Historia Reimagined: Storytelling and Identity in Cross-Cultural Educational Development

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Abstract:

Educational developers are boundary crossers within and between their disciplines and institutions, a liminal state that profoundly influences our sense of professional identity. This identity is further tested when the outer circles, that of nation and state, move across borders. Such an understanding is critical, not only in light of increased interest in global partnerships, but also as a reflective lens through which to critically evaluate our assumptions and beliefs. This study seeks to deepen our understanding of the challenge of cross-cultural exchange to our sense of who we are and what we do as educational developers by exploring the negotiation of identities for educational developers, primarily through the use of our stories. In this case, the experiences of educational developers who participated in residencies in Latin America and the Caribbean are offered as paths to fostering understanding and challenging identity. Each story emphasizes the complex and contested relationships between language,

relationships, and culture, and taken collectively they evoke a number of significant questions about the nature of our work.

Key Words:

International; cultural theory; narrative; Latin America; educational development.

Introduction

A popular exercise in multicultural education is to ask students to delineate layers of their own identities by labelling them on a graphic organizer in the shape of concentric circles (Jones & McEwen, 2000). As the circles radiate outward, the scope of the identity group expands, but often at the expense of the strength of the bonds that connect the individual to it. It is interesting to imagine how educational developers might situate their own identities. Beyond the inner circle of family and friends, the middle circles of work and academic life would be challenging to represent. By nature of their work, educational developers are boundary crossers within and between their disciplines and institutions, a liminal state that profoundly influences our sense of professional identity. This identity is further tested when the outer circles, that of nation and state, move across borders. This study seeks to deepen our understanding of the challenge of cross-cultural exchange to our sense of who we are and what we do as educational developers. Such an understanding is critical, not only in light of increased interest in global partnerships, but also as a reflective lens through which to critically evaluate our assumptions and beliefs.

Literature Review

Multiple studies affirm the need for mutually beneficial educational development strategies that cross global boundaries (DeZure et al, 2012), approach all individuals as partners (Cooper and Mitsunaga, 2010), and remain continually open and responsive (Willis and Strivens, 2015). A growing shift over time, from approaches rooted in power structures and isolationism to ones supported by collaborative practice, mutual growth, and guidance from within international communities themselves, has forged a foundation of heightened awareness for engaging with cultures from a post-colonial perspective (Lee et al, 2013; MacKinnon and Manathunga, 2003; Saroyan and Frenay, 2010). Case studies of international collaborations have identified both the challenges and successful strategies of true post-colonial partnerships and highlight the need for alternative models of cross-cultural exchange (Cooper and Mitsunaga, 2010; Hubball and Edwards-Henry, 2011). Methodologically, these studies have focused primarily on delineating best practices rather than following up on Catherine's Manathunga's call (2006) for deeper engagement with the rich theoretical traditions that surrounds post-colonialism, intersectionality, and cross-cultural identity formation.

Educational developers may not have delved deeply into this theoretical tradition, but educators have. In addition work being done on multicultural competency more broadly, border pedagogy, a term derived from the work of critical theorists such as Paulo Freire, emphasizes the imperative of educators to teach students to transcend the inequities that characterize cultural boundaries, both real and imagined (Erickson, 1997; Giroux and McLaren, 2014; Morgan, 2000; Romo and Chavez, 2006). To do so, teachers must be trained to coach their students to negotiate between cultures and form

(and re-form) fluid identities that may not be confined to a static set of clearly demarcated circles. In practice, this has proven to be easier said than done, but the movement has gained ground, especially in the context of the increasingly interconnected relationships between Latin American countries and the United States.

Educational developers are an especially interesting case study for a concept of negotiated identity, in part because so much of our development as a field stems from an intentional desire to work across the boundaries within academia (Lee and McWilliam, 2008; Little, 2013; Green and Little, 2013). The study of academic identity frequently focuses on the distinctive dualism that exists within higher education; where faculty define themselves both as members of an extra-institutional body, i.e. scholars in their discipline, and as staff within an organization unit as part of an institution, i.e. a college and department (Billot, 2010; Kogan, 2000; Winter, 2009). Educational development adds an additional circle, while often retaining at least remnants of the two previous roles. Although many educational developers began as faculty in a particular field, they connect with faculty from across disciplines and must seek to integrate multiple disciplinary habits of mind in order to be successful in expanding teaching and learning communities.

Similar to critical theorists, anthropologists characterize identity less as a fixed attribute, or product, and more as an evolving process (Hoffman, 1998). While this has the benefit of providing nuance and complexity to the understanding of identity, it also makes it more elusive as an object of research. Thick description, a method in which the scholar deconstructs layers of meaning embedded in a set of practices, rests on similar conceptual foundation as identity circles, but with one key difference---the emphasis on narrative as the window through which to view culture (Geertz, 1994). This perspective migrated into the social sciences and the use of auto-ethnography as an analytical tool for understanding both individual and group identity has become increasingly recognized and productive (Elliott, 2005). Our study explores the negotiation of identities for educational developers, primarily through the use of structured narratives---our stories.

These stories convey thick descriptions by three educational developers who connected through shared experiences with extended residencies in Latin America and the Caribbean. The use of stories to examine our experiences may be especially apt, not only because of the growing interest in narrative coming out of the scholarship of teaching and learning (SOTL) (Hutchings, 2000; Quinnell, Russell, Thompson, Marshall, & Cowley, 2010; Thomas, 2011); but also because of the extensive story-telling traditions within Latin American culture. The word for stories in Spanish is *historia*, an etymology that reflects the degree to which the use of narrative is tied to personal and cultural histories (from the Latin); but also (from the Greek) how much the telling of stories serves as an expression of teaching and learning.

Story 1: Lingua Franca

My research focuses on heritage language, i.e., the words which are often spoken by minority families at home; but are often subordinate to another language in public discourse. In particular, I focus on developing effective strategies for effectively working with heritage language learners in the classroom. This expertise that has led me to

working with both pre-service teachers and faculty to navigate the implicit and explicit intersections between language and culture as part of the learning process. As a consultant, I have worked with institutions in Jamaica, Belize, Honduras, and Mexico.

What I did not realize was that serving primarily in the role of expert led to the development of blind spots, just as the use of a dominant language can overshadow the meaning and expression of a heritage language. In Honduras, for example, the language of public education is English; and my interviews with local officials (conducted in English) revealed that they viewed that language as providing students with increased educational and vocational opportunities.

During the course of one visit, however, one of my local colleagues invited me over for dinner, which I took as a casual invitation, not unlike how similar invitations are offered and accepted back home. When I asked directions, my colleague informed me that a taxi would be called. Because my colleague and I spoke in English, I was surprised to find that everyone at the dinner party spoke in *garifuna*, a language with which I had only intermediate fluency. As we sat down to eat, the women took turns standing outside the door and those that stayed inside showered me with small gifts, a generosity I could not return. Slowly, it dawned on me that the women were guarding the door in order to assure my physical safety; a factor I had never considered. They also informed me that it was the first time a teacher, whether local or foreign, had ever come to their village; and my presence took on a symbolic meaning. I was not brave, I was oblivious.

It was only after jettisoning the role and language of expert that I developed authentic understanding and insight into the challenges my local colleagues faced. Language is not just a means of communication; it also conveys messages of power and authority. As we increase the scope of our work to include a wider diversity of cultural, institutional, and geographical contexts, there may be a lesson regarding how we use our current discourse of educational development. Rather than take what we see at face value; I suspect we need to be sensitive and listen empathically to the subtext, or figurative equivalent of heritage languages, as well.

Story 2: The Contact Zone

My first trip to Haiti took place eight months after a 7.0 magnitude earthquake rocked the country and shifted global attention once again in Haiti's direction. As a middle-aged white female from a tiny rural town in the southern United States, with her teenaged daughter in tow, to say I was apprehensive would have been an understatement. I had seen images and heard stories about Haiti—the devastation of the earthquake, the overwhelming needs and challenges of the country, and the very real dangers of travel there. Nothing could have prepared me, however, for the sights and sounds we encountered and the ways in which my professional and personal journey would be affected. During that inaugural trip, I witnessed the devastation and destruction from the earthquake at every turn. At the same time, a message of the beauty, strength, perseverance, ingenuity, and hope was recounted in the words and deeds of the Haitians I met.

Over the course of seven years and nine trips, my involvement in Haiti shifted considerably as I constantly questioned what role I should play. Personally and

professionally, my relationships involved a process of wrestling with my own notions of who I was within my work and how limited I was by the concentric circles of identity that had built up in my life. For example, most of the initial lessons and activities I had brought with me were either impractical or irrelevant, Instead, I sought to forge new expertise, and a new identity, in the changed context. This process constituted some of the most uncomfortable and honest moments I have ever experienced, as I had to truly question my inherited position of privilege, rooted firmly in Western and colonial thinking.

Rather than seeing identity as a fixed characteristic, my experiences working in Haiti took place in what I saw as my contact zone, or a dynamic space where cultures "meet, clash and grapple" with one another (Pratt, 2007). While in Haiti, I had the opportunity to engage with many individuals, but there were two – one student and one teacher – whose words shifted my perceptions. The teacher and student were from different rural areas, but there message was the same. They *each* spoke to the power of education to change their communities, but also the need for lasting change to ultimately reside in the action and direction of Haitian citizens themselves. At first, these exchanges suggested to me that my presence was superfluous; but then I realized how our collaboration could be redefined as a learning experience. The space created through examining and questioning itself—the epitome of the contact zone—could be as empowering as it is exhausting and uncomfortable. I learned that if we are to be successful agents of change, it will require us to constantly be observing, questioning, seeking knowledge, and negotiating new understanding; and this process constitutes an end in and of itself.

Story 3: Outsiders and Insiders

In 2013, I was thrilled when asked to assist with Ed.D. internships in Belize given the proximity to Panama and my Panamanian heritage. On the first day in Belize, the bus driver asked me, "Are you sure you are not Belizean?" I chuckled and said, "I was asked the same question when I traveled to Jamaica." I smiled to myself, because if only for ten days, my race/ethnicity would match the majority of people, and it was like sunshine kissing my brown skin.

During a subsequent 5-week trip, wearing casual clothing, I stood outside the hotel waiting for students as they traveled to internship sites. As staff buzzed around carrying cleaning supplies and other materials preparing for the day I realized that as an Afro Latina my role, in this setting, should be "the help" rather than faculty member/educational developer like White colleagues. I am unsure if it was because I was determined to 'feel at home' due to the duration of the trip or a series of awkward events that brought being an outsider/insider to the surface. On this same trip, one evening in the hotel restaurant a white patron approached me and asked for the daily specials. Since I am expressive the confused look on my face and multitude of thoughts about race relations was likely evident.

On this same Belize trip, there were occasions wherein white female colleagues who I have known for a decade contributed to my feeling like an outsider although we share identity as faculty and women with administrative experience (educational developer and otherwise). For instance, one evening while two white female faculty members and

I were dining, one of them set up a tour for the other person to see a vacation house. Yet, I was not asked if I wanted to see it or invited although I was sitting with them. On another occasion, while the three of us sat together, one colleague emphatically and enthusiastically identified a male successor for her leadership position. In Belize, gender roles are clearly defined—men are dominant and more well-respected than women. In this context, a place where these two faculty were women and a racial minority, I was struck by the conversation and the lack of consideration of diversity in relation to the leadership position. Every day, we have opportunities to consider ways to help shift identity politics in our spheres of influence (e.g., the college/at our institution).

In general, as a female, Afro Latina, single-parent, I approach my work in educational development from a place of marginalization, which I have experienced across contexts (i.e., schooling and professionally). I live life differently, as the only Black [Hispanic] person in the room, removed from conversations altogether, or included superficially yet excluded subtly. Yet, I have the opportunity through educational development to help enhance teaching and learning as well as inspire positive change within higher education. Although fully aware that faculty developers are often marginalized in academia due to intersectionality of their faculty and administrative roles, I remain optimistic. In Belize, I realized that I must be more self-aware and reflective, than I was previously, in order to grow as a faculty developer (and human being). Regardless of gender, race/ethnicity, sexuality, social-class, religion and so forth—I want everyone to be included who wants to be. As a result of my collective experiences, I intentionally make space at tables or invite people into conversations when I perceive exclusion. As a faculty developer, I am passionate about limiting marginalization, promoting positive collaboration, and serving as a role model for others.

Discussion

These stories are individual and are not intended to be generalized across all experiences. That being said, when taken collectively, they suggest potential lines of inquiry that may inform how our field continues to take shape. Just as SOTL claims trans-disciplinarity over disciplinary-based education research, some specialists claim that the practice of educational development is, or aspires to be, universal, crossing over a multitude of teaching contexts (Jacobs, 2007). On the other end of the spectrum, others assert that pedagogical training is essentially adaptive and should take into account the history, practice, experience and "heritage language" of the locale (Asaya, 2010). We have only just begun to systematically explore the degree to which the language and practices of educational development are culturally-derived and culturally-sensitive (Starr-Glass, 2010). In other words, our collective experiences call into question how much the way we talk about teaching and learning serves as *lingua franca*.

Each of our stories emphasizes the centrality of the relationships and relationship-building between individuals, institutions, and cultures; especially those that take place in the contact zone (Wright, 2018). In our cases, the nature of those relationships was not just bonding but also disruptive. Working in post-colonial environments, such as those in Latin America and the Caribbean, presents distinctive psychological challenges, including experiences of discomfort, resentment, guilt, and self-doubt. On a personal level, these effects may be difficult to work through, but collectively they can

prompt us to ask constructive questions, such as: what do post-colonial relationships look like (or what could/should they look like) when applied to the work of educational development?

As educators and educational developers, we use stories to find common ground with our students and, by extension, our faculty; but that same process can lead to divided ground in the context of competing cultures. As educational developers we are frequently outsiders when it comes to disciplinary contexts; but it is unclear whether that prepares us to be outsiders for different reasons. Researchers have noted the distinctive ways in which educational developers juggle multiple hats, or roles: educator, scholar, administrator and/or agent of change (Green & Little, 2016; Green & Little, 2017), but our experiences show that when working across national boundaries, our personal and professional identities became not only more complex, but also more fluid. In our stories, these roles became increasing indistinct in the context of transcending cultures; as all three of our storytellers drew upon their experience and expertise in both disciplinary and transdisciplinary ways. Similarly, their experiences in the field influenced their identity, both personally and professionally, but also simultaneously as educators and educational developers. Imagine a model of cultural identity that looks less like circles and more like a Mobius strip (Lury, 2013). This suggests the need for further research into how we can move past trial and error and learn to effectively and perhaps systematically navigate cultural and professional liminality.

The same global study that delineated our roles also points out that educational developers in the United States are more likely than their counterparts to come from a disciplinary background grounded in the humanities. This seems to contradict the predominant approaches in much of the scholarship of educational development; which bears a close relationship to social science methods used in educational research. Like many of the comparisons drawn in this essay, the relationship between these two schools of thought is growing increasingly blurry; particularly in light of increased calls for interdisciplinary work as the foundation for creativity and innovation (Barry & Born, 2013; Hall, Matos, & Bachor 2016; Taebi et al, 2014). In this case, we have used a signature method of the humanities, narrative, to deepen our understanding of the sociology of our field (Trahar & Yu, 2015). How might all aspects of our 'border work' be enhanced by efforts that cross both disciplinary and geographical boundaries?

Our use of stories is intended to provide insight that may be elusive for conventional social science methods, such as surveys, because of the intimate nature of what is revealed (Cortazzi, 2014; Gazarian, Fernberg & Sheehan, 2016; Monk, Sinclair & Nelson, 2016; Seixas, 2017). This somewhat uneasy comingling of approaches reflects a more profound debate within higher education itself. While there are those who advocate for teaching and learning as a science, these calls are counter-balanced by those who revel in the art of teaching (Burns, 2017; Dhaliwal, Supe, Gupta & Singh, 2017). Both perspectives inform the work of educational developers; and the question becomes how both can become integral to the ways in which we convey the work we do across boundaries, both within and outside of our own institutional contexts.

The value proposition also applies to individuals. As our stories attest, our experiences in Latin America and the Caribbean contributed meaningfully to our professional development, but they also incurred personal sacrifices of time, resources,

and, at times, health. Whether these sacrifices were worthwhile is a difficult calculation to make objectively. Similarly, international partnerships at the institutional level take considerable energy, time, and resources to build effectively and the return on this investment is also difficult to calculate. Our collaborations were financially supported by a number of different agencies, both private and public, and transnational relationships took years, even decades, to cultivate. If we want to increase support for these endeavors, then we will need more than stories to demonstrate impact. Strengthening the case for the value of such work rests on our ability to find sufficient common ground to support effective assessment; a basis which does not exist (yet). In other words, how and where can we begin to talk about ways to systematically assess the impact of work that crosses over so many cultural, geographical, and even epistemological boundaries?

We can also consider how we make the case insider our own circles. Recent research has suggested the educational developers are highly motivated by an ethos centered on care, service, and emotional labor (Bernhagen & Gravett, 2017). As we see educational development practices diverge as the work their way into different contexts, at our core educational developers share the belief that we should all strive to be better, whether it is faculty who teach or students who learn, (or both); and that through that process, we can make a collective difference. Our stories, too, reflect how these desires can coalesce in a kind of magical thinking; as we each found a part of our experiences to be deeply moving, transcendent, and, at times, even ineffable. That being said, we must take care to adapt this core of transformative idealism to the post-colonial world; in which even the words develop, developing, and development are fraught with terminological and philosophical baggage; and the need for transparency, accountability and credibility has become part of our shared vocabularies across higher education. That being said, our experiences suggest that while we certainly do not live in a fairy tale world, it is perhaps not folly to aspire to happily ever after.

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