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Neo-colonialism in Distance Learning in Barbados and Canada

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ABSTRACT

This study reviews the literature on the evolution of distance learning in Barbados and Canada's higher education systems in the context of their unique geographies and colonialism. First, postmodern concerns about what is "good" in education (Slaughter, 2001) are considered, followed by a brief discussion of the role of distance learning in neo-colonialism. Next, the evolution of Barbados and Canada's higher education systems within the colonial context is described, setting the stage for the development of distance learning. Both countries' roles within the Commonwealth of Learning organization are compared and used to locate neo-colonial patterns. This analysis highlights risks and benefits of working with external organizations to meet higher education needs in Barbados and Canada, the neo-colonial complexity of a Commonwealth educational organization, and opportunities for strengthening the local while embracing the global in both of these regions.

Keywords: Barbados, Canada, commonwealth of learning, distance education, higher education, neo-colonialism

INTRODUCTION

Distance learning has expanded over the past two decades in many parts of the world as growing student-age populations increasingly seek tertiary education (Klimova & Poulova, 2016; Qayyum & Zawacki-Richter, 2019). Online education provided by brick-and-mortar institutions, open university offerings at a distance, and other mobile learning arrangements help educate large numbers of people by removing physical barriers to access and broadening participation, and is utilized in geographically isolated locations to alleviate the need for relocation or long commutes to campus (Boiselle, 2014; Gordon et al., 2014; Simon et al., 2014; Stewart, 2016).

However, many smaller nations and isolated regions that use distance learning have histories of colonialism and already struggle to promote local knowledge in their curriculum, leaving open the possibility that neo-colonial notions about what can and should be taught will predominate over local needs (Facey, 2001; Louisy, 2001). Widespread importation of online learning technologies have raised concerns that these regions may become a “dumping ground for sub-standard services” (Boiselle, 2014, p. 9), which negates the benefits of distance learning in bringing educational opportunities to remote students. While concerns about externally sourced educational programming may exist in any setting, populations that have previously been subjugated or marginalized by colonization sit at a multifaceted crossroads of local knowledge systems, interactions with and dependence upon non-local educational providers, and postcolonial relationships with development-oriented organizations.

The relationship between distance learning curriculum providers and recipients, and the way in which post-colonial status intersects these roles is not clear-cut. Untangling the complexity of these arrangements can reveal how distance learning may serve as a conduit for neo-colonialism by shaping and supplying externally-sourced ideas about what is ‘good’ in education, as this case study of two intertwined countries and the commonwealth organization within which they exist demonstrates.

This study explores the way Barbados and Canada utilize distance learning to meet higher education demands, and the challenges that arise for local populations when implementing materials produced elsewhere. Exploring these two countries shows differences between two highly developed former British colonies with geographically isolated populations, and also illustrates the importance of spatial location and context in access to higher education (Valimaa, 2009). This case study is bounded by the presence of the Commonwealth of Learning (CoL), a postcolonial organization to which both countries belong, and which is geared towards increasing development throughout commonwealth countries (Commonwealth Governments, 2014). In exporting curriculum, CoL is also exporting their vision of what is ‘good’ in higher education. The objective of this study is to unravel how postcolonial efforts at development via distance learning intertwine with neo-colonialism and global notions of what is ‘good’ in education, potentially at the expense of what is ‘good’ locally.

Barbados’ relative isolation as a small island and the isolated Canadian North (in this study, my usage of the “Canadian North” or “Northern Canada” refers to the Canadian territories of Yukon, Northwest Territories, and Nunavut, and my usage of “Canada” refers to the country as a whole) present added challenges for providing traditional higher education opportunities, making these regions particularly salient for this study (Lipatov, 2014; Louisy, 2001; Marshall & Marrett, 2008; Philpott, Sharpe and Neville 2009). The number of students enrolling in universities has increased worldwide, and these two countries are no exception (Boiselle, 2014; Marginson, 2016). In addition, institutions in both countries, like most in the world, have limited (or dwindling) financial

resources to support education, requiring novel approaches for meeting resource demands (Jones, 2012; Zephyrine, 2019).

Supranational organizations like the CoL have emerged as providers of distance learning technology but bring with them the omnipresent threat of eroding the local by embracing the global (Facey, 2001; Louisy, 2001). Yet supranational distance learning organizations like this may be in a unique position to incorporate more collaborative higher education initiatives. Adapting the local to the global (or vice versa) via hybridity of forms could open up a third-space, partway between the local and the global, providing a generative response to these postcolonial tensions (George & Lewis, 2011).

This study first describes and situates postmodern concerns about what is 'good' in education (Slaughter, 2001). Next, earmarks of neo-colonialism are identified, and used to direct a line of postmodern inquiry into higher education and distance learning. Then, the colonial origins of higher education in Barbados and Canada are reviewed to provide a backdrop against which to examine their distance learning trajectories and struggles for self-determination. The CoL is then highlighted to provide an example of how Barbados and Canada differently experience external distance learning support. Because the CoL is rooted in the British Commonwealth, this organization represents a thread connecting these countries with their colonial past. Exploring the ways that Barbados and Canada interact with the CoL reveal neo-colonial patterns impacting their higher education systems, and the unique conditions that distance learning adds.

Disrupting Narratives of What is 'Good' in Higher Education

What is considered 'good' in higher education in Barbados and Canada has been shaped by each country's colonial roots, their postcolonial developments and efforts at self-determination, and the current globalized, market-oriented educational context (Louisy, 2004). Slaughter's postmodern approach argues that higher education reforms like massification are generally considered 'good,' unproblematically situated as a way to increase access to Western-style higher education systems that produce graduates suitable for entry into the global marketplace (2001, p.391). This perspective, she notes, fails to question whether or not the changes occurring in institutions to broaden access are actually having the intended effect of equalizing opportunities for diverse student groups, and how evolving power dynamics might actually reify existing inequalities (Slaughter, 2001). It is from this postmodern approach that I am interrogating distance learning systems in Barbados and Canada.

Applying a postmodern approach can involve posing critical questions designed to destabilize and critique, unraveling embedded power structures and, heretofore, unquestioned assumptions (Aylesworth, 2015). Revealing underlying power structures can make stark imbalances between groups like those emanating from a colonizer/colonized relationship, even after that relationship has seemingly faded from prominence. In combination with questioning assumptions, educational actors taking a postmodern approach might ask why things are done the way they are, and who really benefits. An underlying assumption in higher education is that distance learning is good and that learners benefit. In interrogating this assumption, I retrace the colonial roots of Barbados and Canada's higher education systems to help lay bare the colonial influence from its origin to the present. This involves identifying explicit colonial controls, more subtle colonial influences, efforts at postcolonial self-determination, and the ever-evolving global education system in which neo-colonial powers operate.

Neo-colonialism may be exhibited in former colonies through the military outposts of and economic dependency on former colonial powers, and the importation of educational standards and policy (Ali, 2010; George & Lewis, 2011; Girvan, 2012). Also

falling under the auspices of neo-colonialism is “ideological co-optation,” when one group exhibits control over another such that the subjugated population begins to internalise this imbalanced world view, seeing themselves as inferior and even failing to question this hierarchical arrangement (Girvan, 2012, p. 9-10). Asking questions about the norms of higher education and distance learning can reveal who benefits from these norms, and what problems persist or arise. In both Barbados and Canada, neo-colonialism can be observed in the way that higher education systems have followed Western (namely British and American) norms, even in places where some of these norms clash with those of the dominant local population, as we will see below.

EVOLUTION OF HIGHER EDUCATION AND DISTANCE LEARNING IN BARBADOS AND CANADA

Barbados has a population of around 290,000 and, at 431 square kilometers in size, is small enough to fit within Canada’s largest city, Toronto (World Bank, 2020). In comparison, Canada has a population of 37.6 million, and over 9.9 million square kilometers of land, though most of the population resides along the southern border with the United States (World Bank, 2020). While Barbados lacks space and suffers from brain drain (Rudder, 2012), Canada has no lack of space and its southern cities currently have brain gain, attracting skilled immigrants from around the world (Ng & Metz, 2015). Barbados is one of the most developed countries in the Caribbean, with a GDP of \$5 million USD in 2018, the highest in the Caribbean, and a Human Development Index of 58, which ranks in the ‘Very High Development’ category (UN Development Programme, 2019; World Bank, 2020). Canada’s GDP was \$1.7 trillion (USD) in 2018 and ranks 12th in the Human Development Index; however, the development level of small, isolated far northern communities is considered much lower (UN Development Programme, 2019; World Bank, 2020).

Evolution of Higher Education and Distance Learning in Barbados

Widespread higher education did not take hold in the Caribbean until the 20th century, partly because of the expense, but also because of a sense that educating the Black population would be ‘dangerous’ for the small White elite (Cobley, 2000, p. 3). Miller proposed that colonizers were not interested in establishing infrastructure beyond what was needed to make money in the short-term (2000). As the number of imperial officials dwindled, rather than find a way to educate locals to take control, it behooved the empire to continue sending expatriates to maintain control, obviating the need for a locally trained populace, and maintaining an educated colonial elite (Miller, 2000). This racially divided educational system left a lasting imprint on Caribbean nations, where ‘there remain remnants of a colonial gaze towards the “centre”’ indicative of neo-colonial ideological co-optation (Lam, 2011).

Beginning in 1876, the ‘best’ students from Barbados were granted scholarships to attend Cambridge and Oxford in England, contributing to a lack of higher education development in the Caribbean, and making local attempts to educate the population look paltry in comparison (Cobley, 2000; Coggins, 2018). Growing nationalist uprisings in the colonies inspired England to designate the University of London as a degree provider in the Caribbean through local colleges; educating colonial subjects through an English-affiliated institution met the needs of the British Empire, keeping subjects “intellectually and ideologically tied to England” (Cobley, 2000, p. 10). These early higher education initiatives were shaped by events in the British Empire, and cast local efforts at developing higher education within the shadow of colonial institutions and control.

Barbadian students sent abroad were initially mostly male and White, however by the Interwar Period; Black and Brown students from the Caribbean were also studying

abroad (Coggins, 2018). These students eventually began to complain to the British Colonial Office about racism they experienced in the UK. At the same time, African students studying abroad were being radicalized against colonialism (Coggins, 2018). These factors contributed to British colonial authorities' decision to give their Caribbean colonies a university (Cobley, 2000).

The University College of the West Indies (UCWI) opened its Jamaica campus in 1948 with an inherently conflicted identity. The university was both a British stronghold over its increasingly nationalizing colonies, as well as a way to unite and stabilize the Caribbean and foster political and economic independence (Coggins, 2018; Cobley, 2000). The UCWI adhered to British standards, with degrees continuing to be granted via the University of London. However, punitive expatriate leadership and entry requirements that did not correlate with local secondary school standards kept enrollment and graduation rates low in the university's early years, though rejected or failing students often found success at schools in North America and the UK (Cobley, 2000). That these standards were adhered to even when students left and succeeded elsewhere raises the question of who this educational institution was really for, and for what purpose. Even those succeeding in UCWI programs obtained degrees not necessarily locally useful, perpetuating "a narrow neocolonial elite" (Cobley, 2000, p. 17).

In 1962, the UCWI gained independent status and was renamed University of the West Indies (UWI). An agricultural college in Trinidad had been incorporated in 1960, and the Barbados campus at Cave Hill was added in 1963. Nettleford (as cited in Cobley, 2000, p. 19) described a process of 'piecemeal institutional engineering' over the ensuing decades to reorient the university system locally rather than as a colonial structure, which was increasingly important as Barbados gained independence from the British in 1966. That the process was referred to as "piecemeal" and requiring "engineering" demonstrate the depth to which colonial ideas about education had already been engrained, requiring dismantling and redesign. Island-specific professional and vocational colleges opened throughout the 1950s and 1960s, and community colleges and other regional institutions were developed in the 1970s and 1980s, all providing local supplements to the UWI and more locally focussed professional training (Miller, 2000; Thomas, 2008). These efforts toward localizing would soon be situated alongside improving technology and an increasingly interconnected world.

Distance education programs were developed in the late 1970s, including correspondence study and audio conferencing technology (Howe, 2000). In 1992, the UWI began a new push for distance education utilizing modern technology and with a more robust, student-centered approach, and the UWI Distance Education Centre (UWIDEC) was established, enabling dual-mode delivery (both face-to-face and online) of postsecondary education (Harvey, 2000; Kuboni, 2017). Not only were ministers of education in the region concerned with broadening participation in higher education, but also with 'the economic advantage it would bring to small countries in a period of expansion of knowledge industries, globalization and trade liberalization' (Harvey, 2000, p. 326). Of note is the fact that this dual-mode delivery push was influenced by a 26-page report compiled during CoL consultant William Renwick's site visit in 1991; the CoL was present as the gaze of distance learning leaders in the Caribbean was shifted increasingly toward the global marketplace (Howe, 2000). This shift did not progress without local apprehensions.

By the early 2000s, concerns about the quality of, and competition from a massive influx of external online higher education providers, as well as the appropriateness of education designed outside of the local environment, were voiced in the Caribbean (Marshall & Marrett, 2008). Concerns included the quality of instruction, where degrees would be recognized, and how relevant the programs were to local needs,

particularly when institutions operated outside of local collaborative agreements. Indeed, ‘twinning partnerships’ involving external institutions collaborating with local institutions to deliver programs formed the majority of external higher education provision (Thomas, 2008, p. 30). Many of these twinning arrangements were department-specific, subverting the application of broad policies to structure and guide the process (Marrett, 2008). Distance learning could occur without local control or authority, potentially undermining Barbadian efforts to define the conditions of higher education in the region.

The next section traces a similar history in Canada, focusing on the less developed northern reaches of the country, where postsecondary education and distance education have, like Barbados, evolved largely within the context of external actors.

Evolution of Higher Education and Distance Learning in Canada

In Canada, higher education has existed since the 17th century, beginning in the colonial territories of New France, although degrees were not formally offered until the late 18th century (Jones, 2014). Early colonial educational endeavors under the auspices of the French Roman Catholic church typically involved attempts to ‘civilize’ aboriginal populations, an approach that would persist for some time (Jones, 2007, p. 629). As British loyalists migrated into Canada from the US following the Revolutionary War, they developed higher education institutions as a way of strengthening their British identity, beginning with colonial colleges and later expanding into religious institutions (Jones, 2014). Strengthening British identity in Canada via higher education seemed to be about defining and developing a nation, whereas British colonial power and establishing higher education in Barbados seemed to be about maintaining control of a local population, as described above.

Despite the impetus to strengthen British identity via the higher education, Canadians looked to their neighbors in the US, rather than the British, when developing their higher education systems (Jones, 2014). The first institutions, King’s College in Nova Scotia in 1789 and the University of New Brunswick in 1800, were modeled on New York’s King’s College (now Columbia University), not the British institutional model (Jones, 2014). This perhaps sowed early seeds for developing a uniquely Canadian higher education system composed as a sort of hybrid, rather than a purely imported British system as was initially installed in Barbados. In any case, the higher education system was still in its infancy even as Canada moved towards self-governance within the British Empire.

When the British colonies of Canada, New Brunswick, and Nova Scotia federated into the Dominion of Canada in 1867, enrolment in higher education was relatively minuscule; as such, control of higher education institutions fell under the purview of provinces rather than the federal government or colonial offices (Jones, 2014). Unlike in the Caribbean, multiple institutions shaped by the unique interests of each province were free to develop in Canada, unbound by the colonial restrictions like those that established UCWI as a campus of a British university in Barbados. As Canadian universities massified following the Second World War, government funding was increased and satellite colleges and vocational institutions began opening to meet rapidly increasing demand (Jones, 2014). Higher education was seen as a means for the country to develop socially and economically, no longer just the domain of the children of the elite.

Similar ideals were echoed in the Northern reaches of Canada, where hopes for a Northern university were tied to improved well-being, stability, recognition of a distinctly Northern history and identity, and self-reliance (Graham, 1996; Graham, 2015; Poelzer, 2007). However, some rhetoric around higher education in the North took on a hierarchical, Southern serving orientation with ideals and goals that ‘[reproduce] colonial

paradigms in which Indigenous peoples are not producers but recipients of knowledge' (Black, 2015, p. 43). Within Canada, neo-colonialism has had an intra-national element, with the Southern part of the country looking towards the material resources and sparse populations in the Northern part of the country as a lucrative opportunity and a wilderness in need of taming (Graham, 2015). Such attitudes have shaped attempts to establish postsecondary institutions in Northern Canada.

The initial thrust of postsecondary development in Northern Canada appeared to be driven by what was considered good from a Southern perspective. For instance, the University of Canada North (UCN) was proposed but drew criticism for failing to consult aboriginal action groups before incorporating, and for designing an institution that followed traditional Western structural norms (Black, 2015; Graham, 2015). The failed UCN project prompted a survey of local interests in postsecondary education possibilities, which pointed towards community colleges (Graham, 2015). Kelly described this development as a shift in attention from building a university to support research and educate Northerners, to enabling Northerners to participate more fully in the region's economic development (2015). Early distance learning foundations also began with Southern Canadian roots.

Early notions of higher education distance learning in Northern Canada included a University of Western Ontario (UWO) conception in the 1970s, the "'university of the air" based on a microwave communications network' (Graham, 2015, p. 85). Project leaders, however, did worry about the potential negative impact of a Southern Canadian, Westernised teacher training curriculum on Aboriginal people (Graham, 2015). Other early attempts included phone conferencing and correspondence study. Hybrid models combining online study like videoconferencing with short-term face-to-face study delivered by on-site visitors are numerous (Paquette-Frenette, 2009). Like the small, isolated islands of the Caribbean, the remoteness of Northern Canada has presented challenges for establishing local origin higher education systems.

Recent studies of Northern Canadian higher education highlight the importance of a locally designed curriculum to avoid reifying colonial structures, and some lament the impact of having distance learning instructors who were not knowledgeable about the unique cultures of Northern Canada (Simon et al., 2014). A 2014 study on the implementation of an online teacher education program delivered in the remote reaches of northern Ontario revealed disconnects between the remote students and the program administrators based in southern Ontario city centers (Gordon et al., 2014). Not only did administrators overestimate the quality of internet connectivity in this region, they were also surprised when students were not able to secure time off to attend synchronous course meetings during their teaching hours, and were unable to quickly replace broken equipment due to a lack of nearby retail outlets. The researchers attributed this disconnect to the administrators' lack of awareness of what life was like in this remote region, and their assumption that online schooling would operate in much the same way there that it did in the urbanized southern part of Ontario where they were located (Gordon et al., 2014).

Studies also demonstrate increasing efforts to tailor programs to local preferences, relying on Elders and local language speaking adjuncts in teaching, incorporating an instructor with Northern experience and grief counseling expertise, implementing Aboriginal learning and reflection frameworks to situate the program with local culture and language, flexibility in the manner of delivery, and giving students more agency in how courses are delivered (McAuley & Walton, 2011; Simon et al., 2014). Access to higher education via distance education continues to be viable, and shifts in pedagogical design indicate that attention is being paid to who these programs are for.

The next section describes the Commonwealth of Learning, demonstrating how this organization operates differently in Barbados and Canada, and indicating evidence of neo-colonial patterns via the origin and exportation of distance education.

The Commonwealth of Learning

As part of the British Commonwealth, both Canada and Barbados have access to and participate in the Commonwealth of Learning (CoL), an organization devoted to improving learning opportunities and supporting development through digital technology (Commonwealth Governments, 2014). The CoL was created by the British Commonwealth in 1987 to support learning across the Commonwealth, particularly utilizing technology. The organization is governed by leaders from Commonwealth countries who contribute funding and have relevant regional expertise (Commonwealth Governments, 2014). Funding is also provided by the World Bank and other global organizations that support development initiatives.

The CoL is headquartered in the Vancouver, Canada metropolitan region, and its Open Educational Resources (OERs), technological expertise, and professional development and training resources are accessed by members around the world. The CoL is staffed largely by individuals schooled in Canada at some point in their academic careers. Documents produced by the organization are written in Canadian English and financial figures are reported in Canadian dollars. The organization also has a regional office in New Delhi, India, referred to as the Commonwealth Educational Media Centre for Asia. In this study, the CoL provides an illustrative through-line; its differing relationships with Barbados and Canada are used to interrogate its role in neo-colonialism.

DIFFERING INTERACTIONS WITH THE COMMONWEALTH OF LEARNING

In Barbados, the CoL develops and delivers content related to skills development as well as knowledge in agricultural management, disaster resilience, fisheries, and tourism (CoL, 2018a). The CoL “supports the collaborative development and sharing of OER to promote learning for sustainable development” through the Virtual University of Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC), of which Barbados is a part (CoL 2020, p. 3). In addition, the CoL provides connections to content developers and experts, and has helped facilitate the development of locally oriented programs through professional development and online resources (CoL, 2018a; CoL, 2020). Much of the description of the CoL’s activities in Barbados is encapsulated more generally through their activities in the Caribbean as a whole, making it difficult to parse out how collaborative their interactions are with each country. Though these country profile documents are likely not meant to be highly comprehensive, and other activities might not publicly shared on the website, this perhaps represent a missed opportunity to highlight locally-focussed educational initiatives and collaborations through providing more country-specific details in the profiles.

In Canada, the CoL provides teacher training through Athabasca University’s MOOCs, and conducts and publishes research based on their study of the usage of OERs through the CoL (CoL, 2018b). In addition, the CoL provides the University of British Columbia with student interns at no charge. Students serve in communities and inner-city schools, conducting research and participating in meetings, and receive experiential learning credit (CoL, 2018b). The country profile on the CoL’s activities in Canada also describe Canadians as serving in consulting roles in distance learning and OER design, and professional development for Ministries of Education and other institutions. If Barbadian students serve as interns or consultants through the CoL, this activity was not included in the most recent CoL country profile (CoL, 2020). I was unable to locate any information within the website that indicated how the CoL is used in the Northern part of Canada, if at all (CoL, 2018b). That the Northern region is not identified as a part of

Canada where these distance learning resources may be used has the effect of homogenizing the country, erasing internal differences and spatial distinctions, and therefore rendering the country profile somewhat incomplete. Knowing more about the CoL's activities in Northern Canada might be illustrative in terms of the differing recipient and provider roles within Canada, and how the CoL could help rectify imbalanced access to resources throughout the country.

These contrasting interactions with the CoL demonstrate the ways that Barbados and Canada interact differently with this organization. Barbados appears to primarily be a recipient of the CoL's services, while Canada serves as both a recipient and a provider of services through the CoL. Both countries receive training and digital education access for postsecondary students. In addition, Canadian students may participate in international community service experiences and professional development. Canadian consultants benefit financially from their work with CoL when their services are provided for a fee, and Canada benefits from having the organization housed on their soil, through paid staff positions and international recognition of hosting a globally relevant and developmentally oriented organization.

There is also a benefit derived from the actual development of programs. For example, the Canadian Caribbean Distance Education Scholarship Programme (CCDESP) began in 1998 and involved the CoL, four Canadian universities and students in Jamaica, Dominica, St. Vincent and St. Lucia. Canadian funds supported the students' programs online utilizing the UWI's Distance Education Centre and in visits to Canada. Memorial University reported that developing ten teacher education courses for this program made them competitive global online learning providers (Brandon, 2003). Had the UWI agreed to contribute to the development of these courses, the degrees would have been joint UWI/Memorial University products. However, because the UWI did not contribute to their development, the degrees are Canadian (Brandon, 2003). Reasons for the UWI's lack of contribution to the development of these courses could not be located, but, it could be that the development of UWI's Open Campus was occurring during the same time period.

While it is likely impossible to say who benefits more from interacting with the CoL, based on their country profile reports and their website, Barbados appears to engage more in importing knowledge and content than in exporting it, while Canada is in the opposite position, exporting more knowledge and content than it imports. This could be indicative of a neo-colonial relationship wherein Western-oriented distance learning is being imported into Barbados, with Canada (by way of the CoL) as a neo-colonial power. However, the directionality of information is more complex because, as a consortium, knowledge exported to Barbados may not come just from Canadian resource developers. Within the organization, national lines may break down, with information produced in multiple parts of the Commonwealth and exported across multiple lines into other parts of the Commonwealth.

Which types of programs are developed for export, and where those programs are most in demand does not appear to be readily available on their website, and is a possible area of examination in future research. Such an investigation could indicate how the collective knowledge of the CoL is (or is not) being shared globally, and what neo-colonial roles might be (un)intentionally perpetuated through its distribution.

Having briefly considered both Barbados and Canada, it appears that both countries' higher education systems have been shaped by perceptions of what is good in education that originated outside of the local context, with a modern version facilitated by the CoL. The following section uses this premise as a basis for returning to Slaughter's (2001) call for disrupting traditional notions of what is good in higher education to echo

the utility of interrogating closely what is being imported in Barbados and Northern Canada by way of postsecondary distance learning.

NEO-COLONIAL COMPARISONS

Clearly, the CoL provides useful postsecondary education services through sharing resources, funding professional development, and supporting quality of life initiatives like educating women and enabling vocational skill development that serves local needs (CoL, 2020). It is not the quality of their provisions that are of concern in this analysis, but rather the way in which these services are perceived, and what that indicates, implicitly and explicitly, for local populations.

Boiselle warned of the dangers of adopting any external pedagogical practice or tool without critical thought about how it will impact Aboriginal ways of life (2014). Even when the indigenization of imported materials occurs, globalized systems of knowledge and learning may still form the basis against which local differences are judged (Lam, 2011; Marshall, 2008). If CoL is one of the standards against which local educational efforts are judged, how is the local being affected or shaped by the external, and how might that negatively impact the local? Also important is the potential blurring of boundaries between what is externally initiated and what is locally meaningful, and how what is considered good externally may be internalized locally. Perhaps a hybrid version develops, shaped by the best of both the external and the local. Researchers have raised concerns about this process occurring unexamined.

In Barbados, Louisy described the need to develop “‘globally aware but locally relevant’” knowledge systems (2004, p. 287). Throughout the development of their higher education system, Barbados has worked to shape and reshape institutions to better suit local needs, but this is complicated by an increasingly global approach to higher education, which has been exacerbated by externally delivered distance learning. Louisy called upon Caribbean people to make ‘a concerted effort to locate its culture, and its contributions as differentiated elements in the globalised environment’ (2001, p. 433) to help combat the looming threat of globalization-driven homogeneity and to harness aspects of their culture for engagement in the global market. Marrett emphasized the importance of interpersonal contact as a benefit of these intercultural interactions with distance learning, and suggested that more Caribbean ownership and authorship of projects would better supply them with tools that will be valuable in local human resource development, as well as potential sources of education that can be packaged for use elsewhere (2008). In the context of CoL, this could mean approaching resources and projects with intentional goals of collaboration and authorship, and embracing CoL’s resources while maintaining a steady eye upon actively preserving local identities and culture.

In Northern Canada, the development of the higher education system has been concurrent with Aboriginal self-determination and pushing back against the myth of Northern Canada as an empty, wild wasteland that needs to be tamed or somehow used (Graham, 1996; Black, 2015). The development of distance learning has been about more than access in Northern Canada; it can also be seen as a way for Aboriginal people to exert sovereignty over their land by remaining at home rather than relocating, maintaining and fostering local ties, avoiding being treated as an ‘Other’ in a non-Aboriginal environment, and continuing to support family and community needs through their local presence (Parquette-Frenette, 2009; Simon et al., 2014). Black has described the development of higher education in the North as ‘shaped by national fixation with the North and the nation’s political-economic imperatives’ and indicates that much motivation to develop higher education in the North is compelled by Southern neo-colonial motives (2015, p. 36). Likewise, Northern Canadian scholarship has criticized

the reliance on scholarly attention to Northern studies and Northern problems from external points of view (Graham, 2013). The University of the Arctic Consortium is possibly a partial remedy to this, given that it was wholly developed within the North, though the consortium brings with it the complexity of being part of a bigger circumpolar identity (Graham, 2013).

In light of addressing local needs, Marshall acknowledged that to avoid global, external knowledge can be hazardous to the well-being of the local, and that we should not underestimate the power of the local to redefine, indigenize, and adapt for their own use what they encounter when interacting with imperial ways of being and doing (Marshall, 2008). Importing foreign ideas may lead to ‘border pedagogy’ that actually facilitates knowledge of multiple cultural perspectives that can better equip learners to exist within and across borders (Marshall, 2008, p. 150). Several online programs in Northern Canada have identified ways of utilizing ‘outsider’ tools to meet local needs, for instance, in using the Knowledge Building platform (Scardamalia & Bereiter, 2014) to build upon and share community knowledge, and utilising videoconferencing to support hybrid programs that value interpersonal interaction and all participants having a voice (Paquette-Frenette, 2009; McAuley & Walton, 2011).

Organizations like the CoL, composed of Commonwealth countries with a broad spectrum of development and Aboriginal knowledge, as well as postcolonial experience, are uniquely positioned to incorporate more collaborative higher education initiatives. A third-space, partway between the local and the global, could be a way to approach these tensions in the postcolonial world, adapting the local to the global (or vice versa) via hybridity of forms (George & Lewis, 2011). George and Lewis (2011) referred to the development of spaces where knowledge traditions could be shared for the sake of understanding. By its very digital nature, the CoL opens up space for the sharing of traditions and knowledge, and such conversations are already evident in activities like the collaborative development of quality assessment tools and other materials (Daniel et al., 2006). The way in which these spaces are opened up, managed and utilized may come to be understood and acted upon in new ways.

As many distance learning programs fill needs not yet met in Barbados and Northern Canada, planning for the eventual transition from dependence on external providers to locally delivered programming might also push institutions towards more intentional and timely repurposing of external programming (George, 2008). Marshall noted several calls for governmental policies that protect institutions from external exploitation, increased quality control, intentional program diversification, and tracking of institutions operating in the Caribbean (2008). Permission to operate in these regions might also come with a requirement to contribute to local development (Potter, 2008).

Countries and their institutions might shift to a situation wherein the collaborative work of external providers like the CoL benefits both exporters and importers more equally, with greater attention given explicitly to the complicated nature of these inherently imbalanced interactions. Such work is a major undertaking, but important for valuing Aboriginal knowledge and cultures, and in helping to rectify the legacy of these countries’ colonial heritage.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the development of higher education systems and distance learning in Barbados and Canada, highlighting the imprint of colonialism, and exploring the way in which both countries interact with the Commonwealth of Learning. These explorations facilitated an analysis of neo-colonial processes at work in shifting arrangements between the colonized and their former colonizers, and organizations like the CoL who house both. This study also shows ways that Barbados and Canada are

embracing distance learning, and how distance learning by its very nature can add an amorphous, non-local dynamic to a country or region's attempt to define itself and its goals for local development and well-being. The study concluded with an overview of the research community's recommendations on how to move forward collaboratively, acknowledging the global while emphasizing the local.

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