

Critically Examining the Mobilities of a Critical Thinking Curriculum in Transnational Higher Education: A Case Study in West Africa

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Abstract

This research – which is a work in progress – examines a critical Thinking curriculum as a specific case of how a curriculum is shaped by mobilities across geographical, linguistic and cultural borders in transnational higher education (TNHE), where English is the medium of instruction. The site of this research is a TNHE institution in a West African Francophone country, delivering an American university curriculum. The study adopts a critical theory approach and draws on actor-network theory and utilizes document analysis, interviews, classroom observations and an online activity with various groups of actors to build a rich picture of the Critical Thinking curriculum as a case. It addresses an intersection of comparative and international higher education that has not been explored before: the mobility and relevance of a Critical Thinking curriculum in TNHE in West Africa, thus contributing to critical internationalisation studies and supporting broader educational development efforts in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Cette recherche – qui est un travail en cours – examine un programme d'études sur la pensée critique comme un cas spécifique de la façon dont un programme d'études est façonné par les mobilités à travers les frontières géographiques, linguistiques et culturelles dans l'enseignement supérieur transnational (transnational higher education – TNHE), où l'anglais est le moyen d'enseignement. Le site de cette recherche est un établissement d'enseignement supérieur transnational situé dans un pays francophone d'Afrique de l'Ouest, qui dispense un programme universitaire américain. L'étude adopte une approche théorique critique et s'appuie sur la théorie de l'acteur-réseau. J'utilise l'analyse de documents, des entretiens, des observations en classe et une activité en ligne avec divers groupes d'acteurs pour dresser un tableau riche du programme d'enseignement de la pensée critique en tant que cas. Il aborde un aspect de l'enseignement supérieur comparatif et international qui n'a jamais été exploré auparavant : la mobilité et la pertinence d'un programme d'études sur la pensée critique dans les établissements d'enseignement supérieur en Afrique de l'Ouest, contribuant ainsi aux études sur l'internationalisation critique et soutenant les efforts plus larges de développement de l'éducation en Afrique sub-saharienne.

Keywords: transnational higher education, curriculum development, critical thinking

Introduction

In this paper on my on-going research, I am examining a Critical Thinking curriculum as a specific case of how a curriculum is shaped by mobilities – corporeal, physical, virtual, communicative and imaginative (Sheller & Urry, 2016) – across geographical, linguistic and cultural borders in transnational higher education (TNHE), where English is the medium of instruction. I particularly examine the power relations of this case from a critical theory approach (McArthur, 2021) and draw on actor-network theory (ANT) to understand more fully the intrinsic circulations and mediations of knowledge production that emerge through the interactions of an assemblage of actors: curricula, lecturers, students, management and institutional policy (Adriansen, 2020; Law & Mol, 2001).

The site of this research is an independent, non-profit, TNHE institution in a West African Francophone country, delivering an American university curriculum and awarding its own degrees with national accreditation. Though not (yet) a full branch campus, it maintains a strong affiliation with its American partner university, which provides curricula, textbooks and scholarships.

This study seeks to explore how: policies to teach the Critical Thinking curriculum in this institution evolved, the curriculum is situated, managed and implemented, its delivery is mediated in the classroom, students engage with it and go on to use and adapt in other subjects as well as outside of the academic environment, and power has influenced decisions made about the curriculum.

This research addresses an intersection of comparative and international higher education that has never been explored before: the mobility and relevance of a Critical Thinking curriculum in TNHE in West Africa. Most of the existing research on TNHE is focused on Anglo-American and European providers and East and Southeast Asia as sites of collaboration (Gunter & Raghuram, 2018). Much current literature on critical thinking in higher education (HE) outside Anglo-American sites, too, is ‘largely focused on Asian cultures’ (Schendel et al., 2023, p. 4). There is even less published research on Critical Thinking curricula in TNHE, despite its positioning as a solution to solving complex and varied developmental challenges (Schendel et al., 2023), besides generic critiques of teaching Critical Thinking from a single lens (Moosavi, 2020). Furthermore, there is a paucity of research into the teaching of Critical Thinking in Sub-Saharan Africa and certainly none in the country of my research. Thus, this research contributes to critical internationalization studies and will also indirectly support broader educational development efforts in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Literature Review

Critical thinking seems to be ubiquitous, both within and outside of education. First, *critical thinking* – in lower case – as a way of functioning in the world has garnered increasing prominence in recent decades in the discourse of HE as a desirable outcome to develop vital employability skills in the twenty-first century knowledge economy (Davies & Barnett, 2015); thus, it is embedded in assessments to measure intellectual progress (Song & McCarthy, 2018). Second, *Critical Thinking* – with capital C and T – as a discrete subject in HE has rapidly gained support since the 1980s (Ennis, 2015) and is seen as a way of ensuring that students develop critical thinking skills (Egege & Kutieleh, 2004). This research makes the distinction between the two. Both definitions are applicable to TNHE: developing critical thinking abilities is often presented as a fundamental learning outcome of (Moosavi, 2020) and Critical Thinking as a curriculum subject often appears to be included in many undergraduate programs at, mostly Anglophone, TNHE institutions.

TNHE is different from international higher education (IHE), which is the movement of students across geographical borders (Knight, 2016). In contrast, TNHE – or cross-border higher education (CBHE) – is the mobility of academic programs and providers between countries (Knight, 2016). The academic program provider is the home country and the country of program delivery is the host country (Knight, 2016). TNHE students range from host country to expatriate citizens (Doorbar & Bateman, 2008). TNHE provision could be collaborative, e.g. joint degrees, or independent, e.g. an international branch campus. Through its very nature, TNHE provides a unique context for examining cross-border policy mobility and knowledge circulation (Leung & Waters, 2017).

However, mobility of curricula in TNHE is ‘anything but the unproblematic transfer of knowledge’ (Leung & Waters, 2017, p. 1277). Through curricula, identities, experiences and perspectives are maintained, changed or even unacknowledged through the diffusion of knowledge; education transfers knowledge and confers validity to that knowledge (Bernstein, 1975). That curricula in TNHE increasingly influence the boundaries, legitimacy and universality of knowledges and how it should be ‘taught, learnt and produced’ (Leung & Waters, 2017, p. 1278) exemplifies this transmission. From a critical theory lens, the curriculum is then a reflection of power and social control (Bernstein, 1975): an interplay of tensions between the *planned or intended curriculum* of policy; the *created or delivered curriculum* of teaching practice; the *received or understood curriculum* of student learning experiences; and the *tacit or hidden curriculum* comprising those elements that are extrinsic to the formal curriculum, yet nevertheless communicated by the culture of the institution (Bernstein, 1975; 1996). Another aspect of power is the stratification of local and international education (Leung & Waters, 2017), which creates a ‘cultural distance’ between the ‘producers and consumers’ of TNHE (Ziguras, 2008, p. 44) and elicits questions about the curriculum as a critical tool for creating social consciousness, challenging the hegemony of codified knowledge and finding alternative ways of re-examining multiple epistemologies, through a critical theory approach (McArthur, 2021). Within TNHE, these questions are shaped by the tensions of a relational sense of place within a hybrid global-local framework of social, cultural, historical, geographical, political and other influences (Massey, 1991) and could provide a conduit to expand the validity of knowledges and establish responsible, engaged, curricula (Madge et al., 2009).

Research Methods

One of the main ethical considerations that has shaped this research is my identity as a researcher (Bukamal, 2022), shaped by the various roles I have played as a learner and teacher. My positionality in this research is primarily characterized by my insider-outsider status as a South Asian researching a West African education context. Though many of my participants and I come from formerly colonized countries, our respective histories are varied, so my responsibility is to facilitate their views in way that articulates solidarity in South-South collaboration (le Grange, 2018). Furthermore, as I have previously taught at this institution, my identities as a former lecturer and current researcher were not always static over the course of my fieldwork (Milligan, 2016). Reflexivity is key to interpreting the data, always bearing in mind that my views are likely to be affected by my own experiences (Cousin, 2008).

This research has been approved by The Open University Human Research Ethics Committee. I have adopted case study research because its contextually unique inquiries (Stake, 1995) and recognition of the complexity of social realities in meaning-making (Adelman et al., 1976) make it congruent with a critical theory approach and appropriate to interrogate and analyze the policy and practice of this specific Critical Thinking curriculum, illuminating decisions made, exploring its delivery and understanding its relevance for the students, in particular.

This study is a work in progress, employing multiple methods to generate credible and valid qualitative data. At the time of writing, I have used a critical interpretive approach to analyze policy documents, syllabi and textbooks, interviewed different actors – management, lecturers of Critical Thinking and other subjects and students, selected through purposive sampling – and carried out classroom observations and a participatory activity with students via Padlet to generate different types of data that will build a rich picture of the Critical Thinking curriculum as a case, drawing from the concepts of assemblage and interaction inherent in the ANT approach adopted. Carrying out the data generation in four phases with time for reflection and each previous phase to inform the next has helped me to establish a more thoughtful, considered and transparent research practice.

Through active interviewing (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995), I aimed to create a ‘third space’ in semi-structured interviews, where both the interviewee and I engaged in ‘a reflective, dialogic journey’ towards shared meaning-making (Cousin, 2008, p. 74). The management (5), lecturers of Critical Thinking (2), lecturers of other subjects (6) and students (21) were interviewed about the purpose of the Critical Thinking curriculum, its mediation in the classroom and relevance to other subjects and to students’ academic and extra-curricular activities and future aspirations. The participants were of West, Central and Northern African, French, American, British or mixed nationality.

These interviews were complemented by 24 classroom observations of Critical Thinking and other subject lectures to observe teaching and learning practices, student engagement and classroom interactions. They were followed by a brief post-observation discussion with the lecturer to clarify any points arising from the observation. Moreover, student participants filled out a short questionnaire to establish some demographics, including their previous educational experiences. An anonymous Padlet wall further engaged them, as a follow-up to the interviews, exploring what they have found most useful in the Critical Thinking curriculum and what else they might have included. In the next phase, I intend to bring together these multiple data sources through critical interpretive analysis to understand further the mediations and circulations of the Critical Thinking curriculum in this institution.

Reflections on Fieldwork

Having only just completed my fieldwork, these are the themes that have emerged (thus far) through the four phases, which will be interrogated in-depth as I enter the stage of focused analysis. First, in the new mobilities paradigm, Sheller and Urry (2016, p. 11) emphasize “the constitutive role of movement within the workings of most social institutions and social practices”. This is exemplified in this research, particularly through the calibration of facts, contexts, mobilities and spatialities that are in constant interaction with each other, while still maintaining a sense of stability and integrity, congruent with the ANT approach (Law & Mol, 2001). Second, circulations of curricula and knowledge shape how the Critical Thinking curriculum is characterized and understood within the institution, including its positioning and purpose through the lenses of different actors – the management and lecturers, in particular. Third, while cultural contexts influence the ways in which the curriculum is mediated and circulated within and outside the classroom, the impact of spatial and temporal forces create relational and variegated cultural contexts and places. Moreover, these circulations and mediations also define the relevance of the Critical Thinking curriculum across the broader undergraduate program. Even though circulations and mediations of curricula are prevalent in every educational context, what makes it unique in this case is the relational sense of place that is structural in TNHE: the tensions between the national and the transnational, the global and the local and critical thinking and Critical Thinking.

My insider-outsider status (Milligan, 2016) as a researcher lent itself both in practical and reflexive ways. Often, finding quiet spaces for interviews was a challenge, but many former colleagues generously lent me their offices. My familiarity with the institution, combined with my relative distance as a former lecturer, also built a sense of trust and provided a shorthand in interviews, especially with the lecturers. Moreover, my presence through multiple classroom observations contributed to supporting co-construction through shared experiences in the interviews with student participants – some of them referred to lectures that I had observed and I relied on my notes of the classroom observations to develop some of the interviews.

Reflexivity was vital to creating a ‘third space’ within interviews (Cousin, 2008, p. 74), providing both the interviewees and me with an opportunity to consider our own positionality. Critical thinking appears to hold a range of diverse meanings and practices at this institution, sometimes unlocking the discussion of topics considered contentious within the cultural and institutional contexts. A journey of shared meaning-making could, at times, encompass the expression of deeply-held beliefs by participants. Being reflexive as an active interviewer, listener and researcher also meant examining my own reactions to these views, engaging in more in-depth discussion and continuing to create a safe space for participants to share – or even reconsider – their ideas without judgement.

Conclusion

These initial reflections will be followed by several readings and an in-depth analysis of the data. In the next phase, I intend to bring together my multiple data sources through critical interpretive analysis (Sage, 2012, p. 2) to understand further the mediations and circulations of the Critical Thinking curriculum in this institution.

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