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INTERNATIONAL *versus* TRANSNATIONAL EDUCATION: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE GLOBAL COMMUNITY

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Abstract

This paper pretends to highlight the advantages and limitations in the use of new technology for the internationalization of higher education, and particularly in the curriculum, with a special emphasis in the existing conceptual differences between international and transnational education. The delimitation of these concepts points out that the debate central question between the use of the new information and communication technology and the international education is of a conceptual and philosophical nature.

INTRODUCTION

For internationalization, the current technological advances have given rise to new challenges. Nevertheless in order to better understand the nature of the challenges that new communication and information technology pose for international education, it is first necessary to define the difference between the concepts of international and transnational education.

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International education

International education, as we traditionally view it, has its origins in the humanistic tradition of education, whose central objective is the formation of character, more than the mere acquisition of academic knowledge. This first conception is based on the fact that the knowledge of other cultures serves to open the student's mind, while the second tradition, from which modern international education is derived, sets forth the pragmatic notion that one travels abroad in order to study what can not be found in one's own country. As an example we need just to remember that during the 19th century, German, British and French universities attracted students from Scandinavia, Russia, Central Europe and the United States for their positions of leadership in science and technology. Since the 20th century, students from developing nations have studied in Europe or the United States for similar reasons: to study what they are unable to in their own country.

In general, the personal growth associated with the humanistic dimension of studying abroad appears to be more of a collateral result than as the goal in itself. In fact, the objective of nations in offering scholarships to foreign students aims to influence its cultural affinity and political opinions. Here the third tradition of international education was born and from which the largest part of current cooperation activities are derived, a tradition that sees international education as a way to change society. In the "internationalist" climate of the postwar period, student mobility for instance was seen as a means of promoting international understanding and cooperation, thus promoting peace among countries. It was believed that the best antidote against ignorance, distrust and prejudice was the knowledge of other cultures and peoples (Brown, 2000).

The *study abroad* concept, coined for the first time in the United States, was adopted, adapted and amplified later by the European Commissions with the purpose of fostering the construction of a united Europe, and achieving a “European citizenry”. The Fulbright legislation was also conceived in the same climate as the Marshall Plan, that is to say, oriented toward the promotion of economic development, education and intercultural contact. All of these programs were part of the same political agenda. More recently, the ERASMUS and SOCRATES programs were designed to construct a cultural cohesion, like training university students for a united Europe. In this way, the aim of international education went further than an individual formation to a political and social transformation. Nowadays, it is widely recognized that the intellectual and personal growth resulting from the international experience and the study abroad periods is of such reach that it should be considered as an integral part of the educational process and should be planned with the same rigour as the activities of an academic nature.

New information and communication technology versus international education

As mentioned, the new information and communication technology (ICT) pose a new challenge for international education called “virtual study abroad” or “virtual mobility”.

If it is true that the principal objective of distance education was in the beginning to widen the national supply for education, thanks to the formidable expansion of the new information and communication technology, today this sector of higher education is found to be rapidly expanding and is frequently considered to be the “panacea” to solve the gaps in educational offer and

supply, as well as for quality. In respect to the concept of quality, many institutions believe – erroneously, in my opinion – that including in the curriculum, courses from more prestigious universities significantly improves the quality of their education.

For international education, the most widely spread definition is the one proposed by the Canadian researcher Jane Knight (1999), which states that international education is an educational practice whose objective lies in the knowledge of cultural diversity, respect for identity and cultural differences, thus enhancing the integration of an international and intercultural perspective in the main functions of universities. In contrast transnational education refers to distance learning, offered nationally and internationally by means of the new technology. These definitions points out that the greatest difference between the two ideas resides in the conception of the desired objectives and the motivation on which they rely.

Internationalization is meant to be genuinely motivated by a desire to provide learning experiences which empower learners to become global citizens with international knowledge and intercultural understanding. Thus the challenge of international education lies in the level of internationalization of the courses and disciplines, which is to say, the curriculum (Groennings and Wiley, 1990). In contrast, the objective of transnational education has been traditionally focused in widening the access to education by electronic routes, and, as such, continues to perpetuate a traditional idea of the curriculum, since no modification of the academic content is implied, and much less the integration of an international, intercultural, comparative and interdisciplinary dimension.

The fact that a university conveys educational content to a student abroad, does not mean it promotes internationalization and intercultural understanding *per se*. A North American university which provides for example a Mexican student with an educational content, performs at the best an “Americanization”, but does not foster a global and world awareness, according to the five parameters proposed by Hanvey (1989), which are namely the awareness of the cultural perspective, the awareness of the state of the planet, the intercultural awareness, the knowledge of the global dynamics and the knowledge of human elections.

Further still, Van der Wende (1998) gives a word of caution. While the use of ICT in international higher education provides new opportunities for cooperation with institutions of higher education in developing countries, there is also a danger that increased access to high-quality education will endanger the further evolution of the less developed system, ultimately leading to their marginalization. The danger in the expansion of new technology lies in the fact that it should not be substituted for the development of academic programs in each institution, but rather serve to stimulate the inter-institutional cooperation and collaboration by way of joint programs. The objective of internationalization by way of the ICT is the joint development of programs where all partners can participate according to their own means, on an equal footing, thus allowing the use of the ICT for the consolidation of the educational systems of each country through international cooperation.

But unfortunately there is little clarity about these conceptual differences, thus producing doubts and questions. The need for studying abroad is, for example, being questioned when confronted with all the opportunities offered by distance learning and global communication. It is

wondered, suddenly, if the notion that certain classes can be better studied abroad than in the home country, has not become obsolete with the Internet.

One way to respond to these doubts, is to recall some of the results showed by research in international education carried out by such researchers as Mestenhauser (1998), who point out the considerable development of cognitive aptitudes and abilities fostered by international education and study abroad periods, such as the ability to recognize differences, the ability of adaptation, of fulfilling cognitive changes, for intercultural communication, of analogical and comparative thought, etc.... just to name a few.

Furthermore, one of the reasons for which faculty and researchers travel abroad to attend conferences, instead of simply communicating via e-mail from home, is that the encounter with foreign colleagues produces an undisputable synergy. Nobody in his right mind would accept that virtual reality is better than material reality.

However, this “competition” between the two worlds makes the clear definition of the goals and objectives of international education essential, for it is worth remembering that we live in an economic environment where governments and individuals have every day less money to spend on education. For this reason it is imperative to come up with convincing arguments that show that international education offers something more than technology.

According the categorization made by Knight and de Wit (1995), which classifies the rationales in favor of internationalization into four headings: political, economic, socio-cultural, and academic reasons, the rationales sustaining both concepts are quite different. While the arguments in

favor of transnational education can be assessed of the economic type, being the emphasis of transnational education on the side of economic benefit of exporting educational goods. On the other hand, the main rationales for international education is the construction of a global community.

This economic and financial motivation was born from a mentality that, historically, has its roots in the Anglo-Saxon tradition, in countries such as the United States, Great Britain and, now, Australia. In this case the market has the last word. Who wants to study and can afford it, will pay, and therefore produces important financial benefits for the countries that have bet on this investment. The numbers are very illustrative. The exportation of educational goods in the United States ranks the fifth place on the list of exported goods, with an amount of four billion dollars. In Great Britain, this line of exports represents 4% of the whole sale of services. Great Britain's part of the global education market is currently 16%, with plans to increase that number to 25% in the near future. In Australia, the tendency is similar, with educational services in fifth place on their list of product exports. They are followed by countries such as Germany and France, even though in the case of these last two, the strength is in hosting foreign students more than in distance learning. The use of English as *lingua franca* is an irrefutable competitive advantage in gaining a place in this new market.

However, these tendencies do harbor negative consequences. One of them, for example, is the diminishing of the humanistic foundation, since the financial gains lead to giving more thought to competition and competitiveness among institutions than to cooperation, the base of a more united and igualitarian global society for the present century.

So far, we can conclude that since the crisis surrounding access to higher education worldwide is leading to a transnational matching of supply and demand, and since highly cost-effective solutions are called for, the internationalization of higher education and the use of new technologies are closely interrelated. This is resulting in ICT-supported transnational higher education within a highly market-driven environment. Moreover, official institutions of higher learning no longer have a monopoly on this market, and the steering and monitoring role of national governments is being eroded. This raises such issues as competitiveness, quality assurance and consumer protection. Furthermore, the impact of ICT-supported transnational higher education on systems of higher education in developing countries must be seen as both an opportunity and a threat (Van der Wende, 1998:15).

In other words, the heart of the debate on the use of the NTIC and the future of international education is to decide if the principal motive is going to be economic profit, the response to market demands or the increased offer of educational experiences and collaboration.

Furthermore, quality is itself another relevant issue, since educational development through ICT is more the result of the recent developments in technology and market demand than solid educational criteria and educational designs. For that reason, educational quality itself is in danger, since it is now quite often mentioned the low quality of franchised programs offered by prestigious universities like Oxford or Harvard. A study done by the OCDE (2001) revealed that the courses offered abroad by Oxford University were of doubtful quality, bearing no comparison with the courses offered to their local students through traditional education. On the other hand, the high cost of such an education only allows for a limited increase in access, since it is

directed at a privileged sector of society. In a word, if the benefits that the ICT offer for the expansion of national and local access to education are undoubtedly tangible, this not necessarily the case for transnational distance education.

It is also important to share a thought expressed in the *Delors Report* which suggests the need for reflection and discussion about the blind faith held in technology and virtual networks. According to this report, these new technologies do not, in any way, represent a substitute for knowledge, meaning and understanding. On the contrary, the dehumanization of the educational process might provoke a greater isolation among individuals (UNESCO, 1997: 57).

If is not rooted in humanistic rationales and the construction of a world citizenship, the use of ICT would only result in a new form of neocolonialism, a North-South educational transference, a Westernization of global education and, worse still, an Anglo-Saxonization of education, that is, a wider and stronger hegemony of the more developed nations in the area of education. This conception of transnational education would produce at the best the globalization of education, but not the internationalization of the curriculum, thus contributing to emphasize an educational imbalance among countries, and in the long range would enhance the lack of understanding among communities, and increase the risk of intercultural conflict.

Therefore, the ICT would support the process of the internationalization of higher education, only if the following recommendations are observed:

- The curricular structure and content of transnational education must be internationalized.

- The teaching methods have to favor intercultural understanding and interaction among the different academic and cultural perspectives.
- The transnational education programs need to be elaborated jointly and be the result of academic cooperation among the different partners involved.
- The transnational education programs must not rest only on the principle of the sale of educational goods from industrialized nations to developing countries.

If these suggestions are not taken into account, transnational education could widen the gap between the educational systems of industrialized countries and developing nations, without contributing to an improvement in the quality nor the educational pertinence, which means it would end to a reaffirmation of hegemonic and neocolonial attitudes, that over time would provoke attitudes of tension, rejection and conflict among countries. Therein sits the importance of the mediator role of the Nation-state in order to limit the uncontrolled access by students to this type of sales and services.

In conclusion, the fundamental difference between international education and transnational education, whose concepts are frequently confused, resides fundamentally in that, while transnational education favors the factors of an economic nature, that is, the financial gains of some in order to widen the access and meet the immediate market demands, international education, for its part, rests in a humanistic, socio-reconstructionist idea, whose objective is the promotion of intercultural understanding, and the formation of graduates aware of global human problems, with the purpose of reaching the ideals of a global citizenry. However, once these conceptual

differences are cleared up, the decisive role that virtuality could play in the expansion of international education is not to be underestimated. To achieve this, though, the internationalization of the content of traditional distance learning is indispensable and done in the spirit of international cooperation based on the solidarity among nations.