

## **Bringing the self into the process of exploring the global: opening spaces for “open spaces for dialogue and enquiry”?**

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*The limits of my language mean the limits of my world.*

—Ludwig Wittgenstein

How do you design a course for prospective secondary school teachers, whereby you are invited to look at yourself, your position and your identity while you tackle issues of global import, and consider the pedagogy of enabling generations to contribute to a sustainable future of justice, prosperity and collective security? How do you create a learning environment conducive to personal reflection and intellectual independence of enquiry and investigation, looking inward at the contextual self and outward at the pressing issues of a crisis-laden world? How do you delineate and communicate the proposed space? What language do you need to open such spaces?

The course on global education, offered as an optional seminar in the teacher education programme at the University of Vienna, provides a case study on an attempt at using an academic setting for a personalized, pedagogically motivated exploration of the global. The blended e-Learning course is designed around a number of central elements including individual self-reflective and self-positioning exercises, research and presentation assignments, an excursion, and a number of hands-on activities in on-line and face-to-face sessions.

Over the past few years, some 160 teacher-trainees have attended the course, of whom an overriding majority can be classified as mainstream, middle-class Austrian nationals. This reflects the prevailing set-up of students and staff at the Centre for Teacher Education. As the foreign-born and bred instructor of the course in this predominantly monocultural setting, I designate myself as “Other”. At the very onset of communication with the course participants, I claim my own “otherness” so as to set the tone for an open, safe space conducive to positioning, situating and contextualizing the self. This is a strategy I have developed in response to the puzzled looks of my students in our initial meeting in the face of my visible difference and my accented German. Speaking in Giroux’s terms, as an “Other” I “reclaim and remake” my “histories, voices, and visions” (Giroux, 1992, p. 33). The brief self-introduction of my reclaimed history in spatial, temporal and cultural terms solves the puzzle, and makes the space inclusive of otherness and accommodating to a flexible continuum of universalities and differences. In a self-reflective biography exercise students are invited to reflect on who they are and what is valued in their own social and cultural contexts, to examine the social construction of their own identities and perspectives.

In spite of the inclusive character of the course space, I have come to perceive a number of obstacles in achieving the aims and objectives of the course. This has to do with a specific kind of engagement in the seminar on the part of some students, which I characterize as passive, at times reactive (as opposed to pro-active), disconnected (as opposed to integral), and detached (as opposed to personally relevant); a kind of “just another supposedly important topic out there” approach. It also has to do with what I interpret as a general disinterest in the category of the political. And it has to do with

a habitual mode of discussion that I regard as dominance oriented instead of inquisitive and explorative.

Identifying the perceived obstacles is one thing, developing strategies to renegotiate modes of dialogue, interaction and enquiry is another; yet languaging the attributes of the desired change proved to be the greatest challenge. My objective was to create a space conducive to bringing the self into the process of exploring the global. I recognized the need to destabilize given rules, roles, positions and fixed identities within the predefined setting of an academic seminar. We needed to renegotiate the rules of space to shift the role of students from being recipients of knowledge to constructors and generators of knowledge. By bringing the self into the learning process I wanted to make the political personal and the personal political. And by renegotiating principles of discussion I intended to shift the focus of discussion from a confrontation of differing views to a collective, participatory, joint endeavour to explore the object of enquiry from various perspectives.

The next step was to propose rules of space, which accommodate the purpose. This is where the Open Spaces for Dialogue and Enquiry (OSDE) Methodology (<http://www.osdemethodology.org.uk>) came into the picture. I readily recognized the OSDE principles and procedures as something I always wanted to convey, but never quite found a comprehensible mode for doing so. The OSDE language of metaphors greatly appealed to me. Metaphors facilitate thought and communication in exploring abstract ideas by using the imagination to describe an abstract concept in terms of a shared experience. The metaphor represents a “conceptual and experiential process that structures our world” (Johnson, 1995, p. 157), and thus provides an effective way of building up new conceptual systems. In this sense, I have found metaphors instrumental for creating other spaces. Metaphoric language that goes beyond verbal enclosure opens spaces that otherwise are not so readily accessible. It contrasts with a language confined to signifiers and words that is often hermetic in its effect.

The depiction of the luggage or the backpacks, the lenses, the doors in the OSDE resource pack, acknowledging contextually constructed knowledge, indicating partiality and incompleteness of perspectives, not de-legitimizing but questioning origins and implications of perspectives, and inviting a broadening of vision and understanding, gave me the language tools I needed to articulate and negotiate the rules of space.

## **Case Study**

To examine students’ perceptions of the space created and maintained in the seminar I conducted a survey over a period of one academic term involving two groups of university students: trainee teachers attending the course on global education, and postgraduate students attending a course on the theory of education and globalization.

Although the two courses have a similar course structure, similar content despite different focuses and similar group size, they are different in terms of the participants, and in the language of instruction. The students of the postgraduate course are more diverse in their educational and professional backgrounds compared with the group of student teachers. The postgraduate course is held in German, whereas the teacher-training course is in English. Courses offered in English are rather an

exception than the rule in the general teacher education and the degree programs of the university's Department of Education.

I introduced the OSDE materials at the initial session of both courses. In the teacher-training course we went through the OSDE principles and procedures, using the professional development resource pack "Critical Literacy in Global Citizenship Education" and did the exercises of the first unit on "Knowledge and Perspectives". Towards the end of the course, the teacher-trainee group went through the final units on "Educational Tools; Critical Literacy". In the postgraduate course which was held in German, the language difference posed a problem in using the OSDE materials. Here I presented the OSDE principles in the original English, rephrased them in German, explained that we were piloting these principles for creating an open space of dialogue and enquiry and mentioned that students would be asked to comment on the space with reference to these principles at the end of the course. I omitted the exercises of the first unit of the resource pack, because I perceived irritation and difficulty in the group having to read content in English and discuss meaning and positions in German. At this point I decided to incorporate the postgraduate course into the experiment as a quasi-control group to compare and contrast with the experiment group of students in the teacher education programme, who worked more closely with the OSDE materials.

Data was collected at the final session of the two seminars using a questionnaire asking the students to reflect on how they experienced the space created in the course in relation to the OSDE principles: 'everyone brings valid knowledge to the space', 'all knowledge is partial', 'all knowledge can be questioned'. The questions addressed perceptions of open-ness of space, safe-ness of space, and personally relevant learning.

When an instructor is conducting research in one's own courses it must be made clear that students' success will not be jeopardized if they choose not to participate. To address this concern questionnaires were anonymous and were not personally collected by myself. Students were informed that their comments would serve as data for a case study. A total of 33 questionnaires were collected.

Mayring's (2007) qualitative procedure following content analytical rules was employed for a preliminary analysis and thematization of the collected data. The method involves a step by step procedure of developing inductive categories, summarizing, analysing context, and applying deductive categories (Mayring 2007).

My research interest was directed towards how the OSDE materials helped renegotiate the rules of space to shift the role of students from being recipients of knowledge to constructors of knowledge, to shift the mode of discussions from a confrontational to a participatory, collaborative process, and to make global learning personally relevant. My research question was: What are the students' responses to the incorporation of the OSDE materials into the courses on global issues? A preliminary analysis of the students' responses to the questionnaire revealed a number of central themes.

*Open and safe space.* Students in both courses commented on the space as "exceptionally open", "non-restrictive", "free and unconstrained" in comparison to other courses they had attended at the university. In terms of a safe space students described the attributes of the space as "non-judgemental", "unstressed", "free from anxiety", "comfortable", "non-frightening", and commented on the "unconditional respect", the "collaborative" character, and the "mutual learning" among participants.

*Constancy.* Some students of the teacher-training programme commented that in the course of the academic term they had forgotten the OSDE principles and procedures that were introduced at the beginning of the course, and that “the space created had to do with how the class was conducted on a class by class basis and not by something outlined in the beginning”, “I had forgotten the principles ... but now I realize they were the basis of our interaction and communication”. Thus students attributed the space not necessarily to the assertion of rules of procedure but to a consistent compliance with the OSDE principles in conducting and facilitating the course.

*Personally relevant learning.* In response to the questionnaire item addressing personally relevant learning, all students recognized that they had learnt something about themselves. A number of students stated that they had become more aware of global issues and how these issues related to them as individuals and as pedagogues. Many students made self-reflective observations as to their own personal response to an open, safe space in terms such as “Here I dared to speak-up, I felt compelled to talk, and I realized I can”, “I learnt that it depends on the group if I contribute and speak up. I need a good topic and sensible people, an open space to bring in my knowledge”. Many students commented that they practised self-reflexivity: “I learnt to critically reflect my own opinions, experiences and behaviours”, “I was certainly never invited to reflect so much on various issues before, it was conducive to really taking something with me from this course, because I had to engage with issues at a deeper and also at an affective level, which had much impact on me”, “I learnt how important it is to say one’s opinion”. One student, who at times had chosen not to actively contribute to the discussions, reflected on personally perceived difference of the self: “For the first time I felt comfortable in a seminar discussion, but I felt what I had to say was so different that it wouldn’t fit into the group”. The data pointed to an awareness of conditions conducive to one’s own level of engagement and learning.

*Examining assumptions.* The major difference between the responses of the two groups was that a number of students in the quasi-control group (postgraduate group) explicitly commented that although the acknowledgement of the validity of knowledge brought in by every participant was well established and readily observable, the partiality and the questionability of knowledge had not been realized. A student wrote, for example, “Everyone’s knowledge was seen as valid, but questioning this knowledge and seeing its partiality fell short of what was expected”. In contrast, students in the experiment group (teacher-training group) responded in terms such as: “We could reflect on our own attitudes, and question our own existing stance”, “We discussed our views, questioned our views, commented on taken for granted knowledge and could rethink assumptions”. Thus, there is evidence that although an inclusive, open space was created in both courses independent of the degree of concentration on the OSDE materials, enunciating the partiality and questionability of knowledge in order to examine assumptions and implications took place only where OSDE materials were introduced and discussed in greater depth and detail.

Taking into account my own observations of the processes of destabilizing given roles, positions and fixed identities in order to renegotiate the rules of the academic seminar setting, I noted an essential difference between the two courses. I attribute this essential difference to the working language of the courses, one using English as a *lingua franca*, the other conducted in German. I noted that the course I conducted in English represented a kind of a yet-to-be-defined space, open to negotiation of rules and roles, whereas the course I conducted in German had more of a predefined character, just like every other course offered in the majority language.

It has been argued that in intercultural encounters using English as a *lingua franca*, involving linguaculturally (Fantini, 1995) different co-participants who use English to negotiate shared meanings and practices, cultural identities are negotiated in a process of 'intercultural identification' and in so doing a new temporary intercultural community is co-created (Pözl, 2005). The negotiation process of common meanings and communicative practices enables co-participants to communicate within and identify with this new temporary community (House, 1999; Huellen, 1992). 'Linguacultural identity' is embedded in a relatively stable community with which the individual has identified ever since the enculturation process (Pözl, 2005). The intercultural community co-created in the exchange process involving a *lingua franca*, however, is considerably more dynamic or fluid, since temporary (Pözl, 2005).

Going along with this argument, in using English as a common but foreign language for the students and the instructor alike, a space was created in the teacher-training seminar that was linguaculturally neither mine nor that of the students, but a new space in-between, to use Homi Bhabha's term a 'Third Space' (Bhabha, 1994). In this new in-between space participants, i.e. the culturally "Other" instructor and the more or less socio-culturally homogenous students, could co-construct and negotiate a hybrid space co-defined by both the 'Self' and the 'Other'. In fact in such a 'Third Space', "the 'inter'—the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the in-between space", the very categories of 'Self' and 'Other' emerge as fluid and negotiable (Bhabha, 1994, 56). The hybridity of the 'Third Space' proved encouraging and conducive to an exploration of the global dimension in a space somewhat detached from culture specific parameters.

## Conclusion and Implications

The findings of this study suggest that adopting the OSDE principles and procedures as rules of space contributes to creating an open, safe space where personally relevant learning in the global context can take place in higher education settings. It also clearly shows that using OSDE materials helps question and re-think given assumptions. In terms of my own teaching, and as an instructor facilitating group discussions, this helped me recognize the need to further explicate the importance of questioning assumptions and implications, especially where this would otherwise fail to take place. Research shows that educational programs on international development often fail to critically examine assumptions (Andreotti & de Souza, 2008). Hence, leaving assumptions unexamined results in the uncritical reinforcement of mainstream perspectives as given and universal. At the same time, through discovering the hybridity of the space in a course held in a common foreign language, the study revealed how certain academic spaces could be more open and receptive to OSDE. Obviously this is not to suggest that all global learning courses have to be conducted in a *lingua franca*, but it does imply that the spaces we attempt to create very much depend on the language we use. In this case study I took a closer look at language for articulating the rules of space, the language of metaphors and the effect of a *lingua franca*. Thus, it can be said that creating open spaces for personally relevant global learning works better when and if we are aware of what language does to a space. Heeding Wittgenstein's "the limits of my language are the limits of my world", the limits of the languages we use are the limits of the spaces we create (Wittgenstein, 2003, p. 119).

## Conclusion: A Story Retold

Wittgenstein's insight can be connected to a Persian story that illustrates the conclusion of this article. In the old days as Hindu merchants travelled through Persia they told of a giant in India. Curious as the Persians became, the merchants promise to bring along the giant on their next visit. The merchants arrive late in the darkness of the night. Weary and dusty they settle for rest and lock up the giant in a stable. Impatient to wait for the morning, the villagers crowd around the stable, hesitant to walk in, yet eager to discover the giant. A brave youth walks in, the second to follow and the third. The silence is broken as the one leaves the stable calling: "the giant is nothing but a mighty pillar". "Nonsense" the second calls: "the giant is a throne of leather". The third hails: "All wrong! The giant is a serpent". Jalaluddin Rumi, renowned mystical poet of 13th Century Persia retells the tale of "The Elephant in the Dark", which he credits to the Hindus. In various versions of the tale, a group of blind men, or men in the dark, touch an elephant to learn what it is like. Each one touches a different part, but only one part, such as the leg, the side, the tail or the tusk. They then learn they are in complete disagreement as to the nature of the object of investigation. The story is used in its numerous variations in different cultures to convey an array of meanings. I retell the story in my global education courses to end the course with a metaphor accentuating the contextual validity, situatedness, partiality and questionability of perspectives, and as an invitation to construct and de-construct knowledge in the learning journeys ahead.

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