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Résumé de l'article

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Cross-Cultural Delivery of e-Learning Programmes: Perspectives from Hong Kong

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Abstract

The growing popularity of e-learning may pose one of the greatest challenges currently facing traditional educational institutions. The questions often asked are how, rather than whether, to embrace this new form of instructional delivery and how to create an appropriate learning environment for the learners. Educational institutions in Hong Kong have the option of adopting programmes or learning materials developed in other parts of the world for local learners, or not. Such an approach of acquiring learning materials is not without risks in terms of the suitability of materials embedded with cultural contents 'foreign' to local learners, or in terms of the suitability of assumptions in the communication context. What are the issues involved in the globalization of education through e-learning? This paper explores – from a critical-dialectical perspective – the implications of globalization on educational policy through cross-border delivery of educational programmes by e-learning, with particular attention given to the threat of cultural imperialism. The paper concludes that Hong Kong seems to be coping with 'cultural imperialism' rather well because of its unique history of being a cross-road for East and West, and also with some recommendations to e-learning providers to mitigate the potential damage of cross-cultural delivery of e-learning.

Introduction

A casual survey of the media in Hong Kong, a Special Administrative Region of China, will create the impression of an exceptionally high occurrence of the word 'globalization.' Indeed, few other words in our contemporary vocabulary draw as much attention and controversy as 'globalization'. The context may be economic, environmental, or educational, but invariably the viewpoints will be polarized. Globalization is either depicted as the greatest force since the industrial revolution that created wonderful economic opportunities, improved standards of living and advanced civilization, or it is condemned as the vehicle of all forms of western economic exploitation and cultural imperialism. Such mixed and extremely opposite views are fueling a continuous debate over the merits or demerits of globalization, although such debates tend to be somewhat one-sided in the context of economic development in China, and certainly in Hong Kong. Economic growth takes a higher priority over other things for the country as a whole. In the educational and cultural arena, however, the debate tends to be more complicated by the added sensitivity of China in matters relating to ideology and culture.

The phenomenon known as globalization is generally recognized to have its roots in the business world of about a century ago, as that is when international trade became more and more active (alongside a rapidly changing landscape of information and communication technology) and important to the economies of the world. The tremendous acceleration of trade volume has especially been propelled by the advances in information and communication technology (ICT) in the past quarter century or so. New ICT has brought about two major benefits to the market:

- *information* or knowledge has become much more portable and can be widely shared and communicated on the global internet platform, and;

- such *improved* access to information, especially scientific and business knowledge, has greatly facilitated *innovation*. Innovation is a key element in successful globalization.

Proponents of the globalization of education will point to the reduction of cultural isolation and the improved access to knowledge to support their claim, whilst opponents of globalization will protest the destruction of local culture by the unstoppable 'McDonaldization'. As Joseph Stiglitz pointed out, however, in his analysis of the different effects of economic globalization on different regions of the world:

Globalization itself is neither good nor bad. It has the *power* to do enormous good, and for the countries of East Asia, who have embraced globalization *under their own terms*, at their own pace it has been an enormous benefit, in spite of the setback of the 1997 crisis. But in much of the world it has not brought comparable benefits. (Stiglitz, 2003, p. 20)

This paper explores the implications of globalization on educational policy and politics from a critical-dialectical perspective, and also how the globalization of education could be embraced through cross-border delivery of educational programmes by e-learning, with particular attention given to dealing with the threat of cultural imperialism.

Interdependency, Interconnectedness and Integration — The nature of globalization

One of the greatest obstacles in studying globalization and understanding a discourse about globalization is the diverse definitions adopted in the literature. As Manuel Castells (1999) lamented about the nature of the debate of the information technology revolution, and of globalization, "As is always the case with a fundamental debate, it is most often framed ideologically and cast in simplistic terms" (p. 1). Indeed, there are probably as many definitions as researchers interested in the study of globalization. Their definitions largely reflect their theoretical perspectives (functionalist, humanist, radical functionalist, or radical humanist, among others) as well as their fields of study (economics, sociology, political science, or education, to name a few). Yet, the word 'globalization' always seems laden with strong emotions that imply either great opportunities and promises such as global prosperity, borderless education, democracy and the like, or merciless threats such as economic exploitation, political hegemony, widening of the economic divide, or the death of local culture. Obviously there are winners and losers in the process of globalization, so views on globalization will naturally be influenced by where one is positioned and how one has benefited (or otherwise) through the process.

Some authors tend to refer to globalization as a mega-trend (one world) that has been powered by the much enhanced ICT which, in turn, makes information and knowledge much more readily available to anyone who is appropriately connected to it. Unlike the old days when one's life may only depend on others within a small isolated community, this interconnectedness or 'connectedness' referred to by Castells (1999) depends on improved access to information and improved capacity to communicate globally. It expands the network of interdependencies of each individual person or community tremendously. Giddens, as cited in Held (1991), defined globalization in terms of such connectedness as "the intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa" (Held, 1991, p. 9).

This interconnectedness on a global scale is sometimes referred to as the 'Butterfly Effect.' Communities are no longer isolated like tribal villages in the Middle Ages, but are rather like what Marshall MacLuhan (1982) called the Global Village. Whilst the act of economic globalization such as outsourcing by a company in the United States affects the industrialization and urbanization of certain communities in India, the Indian's success in building-up a thriving outsourcing industry also affects the USA resulting in a rapid outflow of jobs in the labour market.

For others, globalization itself is a 'technology' that consists of certain sets of practices, largely drawn from the business sector, based on certain market ideology. These proponents argue that such sets of practices not only encroach on the freedom of individuals, but also on the capacity of nation states to control policies and politics and to influence the economics of their home market.

Jones (1998) defined globalization as "the organization and integration of economic activity at levels which transcend national borders and jurisdictions" (p. 143). Such economic integration is "achieved in particular through the establishment of a global market-place marked by free trade and a minimum of regulation" (p. 143). This last part about 'a minimum of regulation' may seem a little idealistic in the economic arena even with the best of efforts in intervention by international agencies such as the World Trade Organization (WTO), World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund. Nation states, including the behemoth of globalization, the United States of America, would want the benefits of globalization such as new capital and new markets without its negative effects of de-skilling of labour and resulting high unemployment. It is also true that in the global education market, with perhaps notable exceptions such as Hong Kong, barriers are often set-up to prevent the free flow of educational programmes, and talent, and sometimes even knowledge.

Kohler (1978) recognized this reality and saw globalization as an ongoing work in progress:

Fundamentally, it is the closer integration of the countries and peoples of the world which has been brought about by the enormous reduction of costs of transportation and communication, and the breaking down of artificial barriers to the flows of goods, services, capital, knowledge, and (to a lesser extent) people across borders. (Kohler, 1978 , p. 283)

Both definitions, however, seem to share the concept of integration. Unavoidably, integration implies standardization that demands achieving a certain level of uniformity; hence the Chinese translation of the word globalization renders 'the world becoming one system.' Here, perhaps, lies the heart of the problem with globalization in cultural terms: standardization, conformity and uniformity are very much at odds with multiculturalism and diversity. The 'integrators' might attempt to mitigate the negative effects of standardization by introducing flexibility or allowing

some varieties in the process or standards expected. For example, personal computer makers might introduce different options to different groups of customers in different geographic regions. Such flexibility is always a trade-off to production efficiencies and is driven by market demand. In practice, such flexibilities tend to be limited and sometimes cosmetic, which are intended to gain some marketing angles rather than to provide real and substantial benefits.

Commodification or marketization of education, or the globalization of the knowledge economy, naturally epitomizes the tension of cultural resistance to globalization. The utopia of a 'borderless world' may very much be a Faustian bargain. As Morgan (2002) reminded us, the so-called 'borderless world' may only turn out to be a 'rootless world' because of 'the failure to take into account social realities and deep human preferences.

Another keyword often referred to in the debate of globalization is 'interdependency' of nation states. As Kohler (1978) suggested: "The process es of interdependence, interpenetration and intercommunication in the present era have made the entire humanity into one global society" (p. 283).

Similar to the effect of integration into one global system, such interdependency and interpenetration also tend to introduce either compromises or clashes between different ideologies, cultures, and political administrations. The most notable clashes of globalization with indigenous cultures and ideologies may be what Barber (1995) described as 'Jihad vs. McWorld' or the clash of 'tribalism' and 'globalism' where jihad represents the war against all others as practised in the name of the Islamic faith.

For the purpose of this paper, Knight's (2006) definition of globalization is adopted: A process that is increasing "the flow of people, culture, ideas, values, knowledge, technology and economy across borders, resulting in a more interconnected and interdependent world" (Knight, 2006, p. 18).

In education, the effect of globalization may be even more acutely felt by small states that aspire to become economically as successful as the industrialized countries. What are the key issues of globalization in education through cross-border delivery of e-learning that affect educational policies for a unique administrative region such as Hong Kong? As Rumble (2000) pointed out, it is the empowerment of learners, in terms of more choices, access to previously unavailable experts, high quality education, and the like that makes e-learning such an obvious commodity for globalization.

Impact and Issues of Globalization

Despite diverse opinion about the impact of globalization, there is general agreement on the issues arising from globalization. In the main, these issues fall into three broad categories:

1. Economic: Income erosion and unemployment

In economic terms, there are issues centred on damage caused by globalization of business with the free flow of goods, money, and people (workers or talent). Concerns include loss of jobs brought about by the inflow of inexpensive goods and services produced in foreign countries, and the outflow of capital and talent (brain drain). Current hot public debate in the USA is about the extensive out-sourcing of services such as income tax reporting and service call centres from the

USA to countries like India, which has resulted in a massive loss of jobs and income for the American economy (estimated to reach $US1.5 trillion by 2006). No wonder Burbules and Torres (2000) observed the result of economic restructuring brought about by globalization and argued that "[c]ontrary to Marx and Engel's prediction, the globalization of the economy has produced a unification of capital on a world scale, while workers and other subordinate groups have become more fragmented and divided" (p. 7).

Hong Kong , in this regard, seems to be one of the few territories to be standing somewhere in the middle on a world scale of globalization. As the 'freest economy' in the world, it is an open target of unchecked globalization of any goods and services. Hong Kong is also heavily involved in the business of exportation of goods, however, playing the role of a 'globalizer,' especially with respect to the Mainland of China. But in the process, it has lost practically all of its manufacturing industry to China. Since that happened, Hong Kong has realized it must develop its capability and market as an exporter of services.

In terms of educational services, this gradual shift of position from an importer to an exporter is a good example. As Cribbin (2002a) observed in 2002: " Hong Kong is a fairly open market economy in educational services and light regulation to protect consumers from rogue operators appears to have allowed . . . healthy market provisions to meet undoubted needs" (p. 452).

As analyzed in later sections of this paper , however, recent attention of Hong Kong – and particularly its tertiary education sector – seem to focus more and more on Hong Kong becoming an education hub, which essentially means becoming an exporter of education.

2. Political: Influence and control erosion

In political terms, some nation states may feel their sovereignty or control of their own destiny is eroding under globalization. Some authors take a radical view and say that as a result of globalization, most nation states are becoming declining autonomous decision-making bodies. In other words, there is an erosion of influence or even control. For example, joining the WTO has forced new members, such as China, to weaken their control on trade, foreign currency exchange, taxation, and other spheres of control and influence. In a more subtle way, the growing power of externally defined values resulting from globalization is further eroding these spheres of influence of local institutions and authorities and constraining their ability in policy making. Some might argue, however, that the nation state might be weakened by globalization, but that its influence is not weakened. In other words, the states may be more interdependent but are not powerless.

A case in point is the Hong Kong Government's introduction of a Non-Local Higher Education and Professional Education (Regulation) Ordinance in 1997. The Government could not stop or control the rapid growth in the number of overseas educational programmes in Hong Kong – or the number of students enrolled in them. In the interests of 'consumer protection,' however, the Ordinance gives the Government the power to demand that overseas institutions (the 'globalizers') demonstrate that the qualities of their overseas-delivered programmes are of the same standards as those delivered in the home countries. It also steers (influences) the institutions towards collaborating with local universities by exempting registration of collaborative programmes.

3. Cultural: Identity crisis

In cultural terms, free flows of goods, services and people also means free-flows of ideology and the cultural settings behind and embedded in them. Goods, services and people are never really culturally neutral. Buying a Big Mac from a McDonald's restaurant is also buying the cultural features embedded in the promotion, packaging, and ambience of McDonald's. As Carnoy (2003) put it: "Globalization redefines culture because it stretches boundaries of time and space and [an] individual's relationship to them. It reduces the legitimacy of national political institutions to define modernity" (Carnoy, 2003, p.133).

The process of globalization tends to bring forth cultural standardization and homogeneity that naturally creates tension and fragmentation because of the likely rise of resistance forces in the local cultural movements. In the context of globalization through the cross-border delivery of e-learning, there is also the danger of erosion of the community. The educational process of e-learning is largely without the element of face-to-face contacts of teachers and students, leading to a social loss in a physical community. Mason (1998) warned about the potential damage e-learning does to community, including undermining the physical experience of community and replacing it with the virtual communities.

There are, of course, opposing views. Rheingold (1993) praised the virtual communities, from which he was able to obtain precisely the information he needed to know. The 'well' gives him an "immense inner sense of security that comes with discovering that real people . . . are available around the clock, if you need them" (p. 1). Harasim, Hiltz, Teles, and Turoff (1995) were also optimistic about the positive effect of electronic communication on the community. With the rapid growth of small online learning networks, small interest groups can be formed on a wide range of topics, which in their views made possible "a considerable improvement in the quality of life of the local community" (p. 247).

Another counter argument might be that in the process of professional development based on cross-cultural learning materials, if the learners are cognizant of the embedded bias, they become more aware of the relative strengths of their own culture vis-à-vis those that are foreign. They might even be able to develop stronger local programmes based on this appreciation.

Globalization of Education: The Hong Kong perspective

The word 'globalization' must be one of the favourite buzzwords used by the Hong Kong Government. Together with 'knowledge-based economy,' globalization has been mentioned so often in the Chief Executive's annual policy addresses in recent years that one might form the impression that Hong Kong, or at least the Hong Kong Government, is a radical 'globalist'. Indeed, this interpretation is clearly supported by the repeated appearance of certain government policy agenda items in the annual Chief Executive's Policy Address, such as transforming Hong Kong's economy into a knowledge-based economy, ambitious expansion of the tertiary education participation rate from 30 percent to 60 percent by 2010, exportation of educational and medical services, closer economic partnership with Greater Pearl River Delta Region, and so it goes.

From the perspectives of the Hong Kong institutions of higher learning, now is, indeed, a time of ample opportunities and challenges. The information age – powered by accelerated technological advancement over the past decade or so, which marked a new industrial revolution that has fundamentally changed the business world in a similar fashion – is also changing the higher

education sector. This new industrial revolution has resulted in a new order focusing on knowledge as the prime asset of a corporation. We have therefore witnessed the formation of a knowledge-based global economy, more visible perhaps in America and Europe , but certainly an economy that is aspired to, and is beginning to, take shape in richer Asian nation states such as Singapore . Being one of the world's most open economies, Hong Kong also envisages becoming a vibrant knowledge-based economy. By aiming at 'moving towards a knowledge-based economy' (which implies a road to greater economic prosperity), the Hong Kong Government has adopted a very open educational policy, and at the same time has placed great pressure on the education system to reform. Over a short period of five years, the Hong Kong Government has made the following major policy or strategic decisions relating to education:

Enactment of a *Non-Local Higher Education and Professional Education (Regulation) Ordinance* from June 1997. The objective of the Ordinance is:

> . . . to protect Hong Kong consumers by guarding against the marketing of substandard non-local higher and professional education courses conducted in Hong Kong. It also enhances Hong Kong's reputation as a community which values reliable and internationally recognized academic and professional standards
> (see http://www.emb.gov.hk/index.aspx?langno=1&nodeid=1251).

Essentially, the Ordinance requires registration of all overseas programmes offered in Hong Kong; unless these programmes are offered in collaboration with a local tertiary institution (Hong Kong has stringent controls on private tertiary institutions). Registration requirements, however, are not onerous, and actually legitimizes and facilitates the exportation or globalization of programmes of legitimate overseas institutions in Hong Kong. Additionally, it is perhaps important to note that all purely distance learning courses (including e-learning courses) are also exempt from registration.

As of April 30, 2007, and according to statistics provided by the Non-Local Course Registry (see http://www.emb.gov.hk/index.aspx?langno=1&nodeid=1250), there were 1,101 overseas courses on the register, of which only 37 percent were registered without a local partner (programmes in collaboration with a local partner are exempted from registration and related scrutiny by Government). Whilst no statistics on student enrolment are available, current total enrolment is estimated to be in the region of 85,000 (about 42,000 in 1999). In terms of countries of origin of these courses (or programmes), the UK is the clear leader with a 47 percent and 63 percent share of registered and exempted courses, respectively.

Chief Executive Tung Chee Hwa announced in "The 2000 Policy Address" (Hong Kong Government, 2000) that, among the various policy objectives for Education and Manpower, Hong Kong should actively work "to develop Hong Kong into a regional center of excellence for higher education" (p. 5).

First, Chief Executive Tung Chee Hwa pointed out in his 2001 policy address (Hong Kong Government, 2001) that Hong Kong's economy was facing a major restructuring and transformation because of the global economic downturn and globalization of markets. Such a transformation was leading Hong Kong from an industrial economy to a knowledge-based economy.

Second, severe funding cuts to the public tertiary institutions had resulted in almost all taught post-graduate programmes becoming self-funding in 2003. On one hand, having to charge market rates for these programmes has made overseas programmes much more competitive and attractive to local learners. On the other, the financial squeeze has forced local institutions to look for ways to expand their income base, including more aggressive exportation of their programmes, mainly to Mainland China.

Third, Chief Executive Tung Chee Hwa announced in his 2004 policy speech that Hong Kong should further develop its educational (and medical) services to serve people in the Mainland and elsewhere in Asia.

Fourth, the Chief Executive, in the Executive Council meeting of December 7, 2004, ordered a relaxation of immigration control in respect of institutions and programmes admitting non-local students. As outlined in the Education and Manpower Bureau paper (2005), the implementation of this new policy would take effect in the following areas:

- Increased quota for publicly-funded full-time programmes at sub-degree, degree and taught post-graduate levels, plus the admission of students from the Mainland, Macau, and Taiwan.

- Hong Kong institutions could now admit students from the Mainland, Macau, and Taiwan to the self-financing full-time programmes below post-graduate level, subject to a quota. There would be no quota at post-graduate level.

- For publicly-funded part-time programmes, students from the Mainland would be allowed to enter Hong Kong for locally accredited taught post-graduate programmes provided by the eight publicly-funded institutions up to 10 percent of the student number targets. There would be no quota for self-financing part-time programmes.

Fifth, the Hong Kong Trade Development Council , a quasi-NGO funded by the government, commissioned an independent study in 2005 to assess the demand for Hong Kong Higher Education in mainland China's major cities . The report (2005) concluded that there was great potential for exporting education, and that Hong Kong had the necessary strengths to be successful in attracting students from the Mainland.

Sixth, in July 2005, a Memorandum of Understanding was signed by representatives of the China Central Government's Education Ministry and Hong Kong that outlined the mutual recognition of higher educational awards. The Minister of Education also discussed with Hong Kong representatives a range of topics of mutual concern, such as taxation and expansion of the list of provinces that allow direct recruitment of students by Hong Kong-based institutions and recognition of Associate Degree qualifications for the purpose of articulation into universities in the Mainland.

Finally, on 21 June 2006, the Secretary of Education and Manpower, Professor Arthur Li (2006) provided some glimpses of the Hong Kong Government's intention in developing Hong Kong into a regional education hub. In his speech to the Legislative Council during the debate on the same subject, he argued for the need and the readiness of Hong Kong to become an educational hub. He also outlined various measures that the Government had been studying to support and facilitate such a development. The Government subsequently established a high-level steering

committee, chaired by the Chief Secretary of the Hong Kong Government, to provide policy guidance in this development.

Can Hong Kong Become Both a 'Globalizee' and a 'Globalizer'?

Higher educational institutions in Hong Kongare at the forefront of changes, and the core business of any higher educational institution is the creation and dissemination of knowledge. Any attempts by a society to transform itself into a knowledge-based economy, with rapidly growing demand for 're-skilling' or 'up-skilling,' creates ample opportunities for the higher education sector.

Nonetheless, it can also be the worst of times for weaker institutions in Hong Kong, when education is becoming more of a global marketplace without many barriers, especially if such education is delivered through e-learning. As competition will no longer be limited to between local institutions within the boundaries of one territory, or even one country as was the case in the not-so-distant past, higher educational institutions must face fierce competition for students, teachers, and even resources – globally, not just locally. World-class universities can easily extend their reach internationally and break the barrier of space, especially those from the United States, Britain, Australia, and Canada. For example, in addition to the thousands of students who leave Hong Kong to study abroad annually, Cribbin (2002b) estimated that in 1999 more than 42,000 students were also enroll ed in Hong Kong in both registered and exempted programmes offered by universities of these countries in collaboration with local educational institutions in 1999. With the rapid growth of demand for continuing education in the following years, current enrolment is believed to have at least doubled. At the moment, only a small percentage of these programmes involve e-learning, but clearly this can only grow as personal computers and broadband communication become more and more affordable.

Another reason to expect an increase in the growth of e-learning programmes offered by overseas institutions is the advantage that 'purely distance learning courses' are exempted from registration under the Non-local Higher and Professional Education (Regulation) Ordinance. In practical terms, even if the Hong Kong Government wished to regulate e-learning programmes, it would find it almost impossible unless the providers had a physical presence in Hong Kong. For these reasons, there is genuine concern that 'global universities' armed with their expertise in e-learning can, and will, eventually grab a big chunk of this market.

Although these global universities offer technology-based education not yet widely available locally, understandably there is a fear that the Hong Kong public, which traditionally worships technology and reveres education, may regard taking up e-learning with an overseas institution as a trend worth embracing as Hong Kong progresses toward modernity. But is this assumption valid?

Another worrying side effect from all hype surrounding globalization and knowledge economy is that the Hong Kong Government seems to have an endless agenda of educational reforms covering pre-schools through to universities. Clearly such an agenda is motivated by a human capital development agenda in the interest of economic growth. The perception of the inevitability of globalization and the knowledge economy has been used to push such a government-directed education reform agenda. As Mok and Currie (2002) remarked: "Globalization discourse is used to facilitate the accomplishment of domestic purposes by creating a proper rationale or a legitimate claim for launching institutional reforms or to sustain a new discourse about the environment confronting institutions" (p. 274).

The threat of 'cultural imperialism'

Many educators argue that the real threat of the globalization of education is not so much in economic terms but rather in cultural terms. Gayol and Schied (1997) warned about potential cultural imperialism in cross-cultural delivery of education:

> . . . empiricist epistemologies and procedures derived from mainstream pedagogy serve as the basis for most distance education programs. Frequently, these models are used to produce educational programs delivered globally. Yet the ethical and cultural implications of this approach are rarely discussed in distance education literature. (Gayol & Schied, 1997, p. 1)

There are at least two major sources for this threat of cultural imperialism.

1. The dominance of the English language

In the context of cultural ideology, language is not neutral. The language we use shapes our reality as different languages address and constitute the world in different ways. As Postman (1992) put it, "our most powerful ideological instrument is the technology of language itself" (p. 123). Its structure, form, linkage to history, and connotation relating to usage – and all contribute to the ideological structure of that language. This means when people speak two different languages, they actually see the world differently. But the real danger is that unless people have sufficient command of both languages, this difference is not normally noticeable, which is why the problem of communication between two cultures can be so difficult. To quote Postman again, "language has an ideological agenda that is apt to be hidden from view" (p. 124), which is why he called language the 'invisible technology.'

The dominance of English as the medium of instruction also means most e-learning courses carry cultural bias inherent in that language. According to Vilaweb, about 68.4 percent of all webpages surveyed (over 214 million pages) were in English (see http://cyberatlas.internet.com/big_picture/demographics/article/0,1323,5901_408521,00.html). That implies not only that most e-learning is in English, but also most online references are in English. Online translators are trying to mitigate the problem, but the effect so far has been less than satisfactory.

Some argue that English being the dominant international language creates the environment for communication and improves understanding between two cultures. That may be true to some extent, but unfortunately the flow of culture tends to be one way and at best heavily asymmetrical, with English-speaking Anglo-Saxon-American culture dominating the flow.

Some educators believe that asynchronous communication of e-learning actually helps non-native speakers to follow and participate in online discussions, as language aids can be used before responding. As Mason (1994) pointed out, however, the pace of discussions is such that students working in their second language can find it hard to keep up and therefore tended to make shorter and fewer inputs.

2. The dominance of the Anglo-Saxon-American culture

In the Hong Kong continuing education market, the United Kingdom is the clear leader in the import of education with a 47 percent and 63 percent share of all registered and exempted non-local courses, followed by Australia. The dominance of the Anglo-Saxon-American culture is almost self-evident.

In cyberspace, the American dominance is particularly overwhelming. Since over 68 percent of the webpages on the ubiquitous Internet are in English, if globalization of education is realized through the medium of the Web through the engine of e-learning, such globalization undoubtedly carries with it a distinctive dominance of the Anglo-Saxon-American culture.

Wilson, Qayyum and Boshier (1998) reported a 1996 survey that showed – of the 9.4 million host computers in the world – 60 percent were in the United States, which explains why most of the tools developed for the Web, such as browsers and search engines, are mostly in English. The implication is, "although cyberspace straddles oceans and continents, it is like a boomerang that keeps going back to the US" (p. 120).

Wilson and colleagues also experimented with three widely-used search engines to search 'online course' and found between 68 percent and 87 percent of the hits were American sites. This led these scholars to conclude that the United States has an undisputed dominance of Web education. That means most e-learning courses available contain American cultural assumptions relating to their family, democracy, religion, traditions, social fabrics, and structure: "The overwhelming US presence renders 'American' as the norm and the rest of the world as periphery" (1998, p. 119).

One might add that the dominance of Anglo-Saxon culture is really disproportionate to the sheer size of their related population. This is made possible because of the growing interdependence of nations and people in the world. Because it is the case of a minority race dominating a majority composed of all non-Anglo-Saxon races, however, Kohler (1978) called it a 'Global Apartheid' and suggested that such global apartheid had the characteristics of a minority occupying the 'pole of affluence,' with a disproportionately large share of economic and political power. Although economic development of the two groups is interdependent, their social integration is extremely difficult.

Is 'Cultural Imperialism' All Negative?

Some authors hold more positive views about globalization relating to the issue of cultural imperialism. Henry, Lingard, Rizvi, and Taylor (1999) argued that the effect of globalization depends much on how the forces of globalization were engaged to mitigate their worst consequences and were used to advantage. "Globalization is not necessarily a homogenizing force, but [it] also provides considerable opportunities for heterogeneity of cultural traditions to exist side by side" (Henry et al., 1999, p. 86).

Mok and Currie (2002) held similar views and saw that globalization may not necessarily reduce diversity as a result. "We should not treat globalization merely as a homogenization process. Rather, we must appreciate the complex and dynamic interactions between global-regional-local forces and there is no reason to expect a dramatic decline in diversity" (p. 274).

Luke and Luke (2000) also argued for the more positive outcomes of 'cultural imperialism' as they believed that new forms of cultural identity may be created. "Globalization has generated new kinds of identity, new forms of intercultural communication and new forms of community" (p. 282).

In other words, they believe that globalization is such a complex issue that countries on the receiving end may or may not appropriate Western cultures uncritically and the process of appropriation is not always uni-dimensional ('don't other me'). As Kellner (2000) so powerfully argued: "Culture is an especially complex and contested terrain today as global cultures permeate local ones and new configurations emerge that synthesize both poles, providing contradictory forces of colonization and resistance, local homogenization and local hybrid forms and identities" (p. 305).

Concluding Remarks and Recommendations

Is globalization a real threat to culture and education? Is it possible to retain the benefits and avoid some of the evils at the same time?

Hong Kong's Way of Blending Foreign Culture into the Local Culture

Taking into consideration the above arguments from both sides of the fence, and judging from the limited coverage in the media, the general public of Hong Kong seems to be absorbing the blows of 'cultural imperialism' in a rather nonchalant manner.

First, the view that appropriation of western culture can result in a new form of culture may carry some truth in the Hong Kong context. One only needs to observe the popular practice of frequently mixing English words with Chinese words in pop music or as a common practice in the classrooms so that students can hardly carry on a reasonable flow of discussions in Chinese without using a substantial vocabulary of English words. Indeed, the local pop culture seems happy to embrace features of foreign cultures introduced by the globalization of goods, entertainment, or services into local culture to produce a new form (some authors refer to this process of hybridization and re-appropriation of Western culture as 'glocalization'). As a cross-road of Western and Asian culture, diversity in culture – especially as manifested in food, entertainment, and way of living in general — is appreciated and celebrated in Hong Kong.

Second, it may be of interest to note that the reverse is also happening with respect to the spreading of Hong Kong culture through the globalization of its entertainment products (TV soap operas, movies, pop music) into Asian countries, mainly in sub-communities of Chinese descent. Is this also cultural imperialism when such cultural influence is taking place between diasporic Chinese communities?

Recommendations to Providers of e-Learning in Hong Kong

How can we weigh the perceived benefits against the perceived harm generated from the globalization of education, particularly through the cross-border delivery of e-learning programmes? What can be done by local providers to at least mitigate the potential damages resulting from submissively swallowing cultural imperialism embedded in e-learning programmes imported to Hong Kong? Mason (1994) outlined three broad alternative attitudes and practices:

- *Try to tackle the problem* by 1) making adaptations to the original course; 2) jointly redeveloping the course for cross-cultural delivery with the original overseas provider; or 3) creating a different version of the original course by translation into the local language.

- *Try to develop a culturally neutral course* or a 'culturally uni-dimensional' course (McLoughlin & Oliver, 1999). But trying to create a generic course for all people might end up with a course that pleases nobody. As cited by McLoughlin and Oliver (1999), Henderson argued that instructional design cannot be culturally netural simply because the process of instructional design is is all about the creation of cultural identity.

- *Try to argue that the cultural bias may encourage students to be independent in knowledge acquisition.* This, however, is somewhat like stating 'caveat emptor' as a disclaimer.

For obvious reasons, therefore, only the first alternative is recommended to providers of e-learning.

Admittedly e-learning is better suited for cross-cultural delivery than traditional distance learning courses because greater emphasis is placed on student interaction and reflection. Students from different cultural backgrounds have an environment for inter-cultural understanding and appreciation to remedy cultural bias in the course materials. The ideal solution, of course, is to redevelop with the target audience in mind, along with the full knowledge of the social and cultural grounding of that audience. McLoughlin and Oliver (1999) suggested that instructional designers for cross-culturally delivered programmes should begin with the epistemology of constructivist theories of learning, and to acknowledge that *learning is socially-grounded and located within communities with particular cultures, values, and expectations.*

In practical terms the best strategy to mitigate the potential harm of cultural bias inherent in the cross-border delivery of e-learning may involve the adoption of a combination of the three techniques of adaptation – the joint re-development and translation suggested in the first alternative. As designing a culturally neutral course is not considered practical, making a carefully planned adaptation with suitable modification and substitution of locally relevant materials, and at the same time providing appropriate warnings and guidance to students (including open discussions about the likely sensitive areas in the original materials) would seem a reasonable strategy to deal with this problem.

Care must also be taken to ensure that a communal atmosphere is maintained at all times. In addition to encouraging or directing students to make use of the usual communication facilities in CMC such as forum, chat rooms, and emails, additional activities may be necessary to foster a spirit of community. In the Hong Kong context, as the barrier of space is much less of a problem because of its compactness, a number of face-to-face meetings may be arranged for small group discussions or tutorials with the tutor to supplement the originally designed online activities. Employing a 'blended' or 'integrated' approach would likely be much preferred over the 'pure' e-course.

For a territory that is moving towards a position to be both a 'globalizer' and 'globalizee' in education services, what would be a sensible public policy for Hong Kong regarding strategies in dealing with the threat of cultural imperialism embedded in cross-border delivery of e-learning educational services?

This is a question that perhaps requires more debate – not only in academia, but also through careful consideration by the educational policy makers in Hong Kong.

Note

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