

Chapter 44

Developing a Cross–Disciplinary Framework for Collaborative Research in Multi– and Intercultural Education

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ABSTRACT

This chapter sets out an approach to professional development and team building in a newly established faculty in a Finnish university. A method is given for mapping the academic and professional experiences of eight faculty members across disciplinary boundaries to arrive at a cross-disciplinary framework for collaborative research in multi- and intercultural education. Building cumulatively on faculty members' expertise, the mapping revealed three interconnected themes as a basis for collaborative research: boundary transactions between knowledge, skill, and language; boundary objects as representations and carriers of culture; and technological mediation of boundary encounters. A collectively agreed position statement is given for each of the themes along with a discussion of associated pedagogical ideas.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The terms ‘multicultural education’ and ‘intercultural education’ mean different things to different people. Moreover, the boundaries between multicultural and intercultural education, and their

intersections with international, development and comparative education, are poorly defined. On the one hand, ambiguities around definitions and academic identities are strong disincentives for creative collaborative research. On the other hand, the boundaries between disciplinary perspectives

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are fertile ground for exploring both the tensions between different bodies of knowledge and modes of understanding, and the emergent possibilities for further research.

In this chapter we explain how members of Faculty in a Finnish university with diverse perspectives worked together to develop a collaborative cross-disciplinary framework in which to research multi- and intercultural education. The purpose of the work was: (i) to establish a collectively agreed theoretical scheme in which to ‘place’ our perspectives on multi- and intercultural education which would serve also as the basis of a rationale for subsequent research; and (ii) to identify some themes which reflect our individual interests and expertise but on which we might work collaboratively and out of which we might develop some research questions. The impetus for this work was the creation of the University of Eastern Finland in 2010 from the merger of the Universities of Joensuu and Kuopio and the establishment of a Faculty of Philosophy with representation from disciplines in the humanities and social sciences.

Eight members of the newly formed Faculty took part in a series of structured mapping exercises and associated dialogues. Although all ‘educationalists’ in a broad sense, the eight participants brought with them a range of expertise: cultural studies, linguistics, crafts, information and communication technology (ICT) and environmental sciences. First, group members produced a personal ‘map’ of their expertise and interests. Then, working in four pairs, group members compared personal maps and looked for similarities and differences, identifying connections and tensions. Each pair produced a composite ‘map’ of the outcomes and identified a unifying initial ‘theme’. The initial themes were then used in plenary discussions and progressively and cumulatively refined through a series of dialogues and commentaries on dialogues.

This way of working involved sharing experiences and practices across disciplinary and conceptual boundaries leading to common under-

standings but also a recognition of difference, of ‘otherness’. This at once acknowledges diversity in human culture but at the same time looks for commonalities and enables us to distinguish between multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary forms of research and scholarship. By multidisciplinary we mean the juxtaposition of disciplinary and/or professional perspectives to add breadth to understanding through making good use of available knowledge and methods but through the ‘separate voices’ of the contributing disciplines. By interdisciplinary we mean the integration of data, concepts, tools, methods and theories from separate disciplines in order to generate a common understanding of a complex issue, question or problem. Our definitions of multidisciplinary and interdisciplinarity are adapted from Bruun et al. (2005).

The initial themes to arise from paired discussions around personal ‘maps’ were: (i) relationships between culture and place; (ii) cultural contexts of knowledge; (iii) language as a reflection of culture and as a tool for intercultural cooperation; and (iv) facilitating intercultural education through the use of information and communication technologies. In arriving at these themes, much of our discussion centered on the challenge of reconciling different disciplinary concepts and methodologies and reformulating them in a collaborative academic endeavor. Boundaries were at the heart of these discussions and in order to provide a context for our collaboration, and to foreground the compatibilities and tensions in our respective perspectives, we subsequently worked with the sociocultural notion of ‘boundary’ which we refined as the collectively agreed theoretical scheme in which to ‘place’ our perspectives.

Walker and Creanor (2005) define a *boundary* as a discontinuity in some form of practice, often determined by limits of effective communication. Artifacts, documents, institutional and administrative protocols, etc. have to be addressed by people from different communities if shared understandings are to be built. Star and Griesemer (1989)

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