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Intercultural Ambassadors: Foreign Students' Conflict and Expectations Revisited

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Abstract

The recent increase of foreign students in higher education conflicts with resource budgeting and priorities. Universities are compelled to implement diverse strategies to keep them solvent. Interestingly, one of the responses to increase revenues is to recruit out-of-state students especially international students for higher tuition returns additionally, universities posit internationalization as a necessary component to becoming a "metropolitan research university of distinction" (Task Force 2006, 1). The goal is to elevate its standing in the global market of higher education. However, these efforts compromise the education of foreign students and how these students are taught. By recruiting foreign students, universities transfer both increased costs and intercultural competency onto them. Neoliberal rationality permeates these policies as it "structures and organizes ...the action of rulers, but also the conduct of the ruled" (Dardot and Laval 2013, 4). The American Council in Education (ACE) says as much when it states, "Graduates must possess intercultural skills and competencies to be successful in this globalized world" (2011, 3). Students are accountable for their "collection of skills" (Gershon 2011, 539). Thus, students are expected to be multicultural yet be responsible for their own "entrepreneurial virtues" that a globalized world requires. In the case of foreign students, they are expected to be intercultural ambassadors as universities "slowly and steadily shift... its investment toward the higher yielding crop," that is them (Clawson and Page 2011, 18-19).

Presently, universities project themselves as marketplaces where students can acquire skills to become their "own business" (Gershon 2011, 539). Students are expected to become "global citizens," therefore, higher education institutions "must commit to helping students achieve these outcomes" (ACE 2012, 3). U.S higher education asserts itself to English as a Second Language (ESL) students as the best option to acquire English as a desirable and marketable skill. This paper suggests that foreign students experience themselves as the new customers of culture in the university marketplace. In short, what effect does the commodification of higher education have in shaping foreign students' agency?

Currently, universities emphasize the acquisition of a second language as a vehicle for global, social and economic mobility, while foreign students perceive English proficiency as a valuable skill. When recruiting international students, universities highlight living in a city where English is the predominant language spoken as an American cultural experience. This suggests foreign students should expect to experience a true cultural experience immersed in a new language. However, the cultural experiences "commonly offered [are] ongoing international festivals or events on campus" (13), in other words, campus life. In addition, the ESL courses are reduced to a service learning program administered by native English-speaking student peers. By offering native undergraduates credit for mentoring in these classes, such as "International Peer Service Learning," they "assist" ESL students "with linguistic and cultural activities" (FORLNG 123). This is problematic because cultural transference is assumed to just happen in this setting.

Recent research on ESL programs in higher education focus on the pedagogy used to teach them, online, tutors, computer essay-scoring programs, and so on. Therefore, this study examines how ESL programs re-shape foreign students expectations of learning outcomes. This project seeks to remedy this gap by conducting open-ended interviews in a semi-structured format to students at Boise State University.

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Intercultural Ambassadors: Foreign Students' Conflict and Expectations Revisited

David Harvey (2010) asserts that since 1970, when the “neoliberal project” began, social institutions have struggled financially. Under neoliberalism, social institutions have government’s consent to fund themselves through “freely functioning markets”. (p.64, 88). Thus, universities are compelled to implement diverse strategies to keep solvent. As such, they “structure all of their activities and recruitment of students around the mission of raising funds for its operation” (Clawson & Page 2011, 18). In response to this market rationale, higher education institutions such as Boise State University (BSU), engage in strategies to recruit foreign students. They not only pay higher tuition, but are also the university’s worldly “subjects” in its pursuit to becoming a “global and multicultural campus with connections that reach throughout the world” (Task Force 2006, 1).

Many universities such as BSU believe that native students should have a greater outlook in life. In fact, universities are called to stress the importance that “graduates possess intercultural skills and competencies to be successful,” (ACE 2011, 3). In a report outlining a policy to intermingle the presence of IS with a desire to expand the perspectives of native students, the university stated that “internationalization helps them to develop the global critical thinking essential to contributing as citizens of the world and competing in the international marketplace” (Task Force 2006, 1). Native student should have cultural interactions in order to become universal citizen.

Bob Kustra, BSU president, states that they “work hard to find the right students and convince them to come to Boise State” (Kustra 2014). However, he implies that the “right students” are the ones “whose tuition boosts ...revenue” (2014). Enter the picture: international students-(IS). Thus, the presence of foreign students function as an opportunity for native students to gain the intercultural competitiveness deemed necessary to become successful in today’s globalized world. However, the recent increase of foreign students in higher education conflicts

with resource budgeting and priorities. In many ways, “internationalization is about income generation for cash-strapped higher education institutes,” (Haigh 2002). Thus, international and native students are unwittingly thrust together. The purpose of this paper is to explore **the effect of the commodification of higher education in shaping students’ agency.**

Even though, IS are attracted to a U.S. based university education, they see and experience additional roles they were unaware of. The reality is that IS are transformed from a significant monetary transaction that brings in a lot more resources than native students to a line of multicultural defense for the university. In short, the university’s goal of internationalizing itself “to elevate its standing in the global market of higher education” compromises the education of IS, and how they are taught (Clawson and Page 2011, 18-20; Sawir 2013, 359). **I argue that while ESL programs encourage students to be responsible for their own learning while developing their “brand,” in a marketized world, it is through these programs that universities transform students into intercultural ambassadors while depending on them as an important revenue source.**

Recent research on ESL programs in higher education focus on the pedagogy used to teach them, online technology, tutors, computer essay-scoring programs, and so on. This study, however, examines how ESL programs re-shape IS expectations of learning outcomes. This project remedies this gap through open-ended interviews in a semi-structured format to students at Boise State University. Some of the questions were directed at IS. However, general questions were also asked to all students interviewed, such as “How did you end up at BSU?” and “How did you hear about Boise State?” The interviews asked IS specific questions, such as, “From one to ten, what is your level of English proficiency?” And “How has Boise State helped your English?” Thirty- two interviews were recorded and transcribed with a distribution consisting of 55 % international; and 45% native students. This study focuses on IS, who tend to arrive with higher than usual resource

support from their families and/or governments. While they understand they pay higher tuition than native students, their stated intention is to return to their home countries upon graduating. .

U.S higher education institutions market themselves as one of the best options to IS to master English. However, by recruiting foreign students, universities transfer both increased costs and intercultural competency onto them. Thus, students are expected to be multicultural yet be responsible for their own “entrepreneurial virtues” that a globalized world requires (Harvey 2009, 65). When asked how IS might benefit Boise State from their presence several interviewees did not hesitate in associating their presence with their financial impact. Jalisa, an IS stated that “diversity from the last few years, it is just like financially...so, I can’t see any other reason ...Doesn’t matter how long you’ve been living here...if you’re international student, you still pay full fees- so double- international student numbers are increasing every year tremendously” (Jalisa-Student 2058, 2014). Universities seemingly develop what Ong describes as “new forms of inclusion” (Ong 2006, 16) in neoliberalism. IS are falsely included while universities hoist the compulsory intercultural skill native students ‘need’ onto them as they conceal their actual “funding gap” (Ong 2006, 13). However, universities are exonerated of any responsibility because under “the neoliberal state each individual is held responsible and accountable for his or her own actions and well-being” (Harvey 2005, 65). Neoliberal universities transform IS in “disposable” students, in short, the neoliberal mentality transforms their right to be educated into simply a monetary transaction (Žižek 2009, 101). In fact, it is more important the money they bring than the education students should receive.

Therefore, while native students largely perceive IS indifferently, foreign students live a ‘bare life’ (Ong 2006, 13). Jalisa described a grim situation many IS face. She stated “a lot of students come and they takes about eight to ten years to graduate because of the culture and because of the language difference, so they struggled for their first few years and they got better, but it takes time” and money (Jalisa-student 2058). Likewise, the services offered are not satisfying

IS needs. A Bosnian student, Hassam, stated that foreign students need more time to do “schoolwork.” In fact, the 15 or 20 minutes” the Writing Center gives to review written work is “not enough for somebody who doesn't speak English very well like regular students” (Hassam-2780 2014). However, by fulfilling the university’s goal of self-sufficiency, Hassam’s “failure” is interpreted “in terms of personal failings rather than being attributed to any systematic property” (Harvey 2009, 65). Neoliberalized institutions become more concerned about closing their de-funded gap than supplying foreign students with the services they actually need. Under market ideology, while IS struggle facing cultural and linguistic barriers, universities appear to be the primary beneficiary of the situation. IS expend much more time, and money to graduate. Even if they drop out, universities continue being the absolute winner. There are no refunds. University “keeps the money but have less expenses,” (Clawson and Page 2011, 34). By transforming IS in intercultural ambassadors, universities undermine the need to spend resources in ESL programs. Yet, IS are disposable representing opportunities universities’ to “boost revenue” (Kustra 2014).

While universities emphasize the acquisition of English and intercultural experience as a vehicle for global, social and economic mobility, IS desire for English proficiency as a valuable skill to survive on campus and beyond appears elusive to them. However, to recruit IS, universities highlight the fact that students will live in a city where English is the predominant language spoken. It suggests they will experience the “true American culture” by being immersed in English. However, several IS commented about the distant relationship they have with professors, faculties, and peers and their isolation because of their difficult to communicate. However, if IS want to have an “intensive” English learning BSU offers them two options. First, a two pass or fail classes, English 122 and 123, these sequential classes are focus on basic writing skills. IS should take a placement test before they get into them. The placement test will indicate the class they could enroll before taking the next core English 101. However, if they do not have the level to be in any of those they should take the only next option available. The second option is the Intensive English

Program IEP, which cost them more than two thousand dollars before enroll to a regular semester. IEP is an eight week program where IS are taught the needed skills to survive academically and culturally in universities. The objective of IEP states: “English Language Skills: reading, writing, grammar, listening, and Communication in America Culture: language skill practice in cultural situations. This suggest that in order to immerse themselves in English they are required to do an extra inversion in their agency.

However, paying is not a guarantee to their learning or cultural exchanging. Several IS such as Hassam, stated that even though they did not need “economic help,” he received no support when he started school, because of his “thick accent” (Hassam- 2780 2014). His observations exemplify what Lee identifies as “neo-racism.” Lee states that “neo-racism in the form of less-than-objective academic evaluations;... difficulty in forming interpersonal relationships with instructors, advisors, and peers; negative stereotypes and inaccurate portrayals of one’s culture; negative comments about foreign accents; and so on” (Lee 2007, 29). While, neo-racism takes place, universities collect revenues, and students are responsible by their “own entrepreneurial virtues or personal failings” (Harvey 2005, 64). Although, IS pay higher tuitions they do not receive neither adequate ESL instruction nor the intercultural integration to succeed. University undermine these programs so yet, IS should spend more time, which boots revenue, leaving their learning and integration adrift.

In fact, when native students were asked to describe any experience they have had with a foreign students, numerous respondents, such as John, said they interact with them constantly. John expressed ‘deep’ feelings and empathy stating, “...They are my brothers. I like them. I love their stories. They tell me how this campus is through their eyes.” However, when asked if there should be additional programs or support for IS, he said “absolutely, [although] I am loosely aware that there are a lot of programs already but I am unsure what they are” (John-Britt 3 2015). His responses reflect the neoliberal logic which “intensify the individualism and increase the lack of a

sense of community or the collective that was present in prior generations” (Shumar 2004, 823). John’s ignorance of curriculum such as ESL programs reflect a common problem around campus, in that native students “have little clue” about their peers’ needs or expectations. Neoliberalism undermines meaningful relationships between students by subjecting them at the same time than encouraging students to become the product of their “own merit” (Clawson and Page 2011, 20). Students are responsible for their own agency, while universities compel their economic gap.

Interconnection cultural between native and IS become just a cynical and trivial fact. When asked if “is it important for students to have a multicultural experience?” John responded “it should be required.” When asked if it gives natives an edge on the job market, he stated, “Sure... I call it cultural capital. Absolutely.” He continued with a sarcastic comparison by asking rhetorically, “Who wants to be a mathematician with no cultural capital? People don’t want to be around them. It’s like figuring out the budget then go away” (John-Britt 3 2015). Although, John stated earlier he did not know anything about ESL programs, he sees his “brothers,” as he refers to IS, as ‘necessary’ subjects for his accumulation of cultural capital. John’s assertions were supported by several other interviewees. While there may be a distant and cynical relationship between international and native students, all native students expressed it was important to have IS on campus. On one hand, the subjectivity of IS represent an opportunity to native students claim that they have a practical “cultural capital.” On the other hand, university promises student “cultural enrichment” and advertises itself through their presence in campus.

Even though, native students also recognized IS’ isolation and marginalization, they expressed indifference toward them by justifying their suffering. Katy, a native student, was asked what advice she will give foreign students about to start at Boise State. She stated “They are no different. They need to struggle through it.” Although, Katy recognized that IS “may have more barriers such as language and written barriers... [They are] coming over with a different culture and language” (Katy-Britt 2 2015). However, she expected they receive the help from their

countries. In fact, when asked if they need more support programs, Katy stated, “I don’t know what we have already but I know that for some of them their countries help support them” (Katy-Britt 2015). While “the current education system promises much more than it actually offers” (Canaan and Shumar 2008, p.18), native and IS experience neo-multiculturalism differently. Neo-multicultural education in the age of neoliberalism “mean[s] [a] different thing depending on one’s vantage point” (Ong 2006, 16). Their experiences conveniently underscore the neoliberal ideology and hide the neo-racism by evoking individualism to its highest form (Harvey 2005, 64).

Students have a superficial understanding from limited to no contact at all. Universities offer limited strategies to help IS achieve their language learning expectations and how to anticipate new cultural experiences. Much of the intercultural interaction is also limited through voluntary activities in service learning, clubs, associations, or festivals. Most of its functions are limited to cultural experiences that “commonly offered [are] ongoing international festivals or events on campus” (ACE 2011, 13). Therefore, by showing an apparent interest for IS, cultural interaction and integration, BSU has encouraged the creation of International Student Association, ISA. BSU advertises ISA and directs IS to “join and add [their] voice to these efforts” (<https://iss.boisestate.edu/mtl-student-association-isa>). However, as only international students integrate this association, their voice is disempowered by neo-racism. Lee states that “Negative reactions to international students’ accents and related communication barriers have resulted in many international students feeling intimidated or fearful of asking for assistance” (Lee 2007, 30). Even though, BSU apparently has open this space IS continue being marginalized.

Cathryn, a student from England, highlighted the fact of the creation of this association because it is in charge of “carrying on of student services. However, she claimed should be more support from BSU. Even though BSU and ISA appear as interrelated organizations, a BSU policy stipulates that “Student groups or student clubs are not eligible for funding” (Kustra). In fact, Cathryn stated that ISA “is almost like a charity organization. They work with Boise State but

they're not technically part of Boise State" (Cathryn-Britt 1 2015). BSU uses this association to target more IS without spend resources. By a temporary and superficial inclusion BSU targets more IS through ISA. In fact, new clients will arrive attracted by an unfounded sense of inclusion, and neo-universities will continue hitting revenues.

In addition, through ISA, university not only consigns IS the responsibility to become "oriented, build relationships with native students, and prevent cross-cultural misunderstandings," universities also seemingly anticipate foreign students to be intercultural ambassadors as they "slowly and steadily shift... its investment toward the higher yielding crop;" (Clawson and Page 2011, 18-19), IS increasingly find their experience as customers of culture in the university marketplace. Thus, the university "effectively involve[s] placing all the responsibility for change on the international student, and none on the University" (Sherry, Thomas, & Wing Hong 2010, 35). In other words, campus life experiences are underscored while the real problem is deflected. This is problematic because cultural transference let alone meaningful cultural acquisition, is assumed to just happen in these settings.

While, when Jalisa was asked about her frustrations, she stated she had no-doubt that she was "in charge of learning everything by [her] self. And that it took a lot of time so it was frustrating. I mean just the thing that I'm paying that much- so much amount of money. But I'm not getting what I deserve or they're not providing me what I deserve" (Jalisa-2058 2014). Many IS commented about their cultural marginalization and language isolation because of the limited English they possess. Little English let them to feel that people "don't like if I'm not speaking native English. That's an issue. I feel it here, so I...I can see that from their eyes" (Hussein-2633 2014).

By the transformation of international students as ambassadors, universities undermine the spending of resources in the services these students need. Foreign students are just a good tool to attracting more and make profit. While “the current education system promises much more than it actually offers” (Canaan and Shumar 2008, p.18), students such as Jalisa, Hussein, and Hassam experience the neo-multicultural spot differently. The neo-multicultural education “mean[s] different thing depending on one’s vantage point” (Ong 2006, 16). Their experiences demark conveniently the neoliberal ideology, which recalls individualism, (Harvey 2005, 64). Meanwhile, universities transform international students by the services, support and benefits they offer them. These students are responsible for their’ own lucrative abilities. As stated by Jalisa “they just keeping increasing the tuition fees...” while universities accomplish high ranks and prestige by advertising themselves as multicultural institutions.

Berry (2011) by citing the work of Sauder et al., (2009) and Stevens (2007), affirms, “A racially-mixed student body has become an important indicator of a school’s prestige, academic strength, and national reputation, and administrators have become increasingly concerned with such measures as national rankings of college and universities have become central to the competitive college market” ((Berrey 2011, 577). ESL programs and International students associations are used to attract more transnational students and advertise such universities as prominent multicultural institutions. The convenient cultural dimension that universities, such as Boise State claims, is only practical by transforming international students in intercultural ambassadors. Therefore, scholars, such as, Harrison-Walker (2010), Clawson and Page (2010) point out the improbable marginalization of students by running higher education institutions as a business model. Under marketing ideology, universities shape their services and support they offer to the multicultural subjects. Cathryn,

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