

Chapter 14

Problematizing the Language of Internationalization in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

Like most aspects of modern higher education, its internationalization is framed by terminology rooted in neoliberal practices. No aspect of academic life is more widely touched than internationalization, where encounters with the broad reach of capitalism and its legacy of inequalities are common place; and where the motivations, processes, and practices of individuals representing institutions of higher education have meaningful opportunities to reframe an increasingly transactional space. This chapter offers an analysis of commonly used terms and an invitation to delinking and re-imagining its vernacular.

INTRODCUTION

As we write this chapter, the world is at a near standstill caused by the global spread of the Novel Corona Virus and the pandemic related to COVID-19. International aspects of higher education, mainly those that require faculty, student and staff mobility were caught on the wave of required efforts to repatriate domestic and international students and scholars in a matter of weeks. As it was revealed for domestic students across the U.S., colleges and universities have implicit duties for the wellbeing of their students that very seldom get discussed when considering the value of higher education. In the midst of this planetary pause, the problematization of how we codify internationalization efforts through language and how it functions within institutional agendas take on deeper implications. It is our hope that in this period of evaluation and redesign, international education professionals and higher education administrators will take into consideration that the linguistic repertoires we use to frame internationalization

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impact the experience of inter-cultural exchange and adaptability; and that the transactional nature of the neoliberal models that have guided it, detract from the transformational goals we often highlight in program brochures and websites.

Like most aspects of modern higher education, its internationalization is framed in terminology rooted in neoliberal practices. Saunders and Blanco Ramírez (2017) point to the elusiveness of a single definition of neoliberalism and settle on an understanding of it as “varying definitions to reflect the broad reach of capitalism within our world, the uneven development of capitalist projects, and the meaningfully different and changing material contexts in which neoliberalism attempts to operate” (p.189). No aspect of academic life is more widely touched by these three tenets than internationalization, where encounters with the broad reach of capitalism and its legacy of inequalities are common place; and where the motivations, processes and practices of individuals representing institutions of higher education have meaningful opportunities to reframe an increasingly transactional space. Recently, international education scholars and practitioners have begun to explore the ways in which, when unchecked, these neoliberal methods exacerbate power imbalances, thus replicating structures most often aligned with unequitable and unsustainable colonialist practices. Various authors point to these imbalances in how internationalization is critically examined – or not – in academic writings in prestigious journals (Mwangi, Latafat & Hammond, 2018); how internationalization has become a numbers game (Beck & Ilieva, 2019); and how education for global citizenship comes short in delivering on its lofty aims (Koyama, 2015; Piccin & Finardi, 2019).

To intentionally challenge this praxis, it is important, as a point of departure, to reflect on the often uncontested language that frames the multiple facets of internationalization in higher education and examine the problematic inherent in its discourse for “it is not possible to address such problems inherited by colonialism through the same scopes that have reinforced it” (Piccin & Finardi, 2019, p.3). “Scopes” that continue to reformulate from

a contested and contingent but enduring racial and colonial ‘matrix; of power that materially and symbolically orders both social meanings and relations according to a global imaginary premised on a singular trajectory of space and time, with the West positioned as the geographic center and the apex of linear human progress (Stein, S., & de Oliveira Andreotti, V., 2017, p.175)

The words that convey social meanings have power and influence how we interpret our reality. How we communicate about our lived experiences shapes experience itself. Indeed, language determines intentions and harnesses meaning; and while this meaning is negotiated and changed through our interactions, the language choices that we consciously or unconsciously make in our discourse infuse meaning-making with ideological and conceptual stances. As such, it is incumbent upon scholars and practitioners in the global education field to reflect on the effects these discursive practices have in the perpetuation of neoliberal ideologies and colonialist imbalances.

We begin this chapter by explicating the intricate and constitutive relationship between language and reality. We then introduce concrete instances where language used in global education promotes neoliberal ideologies and colonialist practices. We propose a delinking framework as a reframing and decolonizing strategy. Finally, we conclude by posing a call to action to scholars and practitioners to revise and reframe the vernaculars around global education in ways that shift internationalization’s transactional nature to the transformational aspirations of global mindedness and sustainable global engagement.

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