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Beyond Western bias in international education

Education, both abroad and in India, is increasingly becoming internationalised for students and teachers. For a rapidly growing number of students around the world — India included — studying abroad has become attractive for a variety of reasons.

We will not judge or elaborate on these reasons, but one of the motives of students is interesting: increasingly students want to become acquainted with new cultures and travelling abroad and studying in other countries offers this opportunity. Once students are out of their milieu, learning takes place both inside and outside the walls of their educational institution. For students who would like to study in an international context, it is crucial to develop reflexive cross-cultural understanding.

At NHTV Breda University of Applied Sciences, we have been receiving thousands of international students over the past 40 years of our existence. For us an important question has always been: how do we ensure that we optimise the experience of international students during their stay and studies in the Netherlands?

As a result, a pedagogy suitable for 'international classrooms' has been developed and integrated into the activities of our institution, especially in the field of international tourism studies. The essence of this pedagogy is that a continuous endeavour is made to include voices from all over the world into the design of study programmes and the development of knowledge. In international classrooms, a start is made by a very pluralistic post-colonial debate that discusses ways and means to overcome Western dominated biases in education and knowledge development.

In this context it's also important to learn how to assimilate information about the cultural backgrounds of students who study in our own classrooms. How can we, look beyond stereotypes and discover the individuality of each student so that she can actively participate in discussions relating to cultural adjustments, understanding and sensitivity?

Let us give an example of this Western dominated bias. Indian students for instance are not quite comfortable with the informality which characterises interaction between students and faculty in the Netherlands. As a consequence they are reluctant to argue their case or opinions with faculty members. Instead of acknowledging and addressing this issue, we could ignore it by stating "they have to get used to our systems". But we take pains to prepare Indian students before they start a course in our country.

There are several ways to stimulate open and balanced cross-cultural debate within classroom settings. Encouraging story telling, student to student or between students and teachers, has proved to be an effective and inspiring methodology in NHTV Breda University. Through story telling, cross-cultural information is retrieved in a natural manner, eliminating obstacles instead of creating new ones.

Moreover in classroom settings, introducing storytelling to create harmonious environments improves the comfort levels of students. All too often it provides insights into the lives of students which become interesting fields of study and discussion in their own right and offers students the

opportunity to exchange views.

The storytelling method frequently produces information which is neither academic nor applied, but at the same time is crucial for academic progression. If academic knowledge can be seen as a *first space of knowledge*, and applied knowledge as a *second space*, then there is room for a *third space* of knowledge: information-related lifestyles, cultural contexts and backgrounds of students.

In the new third space of knowledge, voices from differing backgrounds are waiting to be heard in pluriform debates. Mobility, openness and flexibility dictate the rules in this space. Of course, financial differences, varying learning styles, national educational systems, etc are seen as obstacles which slow down international classrooms. However, the idea of third space discourse inspires and, at the same time, creates the sophisticated, balanced and nuanced professionals which the rapidly emerging globalised world needs. Room has to be made for new, emergent voices, to facilitate translation of socio-economic differences beyond the polarities of self and the other and from the west to east.

In this new third space, the international classroom can develop into a promising, educational practice that delivers attributes and values required of world citizens.

In the newly emergent international classroom offering third space, western pedagogies can be nuanced and revised. The lifestyles and cultural mindsets of Indian students can be studied and understood to improve the academic programmes of western universities. Finding a new balance in international education is likely to be the academic challenge of the 21st century.

Written by:

Dr. V. Platenkamp is associate professor, NHTV Breda University of Applied Sciences, the Netherlands.

Drs. C.J.E. Rustema is director Abroad Consultancy India Pvt. Ltd, Bangalore