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.

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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
about the nature of faculty work is shrouded in myth, opinion, and conjecture’ (Fairweather 2002, 24).

The discourse on domestic multicultural diversity in higher education is slightly different compared with the international exchange imperative, and it provides a wider scope of the topic (Abdallah-Pretceille 2006; Clayton-Pedersen et al. 2007; Northedge 2003; Vedder 2006). The notion of cultural diversity refers to various, overlapping and temporary patterns of social distinction (and equality) such as gender, age, disability, profession or academic discipline. Cultural encounters are just one of many experiences of ‘otherness’ (Hallam and Street 2000). This rather trivial observation does not minimize the learning options that international mobility bears, but it reminds us of the broader array of social occasions that call for altering perspectives in modern societies.

With their double function as transmitters of cultural values, on the one hand, and as incubators of (inter)cultural changes, on the other hand, universities display an entire spectrum of values and ideas of a society, including their historical development (Weingart 1995). Educational systems continue to bear the idea of a national or even an ethnically pure culture through such pathways as language policies, the curriculum or access restrictions. Educational institutions and the individuals in these institutions are constantly forced to negotiate heterogeneous identities and cultural order (Wimmer 2005).

‘Doing culture’ within communities of academic practice

It is evident that the simple presence of international students and international colleagues on campus is not enough to turn an academic programme into an intercultural experience or an entire university into an intercultural community, either for students or for the academic staff (Heublein, Özkilik, and Sommer 2007; Kingston and Forland 2008). The lived cultural worldviews and the discourse territories of the ‘academic tribes’ (Becher and Trowler 2001) are crucial to enable academic communities to reflect and develop a professional cosmopolitan practice. It is not enough to focus on the quantitative representation of nationalities and cultures on campus. Rather, a specific focus on the social and organizational embeddedness of intercultural practices is needed. Interculturality, therefore, becomes an issue of organizational learning. Argyris and Schön (1978) distinguish between single-loop and double-loop learning. Single-loop learning means the primary adaptation as modification of actions according to the difference between expected and obtained outcomes. Double-loop learning refers to second-order knowledge and situations in which the entities (individuals, groups or organizations) question their values, assumptions and policies which inevitably lead to their actions.

Among the various theoretical concepts on organizational learning, Etienne Wenger has presented an elaborated approach in his book Communities of practice – Learning, meaning, and identity (Wenger 1999), and Cultivating communities of practice (Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder 2002).

A community is a ‘social configuration in which our enterprises are defined as worth while pursuing and our participation is recognizable as competence’ (Wenger 1999, 4). In line with Wenger’s notion, Ann Swidler defines practice as follows:

Practices are the routines of individual actors inscribed in the way they use their bodies, in their habits, in their taken-for-granted sense of space, dress, food, and taste – in the
social routines they know so well as to be able to improvise spontaneously without a second thought (…). Practices can also be trans-personal imbedded in the routines organizations use to process people and things, in the taken-for-granted criteria that separate one category of people or event from another. (Swidler 2001, 74)

A social theory of learning must necessarily encompass the elements that characterize social participation as a process of learning. The four main entities to this social theory of learning are (Wenger 1999, 5):

- **meaning**: as experiencing our life and the world as meaningful
- **practice**: as mutual engagement in action
- **community**: as a social configuration in which our enterprises are defined as worth pursuing and our participation is recognizable as competence
- **identity**: as a form of learning and becoming in the context of our communities.

According to Wenger, learning takes place through participation and engagement in actions and interactions that reproduce and transform the social and cultural structure. Communities provide the social arena for the evolution of cultural meaning as well as the development and transformation of identities, manifested and materialized in practices. The central term *participation* refers to a process of taking part and also to the relations with others that reflect this process. *Reification* is the process of giving form to our experience by producing objects and shared concepts that transform this experience into ‘thingness’ (Wenger 1999, 58). Participation and reification continually converge as two complementary processes that constitute the negotiation of meaning.

In addition to the four elements mentioned above and the iterative process of participation and reification, every community has to define its ‘domain’ (Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder 2002, 28–32). A domain distils the subject of matter of the community, but at the same time it is more than just a theme or a topic (*what*) because it also frames *how* to talk about *what*.

The domain inspires members to contribute and participate, guides their learning, and gives meaning to their action. Knowing the boundaries and the leading edge of the domain enables members to decide exactly what is worth sharing, how to present their ideas and which activities to pursue. (Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder 2002, 28)

In order to relate the concept of a community of practice to issues of intercultural interaction and cultural negotiation in higher education, at least two aspects have to be raised. First, one must ask what happens if the community itself is multicultural and how people of different cultural and social backgrounds can access a community (or an organization). We need to consider how power and influence in the community are distributed and expressed. The second question is how the special topic of dealing with cultural diversity becomes a ‘domain’ for an academic community. Both aspects, the multicultural composition of the academic community as well as the domain qualities of cultural diversity for the academic practice, constitute the arena for negotiating cultural meaning and cultural order.

**Typology to negotiate interculturality**

*The semantic dichotomy: closure vs opening*

From an analytical perspective, the process of negotiating cultural order within communities and organizations can be characterized by the semantic dichotomy of
The semantic dichotomy of opening and closure is a metaphor for a procedural social figuration. In this sense, closure and opening are two distinct gravity poles that permanently exert push and pull effects on the oscillating process of negotiating cultural order and adaptation (Demorgon and Molz 1996).

In the mode of closure institutional cultural order is protected against external and internal influences that challenge the basic patterns of action, truth, reward and sanction. Typical closure reactions of individuals, groups and organizations – even whole societies – towards expanding interculturality may display a systematic underestimation of cultural and social aspects within institutional processes and structures. ‘Cultural blindness causes problems by confusing the recognition of culturally based differences with the judging of those differences’ (Adler 2002, 107). Thus, cultural blindness can lead to rigid neglecting or even severe unwillingness of the self to face the demands for cultural change. While individuals develop their own psycho-emotional patterns of personal ethnocentrism and ignorance (Bennett 1993), the organization often provides a shared discursive environment of cultural ignorance: ‘What we don’t see, and hear, and talk about, does not exist’.

In the mode of opening, institutions try to explore new domains of uncharted cultural and intellectual knowledge that come along with international mobility and domestic diversity. Holzkamp (1983) and Engeström (2005) have both developed a subject-centred, psychological learning theory that fosters orientation towards expansive learning, as opposed to defensive learning. Central to this critical learning theory approach is the intrinsic and unforced motivation of a person or a group to cope with dissent (Miller 2006). Social action is driven by a strong impetus of turning a ‘problem of unsolved action’ into a ‘problem of learning’ (Holzkamp 1983).

The defensive reaction of closure is of major interest when we seek to understand barriers to interculturality in higher education. Max Weber, Niklas Luhmann and many other classic scholars have taught us that resistance towards change can be found in any organization. However, the traditional (public) university seems to represent a very robust example of a change-resistant organization. This has to do with the specific and contradictory organizational culture of universities: on the one hand, they are extremely formalized in their official procedures of access, gratification and reward systems, and on the other hand, they are extremely liberal in their professional autonomy of the ‘free’ academic scholar (at least for tenure professors) (Kühl 2007). Due to this paradoxical organizational nature and the complexity of its management, several authors distinguish between two kinds of internationalization processes at universities (Callan 1999; Davies 1995; Edwards 2007): processes that are relatively structured, equipped with sufficient resources to accomplish a realistic and accountable mission, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, rather poorly structured ad hoc reactions on internationalization without a clear direction, marginal resources and lacking steering capacities. Thus, individual and organizational reactions towards cultural change in the realm of internationalization are analysed in the light of such theories of institutional transformation.

Typology of four orientations to negotiate interculturality

The typology introduced here incorporates two dimensions, the personal level of attitudes and practices and the organizational level of structures and formal belonging (see Figure 1). The two dimensions are interconnected aspects of every social change
process. Change, in this notion, can mean various explicit and implicit transitions: specific measures undertaken by the organizational members, decisions by the management, planned processes and actions initiated to achieve a certain goal. But it can also mean a slow and subtle shift of values, hidden forms of social evolution, as well as spontaneous contingency that strikes the organization and its members. Change thus includes conscious and unconscious processes and actions.

The vertical dimension of the model refers to structural changes on the organizational level. Changes on this level affect the formal and informal sense of belonging, manifested through formal or informal membership and participation, as well as through the internal power status of people and groups. With regard to cultural diversity, this dimension draws a distinction between those activities that usually lead to a homogeneous structure and others that may lead to a heterogeneous (diverse) organizational structure. A homogeneous community structure requires similarity and conformity of the members. After a certain time, a powerful mainstream structure will emerge. Those who do not ‘fit’ into this structure are kept outside or are placed in a precarious position with less influence on agenda-setting and decision-making within the community. A heterogeneous and diversified community structure is based on diversity of people and groups within the community. Membership status and influence on decisions are not based on similarity or conformity but on complementary cohesion (Rathje 2004).

The horizontal dimension concerns the way individual and collective members think, feel, act and ‘do’ the things they are supposed to do in their organization or community. The personal level of social practices and cultural reflections indicates whether cultural diversity has to be encountered with assimilation and protective routines or whether it is seen as an opportunity to reframe previous practices and to unleash creativity. In Wenger’s terminology, and as far as cultural differences are to be taken into account, the horizontal dimension provides the ‘domain’ for negotiating cultural diversity. One end of the dimension highlights assimilative practices that maintain homogenization. Here, the individual attitude of an overemphasized
ethnocentrism (Bennett 1993) corresponds to the collective problem of groupthink and institutional discrimination (Gomolla and Radtke 2002). Practices on the other end of this dimension emphasize multiple perspectives. They seek to expand discourses on (cultural) meaning instead of cutting them off or subsuming them under a given rule.

Within the two-dimensional typology, four ideal types can now be located. Each one represents a dominant institutional orientation towards change in response to cultural diversity. From the sociological point of view, any intercultural orientation can be seen and explained as temporary ‘negotiated order’ (Strauss 1978), achieved by an academic community of practice. The term negotiation is neutral as an analytical category and it does not predict the normative desirability of the organizational development. It is important to note that these orientations are collective social constructs (and not individual behaviour or attitudes) bound to discourses and practices in communities or organizations.

**Stagnation**

The orientation ‘stagnation’ is a combination of assimilative practices with a weak reflectivity of cultural issues situated in a homogenizing structural environment. Negotiation of cultural diversity rarely takes place and, if it does, it is because cultural differences are considered a source of problems and frictions that has to be eliminated. Activities and practices are characterized as compensatory because they usually address only a minority of people in the organization who deviate negatively from the norm (e.g. foreign students who do not speak the language of instruction of the host university sufficiently well). Such an orientation can be found in international programmes which are set up without a clear commitment of the faculty and with a precarious position of the programme co-ordinator. The increase in financial revenues from fee-paying international students is the main and often only driver to install an international programme. Such programmes are sometimes separated exclusively from the regular study programmes. Problems that occur in these programmes are often attributed as unwillingness or incapability of the foreign students to adapt to the academic culture of the host institution. A majority of lecturers hold an explicit ethnocentric view, taking their own academic standards as universal. Forced assimilation is legitimated on the ground of proclaimed universalism, formal rules and majority (host) power. Policy makers and other stakeholders might be well informed to notice that the compensation approach with forced assimilation has also been the misleading concept for school education for immigrant children in many countries for several decades.

**Modification**

The orientation ‘modification’ seems to be a common phenomena when lecturers, staff and others involved in international study programmes are interculturally competent as individuals, but the university (or faculty) as an institution remains highly parochial (Adler 2002, 11–13). Attempts for individual cultural reflection exist, but they are impeded by a rigid organizational culture which shuns any ambiguity in order to maintain homogeneity. In classical terminology on organizational learning, this type of orientation might initiate single-loop learning but, since the individuals’ competencies cannot transform into collective action, double-loop learning is blocked. This type
of orientation shows that, even if individuals are willing and skilled to act in an intercultural environment, they may not be able to shift the organizational culture. With this type of orientation, it becomes obvious that a cultural change process needs the community of practitioners to modify routines.

**Representation**
A third orientation is labelled ‘representation’. Many universities present themselves as an international or even a global campus, e.g. by presenting proudly the rising quota of foreign student enrolment, by demonstrating semiotic cleverness in using ‘international looking’ faces for their websites and brochures, or by recruiting outstanding international researchers. In the second section of this paper, it is explained why the simple presence of people with other nationality, ethnic origin or language does not necessarily change the university. In fact, one can find examples where the demographic composition of an institution is indeed very diverse and people from all backgrounds have the chance to reach a formal leadership role. Nevertheless, practices and routines stay more or less static as they follow an imperative norm which does not value different behaviours and multiple opinions but, instead, values conformity and successful assimilation. Formalized political measures such as the affirmative action approach might also fall into this category, as this policy relies completely on quota-based recruitment strategies, holding the naïve but unverified belief that the adjustment of numerical representation will automatically lead to a widening of diverse practices (Morrison 2006). Research in the field of political participation (Martiniello 2005) suggests that a fair representation of diverse cultural and social groups in any organization is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for substantial changes in practices.

**Transformation**
‘Transformation’ is the rare approach when competent individuals can act in an open and permissive organizational environment that gives room to invent new social rules and time for establishing new synergetic transcultural practices. This orientation affords a suspension of existential pressure, strong negotiating and mediating skills among the people who are involved, a climate of innovation and, last but not least, a strong support of the head of department and the university. It coincides with the highest level of many (stage-based) intercultural competence models (Lustig and Koester 2005; McAllister et al. 2006) and corresponding levels of ‘cultural synergy’ in organizational theory models (Adler 2002). A transformative orientation is not to be considered as a final state of perfection for institutional development but rather as a (utopian) yardstick for those institutions that consider interculturality as a serious and necessary educational endeavour.

**Conclusion**
Substantial and sustainable changes in the organizational culture of universities require a powerful and influential group of people who consider themselves an intercultural learning community, willing to foreground culture in their daily practice (Dunn and Wallace 2005). There is no doubt that academic teaching and research in an intercultural environment requires skilled and passionate people who are intrinsically
motivated to get engaged in ‘all the cultural stuff’. But that should not conceal the fact that most people are also (more or less) ‘governed’ by the written and unwritten routines, rules and interpretations of their powerful peer-groups and disciplinary authorities. As Marginson (2000) points out, the academic profession is ‘deeply conservative’, and ‘thinking not as usual’ (Yershova, DeJaegere, and Mestenhauser 2000) is challenging.

This paper has argued that a community has much better potential than a single person to explore different views and arguments on a certain domain. An ideal community should be diverse in social composition and cohesive in its mission. The recognition and formal representation of different cultural backgrounds in an organization or within a community is an essential starting point to leverage diversity, but it is not an end in itself. Representation can only lead to transformation when the cultural practices that reify the academic life in a study group or a department are reflected and discussed openly. A community has to provide trust and a social climate to negotiate fair and unfair treatment about values and ethics in science, about merits and promotion and all the other issues that are not culture-free science, but deeply rooted in cultural worldviews and traditions. The distinction of different types of orientation may help to clarify that some forms are likely to hinder cultural opening, while others can help to anticipate diverse realities on the intellectual and communicative levels. It is up to communities and organizations to provide the right conditions for negotiating cultural practice in an open and fair climate.

Notes
1. The model is an updated revision of some of my earlier reflections and it is based on an empirical study with staff and faculty in international programmes at several European universities (Otten 2006).
2. The website http://www.diversityweb.org/ provides further information on practical aspects and research about diversity on the US campuses.
3. The sociological concept of ‘negotiated-order’ traces back to early works of Anselm Strauss and his colleagues (Strauss 1978; Strauss et al. 1963).

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References


