australian university in Hong Kong by Australia-based staff who travelled to teach and were supported by locally employed staff ('local tutors'), were asked about the role of both the Australia-based staff and the local tutors. These students highlighted the importance of the role of the teacher in the transnational classroom in modifying and adapting the curriculum for delivery in a cultural context that differed from that in which it had originally been created. They were particularly concerned with the localisation of content through inclusion of case studies that reflected their local context and the provision of international examples to which they could relate. They also saw the teacher as playing an important role in changing their 'mindset', the way they thought about things. They saw the latter as an important outcome of the transnational curriculum, related to personal growth, respect and tolerance for difference, the ability to operate in an increasingly globalised and multi-culturally diverse business world, the personal application of complex perspectives within professional contexts and the ability to actively and effectively engage with cultural others. The students saw the role of the local Hong Kong tutors and the Australia-based staff quite similarly, although the local tutors were seen as being absolutely critical in making appropriate links between the curriculum brought by the Adelaide-based staff to the local Hong Kong context in their provision of appropriate Hong Kong or Chinese examples to illustrate principles and theories. Their role was thus constructed as one of 'cultural translator and mediator' of the Australian made curriculum (Leask 2004).

This small study was followed by a larger study in 2004-2005 (Leask, Hicks et al. 2005). In this study fifteen characteristics of good teachers in a transnational context were identified in a literature review spanning transnational teaching, academic staff development and intercultural learning (Leask, Hicks et al. 2005). The characteristics spanned abilities/skills and understandings. Many of the abilities were simply skills associated with 'good teaching' but some were more specifically associated with the transnational teaching and learning context. The understandings fell into the two categories of 'policy and procedural knowledge' and 'cultural knowledge' (see Table1).

Table 1: Desirable characteristics of transnational teachers by category

Category	Associated characteristics
Policy and procedural knowledge (PPK)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • understanding of UniSA policies and procedures • understanding of the local provider's policies and procedures

Cultural knowledge (CK)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • understanding of local culture(s) including the political, legal and economic environment • understanding of how the teacher's own culture affects the way they think, feel and act • understanding of how culture affects how we interact with others • understanding of social, cultural and educational backgrounds of students
Teaching skills (TS)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the ability to evaluate feedback from students • the ability to include local content in the program through examples and case studies • the ability and flexibility to change the teaching approach to achieve different course objectives • the ability to adapt learning activities to suit the needs of offshore students • the ability to use different modes of delivery to assist student learning • the ability to provide timely and appropriate feedback on student performance • the ability to engage students from different cultural backgrounds in discussion and group work • the ability to reflect on and learn from teaching experiences • the ability to communicate with other staff teaching on the program

These categories are not, however, discrete – in particular, the categories of ‘cultural knowledge’ and ‘teaching skills’ are related and interconnected. For example, there is a clear relationship between a teacher’s understanding of the social, cultural and educational backgrounds of students (CK) and their ability to adapt learning activities to suit the needs of these students (TS). An understanding of how culture affects the way they interact with others (CK) will have a direct affect on the teacher’s ability to engage students from different cultural backgrounds in discussion and group work (TS) as well as their ability to evaluate feedback from students (TS) and their ability to reflect on and learn from their teaching experiences (TS). These links highlight the importance of cultural knowledge in an offshore teaching environment – the way in which it underpins the work of the teacher and the strong influence it is likely therefore to have on student learning outcomes.

In this second study students, as well as Australia-based and offshore based teaching and administrative staff, were asked to rank these 15 potential understandings and abilities (or ‘characteristics’) of transnational teaching staff that had been identified in the literature as either ‘essential’ or ‘desirable’ or ‘not relevant’. All groups were also given the opportunity to suggest additional essential and desirable characteristics of transnational teaching staff – both those who travelled to teach and those who were employed locally.

All 15 characteristics were seen as relevant and desirable characteristics of offshore teachers by all groups. However, while there was agreement as to what were the most essential and the least essential characteristics, there was considerable variation between the different groups of participants in the level of importance ascribed to all other characteristics. There were some interesting differences and similarities between the rankings of teaching staff and students in relation to these characteristics. A limited number of additional items were also suggested by the participants in the research.

The ability to provide timely and appropriate feedback on student performance was ranked as the single most essential characteristic of transnational teaching staff by both students and staff. For staff this was ranked as being equally as important as the ability to learn from teaching experiences. The ability to communicate effectively with members of the teaching team from different cultural backgrounds was ranked lowly at 14 or 15 by students and staff.

Students ranked an understanding of local culture as of less importance than Australia-based academic staff, who saw this as very important. This finding was consistent with the first study where staff clearly indicated their discomfort with working in a teaching and learning environment in which they were the cultural outsiders, 'strangers in a strange land', and the students and local tutors were united in their membership of the dominant cultural grouping (Leask 2004).

There were also some interesting differences in the comparative rankings given by the three groups of participants to the categories of characteristics described above - 'policy and procedural knowledge' (PPK), 'teaching skills' (TS) and 'cultural knowledge' (CK). Students ranked teaching skills and cultural knowledge above policy and procedural knowledge, while academic staff (both those based in Australia and those based offshore) ranked cultural knowledge as being more important than teaching skills (See Table 2).

The greatest variation in ranking occurred around the items related to 'understanding of policy and procedures'. Students ranked this much lower than staff seeing knowledge of policy and procedure as of low importance. This is perhaps not surprising given that students in transnational programs generally speak primarily to administrative staff concerning policy matters.

Table 2: Relative ranking of categories of characteristics

	<i>Students</i>	<i>Academic Staff¹ (Australian-based and local tutors)</i>
Teaching Skills	1	2
Cultural Knowledge	2	1
Policy and Procedural Knowledge	3	3

Of most concern, however, was the comparative ranking given to the teaching skills items by students and staff. These were ranked as more important by students than staff. Teaching skills items were ranked as the top 7 items by students. In order of importance they were the ability to:

1. provide timely and appropriate feedback
2. engage students from different cultural backgrounds in discussion and group work
3. adapt learning activities to suit the needs of offshore students
4. include local content in the program through examples and case studies
5. change the teaching approach to achieve different course objectives
6. evaluate feedback from students
7. use different modes of delivery to assist student learning

All participants were given the opportunity to identify additional characteristics of offshore teachers. For each group these comments were consistent with the relative importance

¹ The data for Australian-based staff and local tutors was aggregated in the analysis of the surveys, their principle aim being to confirm (or not) the key characteristics identified in the literature review and identify any gross differences and similarities between the views and perspectives of academic staff, admin/management staff and students, rather than to draw conclusions about differences between the two groups of academic staff. The latter was explored in detail in the interviews.

placed on teaching skills, cultural knowledge and policy and procedural knowledge in the scaled answers. Thus academic staff suggestions in relation to additional essential and desirable characteristics of offshore teachers were predominantly focussed on cultural knowledge items such as including content related to the particular working conditions in the profession in the offshore cultural context and the ability to speak the language of the country in which the teaching is taking place. Student suggestions were, in contrast, focussed around teaching skills such as time management, the ability to relate what is being taught in the course to what is taught in other courses in the same program and ability to communicate effectively with students.

Clearly students see the ability of staff to provide them with relevant and engaging learning experiences, to give them feedback on their learning that enables them to achieve course objectives and to listen to them when they tell them what they think about the teaching and learning experience, as an important part of the contract they have with the provider institution.

THE PROMISE

What is the nature of the promise that we make to transnational students? Is it to provide them with an Australian degree without reference to the cultural and professional context in which they operate, or is it to provide them with an educational experience that prepares them for their future lives as global professionals and citizens? The results of this research indicate that it is the latter and that it would be foolish of institutions to ignore the focus of transnational students on the importance of teaching skills in the delivery of the educational experience, of the quality of their relationship with the staff teaching on the program and the capacity of staff to adapt their teaching to their needs.

IMPLICATIONS

The fifteen characteristics identified in the literature and confirmed through interviews and surveys could form the foundation of a profile of 'the ideal lecturer for the transnational classroom'². Certainly, if we are to keep our promise to transnational students, we must focus on ensuring that teaching staff have the appropriate balance of skills and knowledge to provide the experience that students expect – that we fulfil our promise to them.

The seven key teaching abilities identified by students as being of primary importance in transnational teaching staff are all focussed on points of interaction in relation to the teaching/learning experience and point to the need for flexibility on the part of teachers in adapting their behaviour and content to the local context. These matters are at the heart of the relationship between students and staff and require that staff are interculturally aware and adept – skilled at identifying points of difference and adapting to these and aware of the cultural foundations of the discipline-based knowledge and concepts with which they want students to engage.

The slight divergence between the students clear expectations that transnational teaching staff will exhibit particular teaching skills and discipline knowledge and the staff perspective that knowledge of the cultural context is more important than teaching skills are of significance to institutions and in particular to those who manage these programs, to the academic staff who teach on them and to academic staff developers who prepare and support teaching staff. Institutions need to pay attention to the expectations of students and ensure that they can deliver on them. Thus:

² See Farkas-Teekens, H. (1997). A profile of the "ideal lecturer" for the international classroom. *Teaching in the International Classroom Nuffic papers* 8. H. Farkas-Teekens and M. van der Wende. Amsterdam, Nuffic. April 1997.

- Managers of such programs need to take a strategic and planned approach to the recruitment as well as the development of transnational teaching staff and in doing this take into account the dynamic social, educational and professional contexts within which staff (both Australia-based and local tutors) will be working and the expectations of the students they will be working with. In particular, they need to pay attention to the focus that students have indicated on the need for academic staff to be expert teachers in general and more specifically, able to provide useful feedback and engage students in offshore locations in learning. Managers also need to pay particular attention to the provision of induction to the role as well as the ongoing development of staff, including the provision of time for staff to develop case studies which focus on local content and their understanding of local cultural values and norms.
- Academic teaching staff need to strive to improve their ability to do those things most highly valued by students (and also identified in the literature as being associated with good teaching in any context'); to recognise the importance placed by students on teaching skills and abilities in general and on some more than others,
- Staff developers need to recognise that transnational teaching takes place in a particular cultural context which requires specific roles and therefore specific training and development for local and offshore-based staff. They need to focus their attention on the provision of a development program that develops expert teachers who work as a team so that together they are equipped to respond to student needs and expectations within a complex intercultural context.

In relation to the latter, further insights were provided by follow-up interviews conducted in Hong Kong, Singapore and Adelaide in the second research study. The interviews focussed on three main areas: the characteristics of the 'ideal offshore teacher', the major challenges facing academic staff teaching in the program and the participant's views concerning the most useful information, activities and resources for assisting staff to meet these challenges to become 'the ideal offshore teacher'.

Four themes related to the professional development of academic staff teaching Australian programs offshore emerged from the interviews. These were that offshore teachers need to:

1. Be **experts in their field** - knowledgeable in the discipline within both an international and a local context (where 'local' refers to the offshore context), and both informed about the latest research and able to incorporate it into their teaching.
2. Be **skilled teachers and managers of the learning environment** able to acquit the operational issues involved in teaching offshore effectively and efficiently.
3. Be **efficient intercultural learners** - culturally aware and able to teach culturally appropriate materials, using culturally appropriate methods which recognise the critical role played by language and culture in learning and flexible enough to make adjustments in response to student learning needs.
4. Demonstrate particular **personal attitudes and attributes**, such as being approachable, patient, encouraging and passionate about what they are teaching.

There was no privileging of any of one of these themes over others and no hierarchy is suggested by the numbering of them here. However, it is notable that themes 1, 2 and 4 would apply to teachers anywhere, in almost any situation. However, theme 3, related to intercultural learning, is not usually associated with 'good teaching' (although arguably, given the results of this research and the increasing cultural diversity in classrooms onshore, perhaps it should be). It is this element that appears to make the offshore teaching environment significantly different from the onshore teaching environment. Cultural difference

is highlighted in the offshore environment where both the program and the academic staff with primary responsibility for its delivery have different cultural foundations from the context within which it is being delivered.

These themes applied to both local tutors and Australian academics travelling to teach offshore although there were some variations in detail and emphasis in relation to the application of each theme to the two groups.

CONCLUSION

Transnational teachers need particular skills, knowledge and personal attributes in order to be successful in what is a complex and demanding intercultural environment. Both Australia-based and local tutors play a critical role in transnational teaching and both groups need to be involved in professional development. Transnational teaching is both similar to and different from any other form of teaching activity. The fundamental differences relate to the intercultural space in which it occurs. Thus professional development for academic staff needs to address the intercultural nature of offshore teaching. The professional development needs of academic staff will vary according to their role and the stage of their involvement with this particular teaching activity. Professional development activities and resources need therefore to be flexible and sensitive to the experience, knowledge and situation of the individuals involved.

It would be easy to overlook the views of students in the delivery of transnational programs, but it would be foolish to do so. In opting to take an Australian degree delivered in their local context transnational students have both a written and an unwritten contract with the Australian provider. The research described in this paper has provided insights into what students perceive as critical 'clauses' in the unwritten contract. These have implications for managers, teachers and staff developers.

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