Teaching and learning on a transnational education programme: Opportunities and challenges for flying faculty in Geography and related disciplines

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**Abstract**

Within the context of the internationalisation of UK higher education, an increasing number of UK-based institutions are developing collaborative degree programmes with overseas institutions, of which partnerships with institutions in China are the most common (Quality Assurance Committee [QAA], 2013). This paper employs aspects of Brookfield’s (1995) approach to critical reflection to explore, from different perspectives (self reflection, student feedback, our colleagues’ experiences), some of the opportunities and challenges that exist for flying faculty through critical reflection on the author’s own flying faculty experiences delivering an introductory Physical Geography module in China. Teaching in an unfamiliar environment brings with it a plethora of challenges, however; for staff in Geography and related disciplines, active engagement with the external world through field-based learning is perhaps the most challenging aspect of any overseas teaching experience. As such, a particular focus of this paper is on the challenges, and potential solutions, of incorporating field-based learning and teaching in the international classroom’. Ultimately, faculty with international teaching experience are best placed to develop and enhance the internationalisation of their own institution’s curricula.

**Key Words**

Transnational Education (TNE), Flying Faculty, China, Field-Based Teaching, Critical Reflection

**Introduction**

The internationalisation of UK higher education (HE) is of increasing importance as institutions seek to respond to national and international economic, social and political demands (Higher Education Academy [HEA], 2014). Within this context, many institutions have sought to expand their research and education activities across international borders (McBurnie and Ziguras, 2007). Although transnational education is nothing new, in recent years there has been a rapid expansion in the number of UK Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) developing transnational education initiatives (TNEs) (Hill, Cheong, Leong and Fernandez-Chung, 2014). Transnational education has many different approaches, including franchising, distance learning, joint/dual honours awards between institutions, research degrees, and flying faculty (Drew, Tang, Poole and Willis, 2006; Smith, 2014), all of which involve a variety of different stakeholders (Hill et al., 2014). Whilst the nature and spread of TNE delivery is highly variable (Lanelli and Huang, 2014), in the last ten years there has been a dramatic increase in the number of initiatives being developed with institutions in China, where the country’s economic reforms have stimulated a desire for Chinese institutions to adopt aspects of foreign (‘western’) models of teaching and learning, whilst retaining elements of their own educational culture (QAA, 2013). Recent data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) show that in 2011-12 there were more than 38,000 Chinese students studying through UK TNE in China, which represents an increase of some 7% from 2010-11 (HESA, 2015).

Of the different TNE approaches, one of the most common forms of collaboration between UK and Chinese institutions is through articulation agreements, whereby Chinese students study at a partner institution in China for up to three years before transferring to the UK partner institution for their final year (or final two years) of study (Hou and McDowell, 2014). A key aspect of such provision is the deployment of ‘flying faculty’ (Smith, 2014), whereby staff ‘fly in’ from their home country and deliver intensive blocks of teaching to students currently based at the overseas partner institution. Whilst a significant body of research now exists around the teaching and learning experiences of flying faculty from across a range of disciplines (e.g., Bodycott and Walker 2000; Dunn and Wallace 2006, 2008; Gribble and Ziguras 2003; Prowse and Goddard 2010; Smith, 20092013, 2014), to date there has been little research into the experiences of Geography faculty, whereby the nature of the discipline means that engaging students in the field is an important mode of teaching and learning (Fuller, Edmonson, France, Higgit, Ratinen, 2006; Kent, Gilbertson and Hunt, 1997). For Geography and related disciplines, putting the skills and knowledge learnt in the classroom into practice, and developing and enhancing generic skills such as team working, problem solving, self-management and interpersonal relationships, lie at the forefront of teaching and learning (e.g., Fuller et al., 2006; Kent et al., 1997; Maskall and Stokes, 2008; Stokes and Boyle, 2009). The importance of incorporating field-based teaching into Geography degree programmes is also highlighted in the UK by the Quality Assurance Committee (QAA) subject benchmarking statement for Geography:

*“Geography is intrinsically a field-based subject. Field experience is an essential part of geographical learning and all geographers require the opportunity to plan, undertake and report significant fieldwork during their programme. An education in geography involves an active engagement with the external world*” (QAA, 2014, p. 10 & 13)

Evidence suggests that Chinese students based in China and studying Geography and related disciplines have little opportunity for guided or independent field work experience (Robinson et al., 2016), and although they do have some laboratory experience, this tends to take the form of the Chinese teacher demonstrating how the equipment works with little opportunity for the students to experience the kind of ‘experiential learning’ (Kolbe, 1984) fundamental to Geography undergraduate degree programmes in the UK (e.g., Healey and Jenkins, 2000). As such, the delivery of Geography modules in China by flying faculty presents some unique challenges for academic staff, which are less evident than in other disciplines.

This paper employs aspects of Brookfield’s (1995) approach to critical reflection to explore some of the opportunities and challenges that exist for UK-based academic staff, through reflection on the author’s own flying faculty experiences delivering an introductory Physical Geography module, in English, at a partner institution in China. These flying faculty experiences (three visits, one in each of the years 2014, 2015 and 2016) are part of a 3+1 articulation agreement between a UK HEI and a Chinese HEI, whereby the students study at the partner institution in China for the first three years of their degree programme before transferring to the partner institution in the UK for their final year of study. Flying faculty contribute to teaching in the second (FHEQ Level-4) and third year (FHEQ Level-5) of the degree programme in China, and students take their fourth year (FHEQ Level-6) in the UK alongside their UK-based counterparts. Face-to-face modules are delivered by flying faculty over an intensive 10-day period (see Robinson et al. (2016) for a detailed overview of the degree programme). Brookfield (1995) suggests that critical reflection comprises of four ‘lenses’ which broadly correlate to the processes of (1) self-reflection, (2) student feedback, (3) our colleagues' experiences and, (4) engagement with the pedagogic literature. In this paper, particular emphasis is placed on the unique challenges and opportunities that arise for flying faculty in Geography and related disciplines and as such, Bookfield’s fourth reflective lens is replaced with a critical reflection which focuses on ‘field-based learning and teaching in the international classroom’.

**Self-reflection**

Smith (2009) suggests that transnational teaching experiences cause us to challenge our own existing perceptions of teaching and learning. Through reflection on these experiences we are able to enhance our own professional practice (Smith, 2013). Often dismissed as anecdotal, our autobiographical experiences as teachers can have long-lasting and profound implications for our professional practice (Brookfield, 1995). Prior to my first flying faculty experience in China in 2014, I had little ‘autobiographical experience’ of international teaching and learning to draw upon, and although I took advantage of the opportunity to take a short language course in Mandarin, I received no other specific training in advance of my first visit to China. My initial approach to teaching and learning in the Chinese classroom was therefore shaped by the widely held beliefs in the literature (Table 1) that Western and Asian educational systems are ‘binary opposites’ (Ryan and Louie, 2007), with the former based around a more student-centred approach, whereby students take more responsibility for construct their own knowledge, and the latter a more teacher-centred approach, whereby learning involves listening to the teacher (Szkornik et al., 2015).

**INSERT TABLE 1**

Dunn and Wallace (2006) highlight that academics teaching transnationally can suffer from cultural hegemony, whereby our Western ways of learning and teaching are considered more important, or where the ‘non –Western’ is considered as the ‘other’. In my design of teaching and learning activities I therefore needed to take into account the way in which students in Chinese HE are taught and learn, alongside the need to increase the students’ exposure to methods of learning, teaching and assessment used in the West to facilitate their transition to UK HE (Szkornik, 2016). A key challenge for me therefore, was to facilitate the transition from surface (teacher-led) to deep (student-centred) learners without ‘problematising’ these students (HEA, 2014). As an example, incorporating student-led activities (e.g., small group discussions, group work) into the classroom in China was initially quite challenging. Hayes, King and Richardson (1997), Maguire, Evans and Dyas (2001) and Ramsden (1992) all highlight the role of prior learning experiences in determining a student’s approach to learning. Incorporating interactive, students-centred activities into classes in a setting where ‘teacher is king’ challenges deep-seated cultural beliefs and can lead to ‘cognitive dissonance’ amongst students (Festinger, 1957). Initially, instead of enhancing student engagement in the classroom, incorporation of student-centred activities appeared to increase the students’ resistance to learning. Continuous self-reflection, and adaptation of my teaching and learning methods throughout the delivery of the module, enabled a gradual transition from an initial ‘teacher-led’ approach, to one which was increasingly student-led.

Anecdotal conversations with Chinese Faculty suggested that they were also very keen to incorporate more ‘western’ methods of teaching into their classrooms, however; the barrier appeared to be in getting the Chinese students to engage in discussions and group activities. Several members of Chinese Faculty commented to the author that they had ‘attempted to be more like teachers in the West’ by initiating in-class discussions, but after several failed attempts at engaging the students they had ‘given up’ on trying such new approaches. Interestingly, Chinese students seemed more likely to embrace different approaches to learning and teaching when those activities were delivered by a teacher from outwith their own culture.

**Student Feedback**

Brookfield (1995) suggests that reflecting on our teaching and learning through our students eyes can help us to be more responsive to our students learning needs. For flying faculty, who may be less familiar with their cohorts of students, gaining a better understanding of how students are responding to often very different teaching methods is of fundamental importance. Whilst the role, effectiveness and reliability of student feedback has long been debated in the literature in Australia, North American and the UK (e.g., Richardson, 2005), there is comparatively little literature published on the role of student feedback in classrooms in China. Contradictory to the author’s own perceptions, Chinese students are used to completing module evaluations, and are actually happy to be very open and honest about what works and what does not. In the Chinese classroom, a system of ‘class monitors’ is used, whereby a single student, ‘the class monitor’, acts on behalf of his or her cohort to transfer information between students and their teacher (Robinson et al., 2016). In some instances, use of the class monitor system can be an effective way of gathering informal (and anonymous) feedback from students.

In my own practice I found that the more lengthy ‘standardized’ feedback forms, commonly employed at the end of the modules in the UK, do little to enable the faculty member to respond to the needs of that particular cohort of students at that particular point in time, although they do provide important feedback for adapting teaching and learning approaches longer term. Some examples of the feedback received via ‘end-of-course’ module evaluations, which often raises issues not commonly encountered in the UK classroom (e.g., the use of mobile phones as a learning tool, problems with access to virtual learning environments (VLEs)), include:

*“You allow using phones in class! Actually we indeed use phones for a little bit of fun besides referring to the dictionary, but it really helps us learn better”*

*“Downloading the books online cost me too much time and sometimes we cannot download successfully”*

*“Teacher spoke slowly at the beginning and then got faster, giving students enough time to suit the language”*

Anonymous student comments from ‘end of course’ formal module evaluation forms (2014).

As an alternative approach, in my own practice in the Chinese classroom I employed mid-module evaluations (typically after two or three days of intensive teaching) which took the form of simple statements for the students to complete (“I like.......”, “I don’t like.......”, Please do more.........”, “please do less............”). In some instances, the informal mid-module feedback from students was surprising. For example, in my second flying faculty experience in China (in 2015) I decided to write on the blackboard using capitals letters, as I thought this would make my writing clearer for the Chinese students. Several students made comments to indicate that this was not effective:

“*Capital letters have strange impact to students. Chinese students are much use to lower case letters”*

*“Please don’t use capitals when writing on the board”*

Anonymous student comments from ‘mid module’ informal evaluation (2015)

The subsequent year, to address this issue, I decided to write on the blackboard using cursive writing, but informal student feedback after three days of classes resulted in many comments along the lines of:

*“I don’t like your blackboard writing because sometimes I can’t watch clearly.”*

*“I don’t like the letters of the words [on the blackboard] because some of them could not be identified clearly.”*

*“I don’t like your fuzzy handwriting – maybe you cannot use chalk very well?”*

*“Please do less ligatures between letters.”*

Anonymous student comments from mid module evaluation forms (2016)

In the UK classroom we typically give little thought to how we write on the whiteboard, with the assumption that most students will understand what we write. However, for flying faculty, in a classroom where English is not usually the first language of students, some students are relying on copying down key terms and phrases and translating them at a later point in time. In this situation, clarity of writing is of utmost importance to facilitating student learning. Similarly, different spoken accents, and the way in which we move our faces and lips when speaking, can hinder or facilitate learning for some students. Seeking informal student feedback early on in module delivery can be critical in highlighting any issues the students might be experiencing, enabling the teacher to address issues accordingly.

**Our Colleagues Experiences**

Smith (2009, 2013) proposed that flying faculty teaching experiences can lead to ‘transformative professional development’. Whilst for many colleagues the opportunity to deliver modules as flying faculty can indeed be a very positive experience, for some faculty the task can be incredibly challenging. The more limited access to information technology and resources (e.g., problems with accessing VLEs, lack of internet access in classrooms), the long and often intensive teaching hours (six hours a day for two weeks, including weekends), the difficulties in contacting and liaising with UK-based colleagues (e.g., Google Mail is not accessible from China), and the language and cultural differences encountered in everyday situations and decision making can lead to ‘culture shock’ (Oberg, 1960; Adler, 1975). In such situations, drawing on the past experiences and expertise of our colleagues’ can be particularly significant. In my own practice, informal discussions with colleagues who had previous experience as flying faculty were pivotal in terms of challenging my initial expectations and perceptions of what to expect in the Chinese classroom. Dunn and Wallace (2006) state that such ‘shared network experiences’ are a key aspect of professional development. Gribble and Ziguras (2003) argue that in addition to developing teaching and learning approaches, flying faculty also need to gain an appreciation of the broader cultural, social, economic and political contexts of the country that they are visiting. Informal mentoring can therefore be critical in terms of preparing flying faculty for the more social and cultural aspects of their overseas visits. In my experience these aspects included formal, evening ‘banquets’ with very senior University staff, as well as interaction with friends and family of Chinese faculty staff who were all keen to participate in the local area field trip, such was the ‘novelty value’ of this approach to teaching and learning. In addition, for Geography faculty, our colleagues’ prior experiences of designing, developing and running field and laboratory-based activities, knowledge of local field sites, and insights into the availability of field equipment at the host institution, can prove fundamental for staff preparing to teach overseas.

**Field-based learning and teaching in the international classroom**

Active engagement with the external world through field work is an important mode of teaching and learning in Geography and related disciplines (Fuller et al., 2006; Kent et al., 1997; Maskall and Stokes, 2008; Stokes and Boyle, 2009). Whilst there is significant body of literature highlighting the importance of field-based teaching and learning for Geography and related disciplines (e.g., Fuller et al., 2006; Kent et al., 1997; Maskall and Stokes, 2008; Stokes and Boyle, 2009), there is little published on the challenges that flying faculty face, and the adaptations that they must make, when incorporating aspects of field-based learning and teaching into their modules and programmes delivered internationally.

From my own perspective, incorporating field-based learning and teaching into the classroom in an unfamiliar environment presented the most acute challenge of my flying faculty experiences in China. In fact prior to my first teaching visit to China in 2014, and based on the experiences of colleagues who had taught in China before me, it actually resulted in my decision to remove a series of field-based activities from the module, and make subsequent changes to the module aims, intended learning outcomes and assessments. However, in my second and third teaching visits (2015 and 2016), and as I became more comfortable and confident with teaching in the international classroom, I re-introduced a series of campus-based field activities into the module. Although geographical field work is often associated with residential trips to ‘exotic’ field locations, Fuller et al. (2006) note that even a short period of field work, conducted in the vicinity of a students’ own institution, can be a very effective learning tool. The choice of campus-based field work also immediately removes some of the key challenges associated with field-work teaching for staff leading field courses in unfamiliar environments (e.g., lack of familiarity with field sites, little time for reconnaissance, transportation logistics, field safety concerns; Table 2).

**INSERT TABLE 2**

Evidence suggests that Chinese students based in China and studying Geography have little opportunity for guided or independent field work experience (Robinson et al., 2016). However, providing these students with field work experiences is critical if they are to subsequently transition to UK HE and receive degrees in Geography and related disciplines from UK-based institutions. Given their limited or non-existent previous field experience, it is no surprise that such students are often unprepared for the challenges of outdoor working. In the author’s own experiences, students frequently turned up for a field trip with umbrellas instead of waterproofs, and were rarely equipped with suitable footwear, despite several classroom-based sessions on ‘preparing for field work’. Many students found walking in unfamiliar settings (e.g., on forest tracks, across fields and on uneven, steep ground) an unsettling experience and had to be physically helped to reach some locations. Consequently, the group took much longer to reach field sites than might ordinarily be expected.

In the UK all field-based activity requires careful risk assessment and communication of the potential risks (and mitigating measures) to students (Robinson et al., 2016). Whilst a key aspect of introducing students to working in the field also included learning about risk assessment and field safety, no formal risk assessment was required by the Chinese partner institution (or the UK-based partner institution) for taking students out into the field in China. In the event of an incident in the field, I was not made aware of the procedures to be followed at the Chinese partner institution, nor did I have an oversight of any pre-existing medical conditions that might affect a student’s ability to safety undertake field work. Such important issues, and the subsequent questions of legal responsibility (Robinson et al., 2016), may prove critical as to whether Geography faculty choose to integrate field-based teaching into their modules and programmes at overseas institutions. A compromising approach is for flying faculty to make use of any campus-based opportunities (Table 2), which enable learning outcomes to be met whilst working in a comparatively ‘safe’ environment, where help is more easily accessible and the risks associated with field-based activities can be more easily mitigated.

Field work also presents some interesting challenges from the point of view of the interaction between UK and Chinese staff in the field, and the pedagogical and professional development of our Chinese colleagues. Field teaching is something which Chinese teachers tend to little have experience of, hence the opportunity to spend time in the field with their students alongside UK-based academics was seen as very ‘novel’ and exciting, so novel that several Chinese Faculty bought along friends and family for the day. In some cases the novelty of this experience for some Chinese teachers resulted in them being very quick to answer questions posed by the UK academics, when these questions were actually intended for the students. It also led to conflicts between the Chinese teachers wanting to use the field equipment provided by UK-based faculty, instead of allowing their students to use the equipment first. These experiences shows that the Chinese Faculty are keen to engage in such activities and enhance their own professional practice, but that this needs careful management to ensure that this is not at the expense of their students own learning experiences.

**Summary and Conclusions**

Teaching in an unfamiliar environment brings with it a plethora of challenges, such as the more limited access to information technology and resources, the long and intensive teaching hours, the difficulties in contacting and liaising with UK-based colleagues, the perception of the ‘teacher as king’ and ‘fountain of all knowledge’, and the language and cultural differences faced in everyday situations and decision making, and a significant body of research now exists around the teaching and learning experiences of flying faculty from across a range of disciplines (e.g., Bodycott and Walker 2000; Dunn and Wallace 2006, 2008; Gribble and Ziguras 2003; Prowse and Goddard 2010; Smith, 2009; 2013; 2014). However, for Geography and related disciplines, active engagement with the external world through field-based learning is a unique, and perhaps the most challenging aspect, of any flying faculty’s overseas teaching and learning experience. It is nonetheless an important aspect of a students’ Geographical learning experience, and critical if they are to subsequently transition to UK HE and/or receive a degree by a UK-based awarding institution. Critical reflection on these experiences from a variety of different perspectives (self-reflection, student feedback, our colleagues' experiences, field-based learning and teaching in the international classroom), enables us, as academic practitioners to adapt our teaching and learning methods and to facilitate our students to move towards a more student-centred approach to learning (Brookfield, 1995). Dunn and Wallace (2006) and Smith (2009) highlight how reflection on our international experiences can enhance our own professional practice at home. My own experiences of teaching in China have increased my self-esteem and self confidence, and enhanced my transition to a more facilitative teaching-approach (Branning, 2005). I am also much more conscious of the cultural differences and diverse learning needs of international students in the UK classroom. As Geographers, we often feel that our own teaching and learning materials are inherently ‘international’ and inclusive in outlook, because we frequently use examples of our own research from around the World. Nonetheless, my flying faculty experiences in China have highlighted the acute ‘Western’ or ‘Eurocentric’ focus of much of my own teaching and learning materials and this has subsequently led to adaptations to make them more inclusive of international students in the UK classroom. Ultimately, staff with international teaching experience are in a strong position to enhance the internationalisation of their own institution’s curricula, and to breakdown some of the perceived barriers between Western and Asian educational systems.

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