

Imagining globalisation: contested images and alternative narratives.

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The discourse of globalisation penetrates, encompasses and shapes the everyday experience of advanced capitalist or late modern societies. As a cultural phenomenon, globalisation is an ambiguous term – representing and signifying a process of profound structural change. Perception and the thing perceived do not form a congruent, causal relationship. While globalisation is frequently represented as an ineluctable, inevitable process of economic integration that determines and limits the scope of political and social responses, globalisation can also be seen as a ‘social imaginary’ (Ricoeur). ‘Globalisation’ needs, in effect, to be understood in terms of representation and ideology as much as it needs to be analysed in terms of economic forces and structural transformation.

In the domain of representation, globalisation is revealed as contested, differently imagined, inscribed with different possibilities. Globalisation may mean the advent of [terror](#); it may mean the last superpower able to project [military](#) force anywhere on the surface of the globe; perhaps the arrival of [migrants](#) from a distant land; or the expansion of international [trade](#); or it may mean the assertion of a transnational religious [identity](#) within secular modernity; or again a transnational peace [activist](#) opposed to imperial violence; or the development of an economy dependent on relentless [consumption](#). Each possibility opens up an alternative, an alternative account or narrative of social identity. Education inevitably figures in these conflicting accounts. In the sociology of education (Bourdieu) education, as a set of institutions and practices, is recognised as a significant element within the social system. However, education cannot be reduced to a mere reflection and legitimation of an underlying structure.

Education includes the possibility of challenging dominant discourses and customary practice, of producing alternative knowledge, sceptical minds, perhaps, even, counter-subjectivities. Education, as norms, curricula, pedagogies, technologies, institutions,

teachers and learners, is a political project. Different political projects are conceivable within the ('relatively autonomous') spaces of education. The representation of globalisation within these spaces and the intrusion of globalisation into these spaces present a number of compelling issues. Two main questions motivate this essay. What is the role of Higher Education in the context of globalisation? In particular, how might e-learning figure as a new pedagogic promise in the responses to globalisation adopted by the university? For the purposes of this essay, Higher Education will be taken to mean the university. That is an institution that awards recognition to particular kinds of authoritative knowledge and demonstration of the appropriate command of that knowledge by students and teachers.

The overall scheme of the essay is as follows: outlining different theses of globalisation; sketching some of the implications for HE; summarising the current place of e-learning within the university; suggesting a possible fruitful relationship between e-learning pedagogies and identities and the wider cultural, social and political changes associated with globalisation. A proposal will be sketched to suggest that while e-learning has tended to be associated with a certain economic and ideologically dominant reading of globalisation, e-learning has the potential, as a practice in which social constructionist views of knowledge are paramount, to contribute to the emergence of postnational societies and cosmopolitan subjectivities. Imagining this radical transition may seem utopian. This will inevitably produce a measure of scepticism concerning the realism of a project that will disturb traditions, practices and the authority of the university. Nevertheless, even if the political will to support innovations with radical intent is in short supply, imagining such a project is a necessary precursor to action.

The debate on globalisation has generated a vast and proliferating literature. Some critics (Hirst & Thompson) challenge the common assumption that economic integration is deep and extensive, arguing that national and regional forms of governance retain considerable purchase on economic processes. Others accept that globalisation represents a qualitative change in cross border activity, changing the structure of states and societies (Held). Such positions critically and empirically

contest suggestions that a global economy has emerged fatally weakening political agency, leaving no other alternatives to embracing the global market.

Translated into tasks for education these positions might suggest: the continued role of the national can be equated with national identity/citizenship and knowledge that is strategically valuable to (nation) state policy, some notion, then, of a bordered community of belonging; qualitative changes reflecting the intensification of cross-border activity but more especially reflecting changes to the 'structure of feeling' (Williams) in the phenomenology of the everyday, accelerating the interaction between the near and the far, calling for the re-invention of education aimed at producing a new sensibility and response to this re-configured world; finally, in the global economy view, equipping individuals with the knowledge and skills to compete successfully in a global market place where the state plays second fiddle to global, mobile, capital (neo-liberalism).

If these three theses sum up the contending definitions of globalisation, sociological analysis begins to get at the distinctive experience of globalisation. Ankie Hoogvelt (2001) impressively surveys the field: a functionalist approach argues that globalisation is happening in the wake of the intensified integration of material flows, in other words, globalisation is happening because we think it is happening; David Harvey suggests that we need to understand the social organisation of space and time as compression, space is annihilated through time (commodities, data etc), consequently, physically situated lives/spaces share phenomenal worlds with distant others – driving the process of globalisation; Manuel Castells discerns an interconnected totality in which the 'logic of informationalism' underwrites a network society. Information flows (electronically) through this network effectively creating a social space that is a new universal existing within the same experience of global time. The 'networked' university can be situated within this scheme with little difficulty. Pelletier (2004) sees a stark choice facing the university:

'the networked university can support efforts to democratise knowledge, challenge disciplinary boundaries and enable a more participative innovative

curriculum. However, it can also use technology to support a worldview in which the student is the servant of the economy, whose needs are defined in terms of technical skills...’

Perhaps globalisation as a species of neo-liberalism has become the dominant understanding. In this scheme, universities provide knowledge required to secure economic growth in a competitive environment: no sector of the economy is entirely immune to the play of economic forces although the exact extent of exposure to the market will vary from sector to sector. Universities, as public sector institutions, are not yet businesses competing in an open market although they have gone some distance down this road. Business practices re-shape academia. Universities are global in so far as they aim to deliver their curricula to work markets and in so far as they attract and enrol foreign students on programmes taught on location. Universities have adopted strategies aimed at extending provision to a wide domestic and international market. E-learning has figured in these strategies aimed at expanding access. Distributed learning enabling a global reach in which location is no longer relevant. E-learning, then, as a strategy for increasing market share and income. For the most part, e-learning has tended to duplicate or supplement the accepted pedagogies and modes of knowledge that reflect and sustain the status of the university as the authoritative provider of valid knowledge and the methods and strategies that can be legitimately applied in the pursuit of knowledge. This version of globalisation constitutes one narrative.

A different narrative of globalisation might view the qualitative changes introduced into human experience by the annihilation of space and the irruption of difference, risk and uncertainty in rather different terms. Alongside the struggle for market share and the accumulation of capital (with its deleterious ecological consequences) a number of parallel processes of transformation, novelty and strangeness can be discerned which open up a fascinating range of possibilities for the university in the internet age, certainly in the age of Web 2.0 applications. Globalisation as the advent of the cosmopolitan society. The identities of nation, place and history, authorised subjectivities weakened (not eliminated but perhaps in the process of being

superseded) by the arrival of the other, the stranger, the distant in the midst of the familiar. This, both in the physical spaces of cities in the developed world but equally within the everyday phenomenal world of daily social existence within security and well-being cannot be disentangled from distant events and decisions. Connectivity between space/place is not only heightened but the flows between spaces render these spaces less determinate and fixed. Flows (of people, ideas, images, commodities, data, finance) transgress and transform space. Identity becomes ambiguous (or strident), fragmentary rather than unified. New technologies might lend themselves to the exploration and construction of 'becoming' under conditions of globalisation.

If globalisation has been pressed into various explanatory and ideologically charged discourses, another term that has risen to prominence in the post Cold War era is surely '[postmodernism](#)'. This essay will not attempt to capture the many meanings associated with this term. However, two aspects can be usefully identified and both have a purchase on e-learning and the University under conditions of globalisation. Postmodernism is associated with uncertainty, the end of belief in secure foundations to knowledge, the rise of competing moralities and modalities of knowing (Bauman). This change is reflected in both the academy and wider culture and can of course be correlated with struggle for recognition won by the postcolonial subject, the presence of these others in the metropolitan centres of European culture, and the upheavals, movements and migrations associated with globalisation. The other aspect, especially interesting from the viewpoint of some of the innovative multimedia practices of e-learning (Herring) concerns the rise of a culture in which images have, to a degree, displaced or at least supplemented the dominance of literacy.

Without seeking to explore the different and contentious dimensions of this debate (Kearney 1991), where the image may once have been viewed as standing in for the real, a mere inferior representation of presence, in a postmodern culture, images saturate the culture. In this grossly caricatured view, images refer to other images; they signify meaning without need for reduction to the conditions of their production. In a world teeming with images, in which the very idea of [originality](#) is barely tenable, images become the bearer of meanings and anyone can use or borrow or

plagiarise images (or ‘texts’) to communicate, to say something, to mean something. The web now has an infinite number of images in circulation (including videos) and widely available devices and applications allow most individuals in the possibility of building up their own archive of images. Images are part of the currency of communication and self-understanding. As such they inevitably infiltrate web texts and the communities of practice that produce these texts. From the university’s point of view, these strange phenomena have yet to find a place outwith media and cultural studies departments.

Globalisation might then stand as the last universal experience after the death of universal knowledge announced by postmodernism (not everyone has attended the funeral). Paradoxically, globalisation brings about the prospect of a cosmopolitan society (resisted, contentious and always with the possibility of rejection in the face of renewed nationalism) yet one in which diversity and fragmentation refuse reconciliation within a new synthesis. However, the absence of a richer synthesis should not be mistaken for cultural conflict and antagonism. Perhaps democracy supplies a minimal consensus – a democracy in which all identities and knowledge have access to the public square, in which recognition is extended, and hospitality to difference becomes a possibility. (Derrida in Kearney 1999). Do the new technologies represented by e-learning reflect these shifts or at least show some indications of these shifts?

According to Barnett (2005) ‘[strangeness](#)’ is the characteristic feature of the postmodern experience. Barnett links the visibility of diversity and the undermining of universalist epistemology to globalisation. The insistent visibility of plural knowledge, which refuses the dominant classification, produces a crisis for the very universality, the unity of knowledge that underwrites the University. Knowledge is no longer one exclusive regime of truth but can be captured by a range of adjectives: ‘experiential, practical, tacit, personal, process and emotional’ (p789).

Barnett, I think, envisages the university as an institution in which the ‘supercomplexity’ of the world can be embraced and explored with each point of view

and way of being free to express itself. This extraordinary utopian vision views the university as becoming a

‘social institution for production both of strangeness and of human ontologies that can flourish amid strangeness: indeed, human ontologies that revel in the production of strangeness’ (p790)

E-learning shows signs of manifesting this strangeness and it remains an open question if the university as presently constituted can view the texts and identities performed in and through the Web as forms of knowledge and, more importantly, ontologies that merit recognition. If there is a relationship between the experience and expressions of networked learning and the human ontologies described by Barnett, one is also reminded of Julian Kristeva’s *Strangers to Ourselves* (1994) in which she analyses strangeness both in terms of the arrival of the migrant other in our midst and the psychoanalytic diagnosis of our deep sense of inner strangeness. Perhaps these analyses of the decentred self, a dimension of globalisation, can indeed be linked in a positive way to the decentred expressions of identity found in social software. It is precisely these tools that may (no stronger claim) facilitate recognition of cosmopolitan ontologies and suggest a contribution that the university may make to foster a society of cosmopolitan hospitality to difference, to strangeness. The University is in a position to award symbolic value to these new phenomena.

The theme of strangeness is taken up by Victoria Carrington (2005) when she very astutely applies Freud’s notion of the uncanny to understand the reaction of orthodox pedagogies to the texts and modes of expression associated with digital environments and network tools. The rich array of expressive and dialogical digital texts/images that have proliferated with their own codes, conventions and vocabularies has produced a disturbance within the familiar spaces of literacy regulated by institutions of education. These forms and ontologies have not yet gained acceptance provoking more alarm rather than reasonable critique. But again – are there signs here of interactivity, receptivity and participation across communities and borders that have the potential to create identities conducive to a cosmopolitan culture?

The qualitative changes introduced by globalisation amount to a new social imaginary. While globalisation has largely been cast in terms of global market discipline and the need to become competitive and particularly excel at producing knowledge and skills that will attract mobile capital, a more complex analysis demonstrates neglected aspects that have a particular bearing on the role of the university and the place of e-learning.

The Internet, perhaps more than any other manifestation of a networked society, symbolises the annihilation of space. Distance is rendered unremarkable, locations can be linked synchronously, communication made instant and simultaneous. The Internet and the tools associated with it have become a central element of globalised society. Universities have mostly responded to these possibilities by utilising e-learning as a means to extent participation, to deliver more programmes to more people, to compete in the market place. The full capabilities of the Internet have yet to be adopted in part because they do not fit with the accepted standards of knowledge and assessment represented by the University. They should not simply be endorsed but critically appropriated. Globalisation is tending to pull universities towards a functionalist role in the emerging global market. Barnett and Pelletier have suggested other more interesting, challenging and innovative possibilities. If globalisation is more than economic integration and the deepening of market relations, if cosmopolitanism follows in the wake of globalisation, then the university, as a political and ethical project, could investigate the prospects of networked learning, exploring and constructing the identities and performances enabled by social software. However, this may well be too radical a departure since digital environments and the modes of interaction and expression they support do not sit easily with the self-understanding of the university or with the state and business sponsors of the university. Mapping utopian horizon is one thing – finding utopia, something else. Yet, perhaps it is nearer and more [ordinary](#) than we think.

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