

The Power of the Disciplines and the Internationalization of Knowledge

Leask, Betty. 2015. *Internationalizing the Curriculum*. Abingdon, Oxon, UK: Routledge.

Williams, Rhiannon D., and Amy Lee, eds. 2015. *Internationalizing Higher Education: Critical Collaborations Across the Curriculum*. Rotterdam, The Netherlands: Sense Publishers.

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Is it possible to have an internationalized sociology or an internationalized mathematics? Two new books on internationalizing the curriculum from Betty Leask (2015) and Rhiannon D. Williams and Amy Lee (2015) argue that through common frameworks of reform and reflection, individual disciplines, and eventually the entire curriculum and campus, can be internationalized. The various authors call it a moral imperative that could create global citizens and change the way the world works.

Paradoxically, however, these two books, for all their originality, sometimes reinforce the status quo more than they challenge it. In *Internationalizing the Curriculum*, by making the traditional arts and sciences central to her internationalization framework, Leask strengthens their hold. As she writes, her framework “locates the disciplines as central” and does not question their foundations or origins (Leask 2015, p. 105). Similarly, in Williams and Lee’s *Internationalizing Higher Education: Critical Collaborations Across the Curriculum*, the participants who reflect on their work do so from entrenched academic perspectives. In this essay, I critique this “disciplines-as-central” perspective in a few ways and offer the beginnings of an alternative approach that builds upon it.

Traditional academic disciplines exert an authoritative influence on the learning process. It is within these disciplines—usually subdivided into the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences—that we learn how to understand the cultural and natural worlds. Newer interdisciplinary programs, such as area studies or global studies, offer frameworks for grasping regional and global phenomena but are often based upon these core arts and sciences, whose dominance has gone unchallenged since the beginning of the medieval European universities. Professional or applied subjects, too, grew out of these traditional arts and sciences and are often seen as “lesser” subjects. Outside of our own experience, then, these programs shape our collective knowledge and teach us how to think about the world.

Internationalization of the curriculum, often abbreviated as IoC, is a relatively new area in international education (IE) that seeks to disrupt such traditions. Sometime after World War II, educators began to recognize that many disciplines, as well as the core liberal arts curriculum, were narrow in epistemology or missing international content and perspectives. The growth of international education, through cultural and scholarly exchanges, also led to efforts to integrate these experiences into the curriculum. Although

the foundational work in IoC was done decades ago by individuals like Jane Edwards, Maurice Harari, Josef A. Mestenhauser, and Hanneke Teekens, the professional concepts of IoC are of recent development. These concepts include process-oriented work about how IoC should be attempted or how exchanges and study abroad should be integrated into the curriculum (an offshoot usually called CI, or curriculum integration), as well as work on how different disciplines treat issues of global and intercultural knowledge. These two new books join recent work by Elizabeth Brewer, Lisa K. Childress, and others in articulating a collaborative approach to IoC that involves faculty, administrators, university leaders, and students in a long and continuous process of reform.

These works by Leask and Williams and Lee also attempt to shift the focus of IoC from a one-size-fits-all, content-driven approach to a more process-driven, critical, and moral approach rooted in deep reflection. While the former view of IoC was too focused on including piecemeal international content into existing courses, the new approach emphasizes the questioning of deep-seated attitudes, often formed within disciplinary or professional training. Williams and Lee call this shift toward reflective *process* over content the quest for “mindful global citizenship,” while Leask terms it “responsible global citizenship.” The two phrases are essentially similar, and the two books complement each other well. Leask’s book offers a conceptual model, while Williams and Lee give us theoretically informed case studies.

Leask’s innovative book (also reviewed by Nick Gozik in this issue of the *GSLR*) is based on a Participatory Action Research (PAR) project funded over a period of two years by the Australian government. Leask gathered teams of faculty and staff at three different universities in separate countries to internationalize their courses, as well as catalog and research the process itself. To bolster research validity, she created an outside “Reference Group” of IoC experts and hired an external evaluator, Fazal Rizvi, to assist with and validate the conceptual framework and data emerging from the process. Leask’s book offers a sound, triangulated, participatory methodology that I think echoes the research sophistication of the IE field, particularly the intercultural work of Darla K. Deardorff. As Leask herself comments, the project was “informed by state-of-the-art international research and leading thinkers in the field internationally, as well as being grounded in the reality of academic life” (2015, p. 5).

Recognizing that “there is no shared understanding of what it means to ‘internationalize the curriculum,’” Leask and her teams first articulate a conceptual framework that is inclusive and flexible, yet grounded in research and theory (2015, p. 3). The conceptual framework offers an ecological approach to IoC, with “knowledge in and across disciplines” at the center of a multilayered circle and the different contexts (local, national, global, etc.) enveloping this center (Leask 2015, p. 27). Moving iteratively between her own work and the PAR project itself, Leask then articulates a “process-model” of IoC. Like Deardorff’s model of intercultural competence, Leask’s model is not linear but circular, beginning with “Review and Reflect,” moving to “Imagine,” “Revise and Plan,” “Act,” and “Evaluate,” and then the circle starts over again (2015, p. 42). As Leask explains, the “Imagine” stage is the most critical part of the process. In the Imagine stage, participants ask themselves: “What other ways of thinking and doing are

possible?” and then use the conceptual framework to reflect on their own biases and imagine new possibilities within their fields. In the short case studies at the end of the book, many of the participants use this model to attempt to creatively “de-Westernize” their disciplines and courses (Leask 2015, p. 157).

In contrast to Leask’s primarily theoretical model, Williams and Lee offer a different sort of contribution that is equally valuable. If we can imagine praxis (the intersection of theory and practice) to be a double-sided coin, Leask reveals the theory side of praxis, while Williams and Lee flip the coin to depict the messier, operational aspects. The volume from Williams and Lee offers two excellent literature reviews on global citizenship (by Elena Galinova and Marta A. Shaw, respectively), longer case studies, explorations of the co- or extra-curriculum, research studies, and critical reflections by faculty members in a variety of fields and disciplines. Many of these chapters emerge from the pioneering work of the University of Minnesota’s Global Programs and Strategy Alliance, which coordinates internationalization throughout the university and is influenced by Mestenhauser’s foundational IoC work.

Both books, however, raise complex philosophical questions that they seem surprisingly unprepared to address. Is the process of internationalization truly similar in each discipline, and what would it look like in non-Western contexts? More so, why are disciplines so central, and what makes them value-free? There is no justification offered for their centrality beyond the status quo, and little questioning of their relationship to religious or political goals (the term “discipline” itself recalls Scottish common sense philosophy, whereby “man” was thought to possess distinct mental faculties). In Leask’s model, for instance, why is disciplinary knowledge at the center of the cocentric circles, with global, local, and national contexts on the periphery? Did all of the participants in the PAR study agree with that discipline-centric model, or were they prodded to question it? By positioning the disciplines at the center, and cultural contexts and experience on the outside, Leask confirms that educators must work through existing disciplinary lenses, which take precedence over their particular experiential and cultural contexts. This approach risks universalizing the traditional disciplines and invalidating alternative forms of knowledge and understanding. While her participants try to “de-Westernize” their courses, it is unclear what this means beyond being sensitive to the concerns of others. It is also revealing that most of the case studies in the appendix come from the applied disciplines of business, nursing, or social work and not from the core arts and sciences. The volume from Williams and Lee helps to overcome these risks by putting experience at the core of internationalization. Yet, here too, the authors tend to approach their reflections from disciplinary, rather than cultural, lenses.

Related to the centrality of the traditional arts and sciences, both books make repeated references to the importance of challenging accepted paradigms and making paradigm shifts. But, let’s recognize that the term “paradigm” is *itself* problematic and culturally constructed. The idea of the paradigm is also vaguely Kantian, emerging first from the idea of “conceptual schemes” in the work of Harvard president James Conant and his collaborators at Harvard, and then from Conant’s protégé Thomas S. Kuhn, whose Cold War-era book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1963) explains how assumptions about the ways in which natural science works actually push natural science forward. Even though Kuhn said nothing at all about other disciplines, the idea of the

paradigm is now commonplace in a variety of fields. There is a sense in which the paradigm idea carries forward the epistemological and positivistic assumptions of the West. Paradigms, although created by humans, seem somehow outside culture, nationality, self-interest, or power—a part of culture and the world but somehow outside of it. Paradigms have their own ebb and flow, their own logic, it is believed, and can be easily chosen or shifted to meet individual needs. Paradigms can thus become new zones of power, not tools of freedom. The excellent book *Knowledge in the Blood: Confronting Race and the Apartheid Past* (2009), by Jonathan D. Jansen, explores this in the case of post-apartheid South Africa by showing how Afrikaners, born at the time of Nelson Mandela's release, still hold deep worldviews in their body and soul, "in the blood," and they organize epistemological paradigms around it. Can we simply choose or transcend alternative paradigms out of our own free will, or do paradigms reflect cultural or structural inequality? Considering these questions puts additional pressure on universities to examine their processes, but it also questions the idea of internationalization altogether. Are we just pushing for a Western individualist world, albeit a more progressive and communal one?

I am not suggesting that the only answer is to adopt a post-colonial, neo-Marxist, or critical theory position as central, or to completely abandon the disciplines entirely. While sharing the pragmatic approach of these authors, I wish to supplement it with critical and structural perspectives on the relationship between learning, history, and culture. In a faculty seminar or internationalization retreat, these two books might be paired with a work of philosophy, such as Kwame Anthony Appiah's *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (2006), a memoir or artistic work from another cultural source outside the liberal individualist worldview, and perhaps a book on the history of the disciplines or the history of science. Working with community members outside the university gates and in partner locations overseas might also help us see beyond ensconced academic frameworks. We might begin to ask: In what sense, and to what degree, does equitable and ethical internationalization ask us to start over and imagine lenses of knowledge anew? What would happen if we put culture rather than disciplines at the core of IoC? What is stopping us from challenging the central power of the traditional arts and sciences? It is a testament to these books that they raise these questions, but additional perspectives and voices are needed.

References

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