

Language, Education and Society in Changing Times: Paradoxes, Tensions and Challenges

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Language, society and education in a world being changed by ICT, travel possibilities, communications and technologies require dynamic and often difficult responses. The complex changes in social, political, economic, and civic life require new ways of being, as well as new literacies. Political, sociocultural, economic processes of globalisation and localisation demand diverse literacies to negotiate needs that overlap, criss-cross and intersect. The papers in this volume explore the various ways in which responses attempt to mediate the complexities involved.

There is an urgent need to confront brave new worlds in education and society, which requires rethinking about the dialectics between change and continuity. This would certainly include new forms and discourses of making meanings beyond conventional interactions to include changing discursive processes in interaction with the broader sociopolitical changes made necessary and critical by the compression of space and time.

Intense social change in the 21st Century has compelled the need for new views of literacy and identity, as well as new subject positions. In this regard, Sarjit Kaur explores student evaluations of teacher effectiveness in higher education. The complex responses from students show a conjunction-disjunction of student needs where broad social changes and the situated multilayered needs of teacher training take place. Teacher education may be viewed as a discursive site that engages a number of social institutions for example, those of schooling, media, communications, technology, workplace, and family, all of which influence participant interactions that in turn frame the expectations, learning and literacies of learners. Sarjit Kaur's contribution on student evaluations of teacher effectiveness reveals a complex of learner needs with tensions surrounding differing and shifting expectations of tertiary teachers in terms of lecture delivery, mode of assessment, student support, and tutorials. There is incongruence in teacher and student views on what good teaching is; views that are at times at variance with those of academic staff some of whom remain in the elitist paradigm and who do not see their subject positions shifting in line with more inclusive views of education, with regards to access and equity. Ambivalent feelings of empowerment and disempowerment amongst learners in higher education are discernible in Malaysia, with strong voices being raised about what counts as learning, what counts as knowledge and who are considered good teachers.

The variations as well as common grounds between teachers and learners on perceptions of effectiveness in teaching-learning interactions could be considered in relation to intense changes in society impacting on tertiary space, the community's and the individual's concepts of learning and knowing. The fact is that radically changing views of new persons, new subjectivities require a critical and reflexive consideration of dominant models and representations of education. Importantly, the global in the local as a trajectory in new times needs problematising. There are several views of what globalisation is and of the indigenous responses to this phenomenon. Nation-states may unproblematically pursue the neoliberal agenda of economic change, viewing education's primary role to be that of reproducing learners for the capitalist workplace. There are other views of globalisation, which see it as an uneven process to be importantly mediated by local meaning-makers and citizens, where the global site is engaged in interaction with local ways of seeing-doing-learning, a heritage-oriented position sustaining vernacular life-forms, including indigenous languages. This process of interaction required reflexivity around issues of the ways of knowing and the assumptions and power structures behind such ways of knowing.

Literacies involve the processes of meaning-making between differing life-worlds, viz. secondary life-worlds of school and work with those of the primary life-world of the family. Changes in contemporary life demand reflexive responses involving multilingual/cultural multiliteracies involving linguistic, subject-matter and cultural crossings, the critical transitions and fusions between local knowledge with cosmopolitan knowledge. It requires thinking around the costs, benefits, risk and consequences of particular valuing of "knowledge" and of "doing knowing", the possibilities in the pluralisation of knowledges. Sustainable and situated education needs to prepare teachers, learners and citizens to negotiate dominant meanings naturalised in terms of economic and political and hegemonic institutions like the media, government, business, industry and neoliberal agendas of economic change at local and global levels. Learners need new predispositions and attitudes including fluid and pluralistic capacities, critical thinking, relating indigenous ways of knowing to other ways of knowing, acquiring attitudes, behaviors and life strategies.

New modes of meaning-making and learning extend well beyond static ways of acquiring information. This, it is argued is brought about by developments in communications technologies, capitalism and the possibilities in civil society which has necessitated a paradigm shift in the expectations of the learner and the teacher inevitably situated at multiple sites with its paradoxes and tensions. Learning may require what is seen to be symbolic analytic work privileged in the cosmopolitan first world with its powerful ways of valuing, ways of communicating knowing and doing knowing (Homi Bhabha, 2004). There is also the mindless copy type factory work needed for the factories of the Third World to realize the primary goals of neoliberal capitalist industries. Unsustainable literacies may lead the developing Third World into an unproblematised continuation of the latter kind of labour, and the likely eroding of their life-worlds within a powerful global marketplace of unsustainable commodification and consumption.

The concept of situated globalisation-localisation attempts to balance the risks of excessive globalisation through reflection about the possibilities and wealth in cultural difference, and as opportunity for discursive dialogues that include pluralist notions extending well beyond those of narrow ethnic, religious, gender, local and nation-state identities. Education has to confront this challenge through various pathways and transformations. Where cultures meet, common grounds need to be established. Intercultural transitions, for example, need to be negotiated. A syncretic blend and palimpsest of subjectivities may be needed to cope with of intercultural crossings and mixing, processes which are in flux.

Reflexivity and open inquiry around cultural and knowledge production are required if one views learning as a life-long journey of dialogues. A deconstruction of normalized conventional views of what is reductionist ethnic, class, gender, religious/spiritual and nation-state affiliations would have to be considered. Pluralistic pedagogy in a world of overlapping and shifting contexts of learning, work and social life would question essentialised and dominant identities both within the construction of the self and of the other. This discursive strategy of pluralism can be used in transforming the dominant gaze, power, norms and assumptions embedded in constructions of ethnicity, linguistic, ideological, nation-state and class. Pluralism conceives of learning and partnerships in multiethnic, multi-religious/spiritual, and multilingual/cultural environments where individuals try to make meaning out of heterogenous contexts admittedly with its paradoxes, tensions and conflicts.

In this regard, Gitu Chakravathy's paper on *Teachers' stories* investigates the various life-worlds of in-service teachers studying to obtain a Bachelor's degree at Universiti Sains Malaysia, majoring in English Language (including Linguistics) and Literature studies. The paper provides details of the shaping influences and teaching goals behind teacher narratives on language and education in social life. The study attempts to meet a need in Malaysia, since research 'specific to teacher

education for TESOL in specific cultural contexts is scant" (Nalliah and Thiagarajah, 2001, p.24) According to Chakravathy, "The voices of these multilingual, multiethnic and multicultural Malaysian teachers who are training to be English language, Linguistics and Literature specialists at secondary school level present contextualising and shaping perspectives to experiences". These voices have been presented as utterances to show special concerns, values, confusions, attitudes and personal feelings, all of which express nuances of knowledge and experience. Together, they provide perspectives on language, education and society". He cites Nalliah and Thiagarajah (2001) as saying that teacher education for TESOL in Malaysia

is situated in a context of sociocultural diversity where the profile of both the learners and teachers of English is as variegated as the socioeconomic and ethnic mix of the country's population. Yet...teacher education programs have been tailored by the 'one-size-fits-all' syndrome... (p.23)

He continues: "There is a need to examine the numerous realities of teacher backgrounds, expectations, personal beliefs, knowledge and teaching goals in order that a broad base of data can provide new directions for English language teacher education. Furthermore, Nalliah and Thiagarajah argue that

different constructions of meaning exist across cultures which inhibit transferability of particular practices between them, when global strategies are indifferent to local conditions, instructional tensions between the progressive new and established old engenders... explicitly stated objectives of teacher education programs never really materialize as trainees abandon whatever they learn during this training for more traditional approaches they have been exposed to as language learners (2001, p. 24).

Chakravathy's conclusions are noteworthy in the discussion about the sustainable knowledge of indigenous communities, and the engagement of the teachers' knowledge of the local within the global.

He argues:

The four voices presented here represent interesting, valid, varied and context-related responses to questions pertaining to their professional leanings. In so doing, the paper has attempted to examine some of the issues pertinent to the education of language teachers in a multicultural and multiethnic society. They show the multifarious issues and dimensions that impact on teaching. It is relevant to note that these voices represent sincere reflections of what each one values, aspires to do, and where each has come from. While revealing personal slants, they also reveal conflicting understandings and different interpretations of what teaching is about. More important, these teachers obviously believe in the important roles they play, believe in what they do, think what they do and believe in are valid, and see them themselves as essentially decent teachers. No one wants to be rated a 'master teacher' (at least at this stage), yet do not value their input to teaching any less.

It will be valid to ask what the responses would be if these voices were added to, and we obtained narrations of other teachers' lives and professional developments. These are limited perspectives, but their value lies in the ways in which they create a web of distinctive connections and diversions, all of which have their own validities and relevance in the context of the dynamic, evolving and non-static world of education. They show individual responses and strategies of coping that have been built on each individual's knowledge, values, upbringing, religious inclinations, ethnicity, cultural traditions and influential others.

In terms of transitions between dominant ways of learning and vernacular, indigenous ways of learning, Chakravathy notes:

It would be stating the obvious to say that there needs to be more research such as this, and that the more we learn, the more we will be able to chart the major influences that impinge on teachers' lives. In particular, we may learn to acknowledge the powerful influences that mould the individuals before they enter teacher education institutions. In doing so, teacher education may be able to provide valid recognition of where the teacher-to-be comes from, recognise the individual's strengths rather than weaknesses, and legitimises each one's uniqueness as teachers. In this way, institutions may be able to accommodate variety, recognise that each is different, and that perhaps each contribution adds to the whole... As more such voices are heard and analysed, we can add to the range of questions to ask, the range of dimensions that impact on teaching, and the overlapping influences that shape teaching and learning. More importantly, we tell teachers that they matter, and that voices must be heard.

I think this point needs reiterating, that we need to engage the voices of people involved in language, education and society, to be reflexive of the locations of these voices in a matrix of power relationships within and without the tertiary space of higher education.

Bromeley Philips conceives of a sociocognitive view of learning that sees learning as social constructivist, one where language is not mentalist but a socially constructed phenomenon. Philips examines learning within the contexts of the situated learning of a learner in an academic context in higher education. Philips deals with the form of instruction that helps learners enter authentic, socially situated communities of learning in a tertiary context. One might ask what the roles of education are in terms of making the transitions between the pedagogies of the classroom and that of the changing social contexts in the multiethnic, multilingual environments of a Malaysian classroom within internationalizing and global imperatives? What are the contestations and mediations to be looked at in view of these powerful trajectories?

Thang Siew Ming and Wong Fook Fei discuss the diverse teaching styles of teachers, arguing that it is important for ESL (English as Second Language) teachers to be aware of the students' various learning styles and to adapt their teaching styles. They describe a study undertaken with regard to a small group of ESL instructors teaching English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses in a public university in Malaysia to investigate firstly, the extent to which ESL instructors apply current theories and thinking on ESL teaching, and secondly, the extent to which the learning styles of their students are taken into account by ESL instructors. The study is drawn largely from a questionnaire and reveals that most of instructors are aware of learner-centred approaches to teaching English, including autonomous teaching approaches. These are of course approaches that need to be mediated in terms of the cultures of learning within the classrooms and within the multiple life-worlds of learners. It seems reasonable to suppose that transitions between diverse teaching styles should be reflexively linked to those of learning styles, in situated contexts of learning and social life.

Zamri Mahamad and Mohamed Amin Embi provide an account of the learning strategies of learners who have high proficiency – as compared to those with low proficiency – in Bahasa Melayu. The contribution concentrates on the pedagogic contexts within which this paper on the learning of Bahasa Melayu has been situated.

Mounir J. BenZid in *New Bottles, Old Wine: Arguments for an Incorporation of Stylistic Analysis into Literature Pedagogy* argues for the relevance of stylistic analysis to exploit reading effectiveness for Tunisian poetry. He compares this with the traditional humanistic approach in the teaching of poetry, outlining some of its limitations in terms of the Tunisian contexts. It is to be noted that Benzid hopes that his contribution would 'renew the debate and enrich the dialogue rather than

be a prescription or a conclusive argument." His paper attempts to look at new ideas, concepts and approaches poetry in relation to the teaching in Tunisia.

Pursuing a discourse on the complexities of the global in interaction with the local, Peter Kell, in this volume, discusses paradoxes and tensions in the case of the Malaysian nation-state in its interaction with education and language education in English, in particular. He reflexively discusses the discourses of globalisation, Islamisation, education, and citizenry in relation to developments in the Malaysian nation-state after Sept 11. In particular, a point to contemplate regards distinctions in the concept of globalisation, especially the responses of the local to the global, and as a discourse contesting dominant views of globalisation, which should be viewed as complex, shifting and heterogenous rather than monolithic. Further, he provides an important reminder to us in his concluding paragraph that we need intercultural mediators on the ground level to interrogate dominant media and institutional views on Islamic terrorism and fundamentalism.

Ooi Kee Beng provides a broad landscape from which one may usefully locate education and language. While some may question the role of this discourse on education, language and society, what he provides is a discourse amongst other possible discourses involving the sociopolitical contexts within which language and education take place, a view which an educationist, a teacher, an educational activist has to be aware of. The classroom is arguably a space of sociopolitical constraints, tensions and opportunities. However, it is up to us as readers to negotiate the meanings that such a piece might offer in terms of our position as educationists, learners, teachers, citizen, members of civil society, and activists who are inextricably involved in institutions of power and hegemony.

In conclusion, the articles are an important collection representing situated ways of looking at the questions around language and education in society. A few papers pose challenges to dominant views of language and education in the face of competing needs and desires in communities, situated at once in global, local, cosmopolitan, and vernacular contexts. Other papers explore ways of meaning-making, learning and teaching as possibilities in the diverse environments of education. Chakravathy's paper in particular, points towards the rich variations in situated ways of being and of doing, located in the diverse indigenous life-experiences of those involved in learning and teaching, including parents, students, teachers, activists, and citizens. There is a reflexive consideration of modern and yet nativised and sustainable sociocultural perspectives on education, and culturally sensitive pedagogies which, whilst being sensitive to the broad sociopolitical and educational landscapes, the universals of social justice and access, are involved at ground zero, in specific transitions.

At the same time, we look forward to a wider range of considered views of learning as a primary mode of doing, and teaching as partnership centred around living-knowing-learning in social life. We may need to consider innovative paradigms – not merely to focus primarily on teaching, a top-down process of learning primarily on the teacher's own expert terms, which continues to dominate thinking in this part of the world. Importantly, there is a need for us to question what constitutes knowledge, ways-of-being-in-the-plural, doing plurality in meaning-making. Learning has to do with questions of ontology, the ways of being of the learners, extending well beyond the question of epistemology, the ways of knowing. What are the plural ways of being, subjectivities and literacies expected when the plural has become inevitable for the 21st century? What are the ways of negotiation and ways of dialoging around differences and what are the ways of establishing common grounds in the way of difference? For example what happens when multiple cultures meet, i.e. when peoples with indigenous resources (including languages) find themselves in a modern classroom where an either/or choice may seemingly be presented? What are the possibilities of the in-between, the multiple in motion? What are the places of meaning in between and involving multiple cultures affording new languages, new ways of being, sustaining vernacular

and modern ontologies? What are the benefits, risks, costs, and consequences of particular ontologies and ways of meaning-making for unproblematically positioning in-out groups in our classrooms and society?

A sustainable pluralist literacy may offer possible pathways, ways of looking at interlingual/ cultural communication across diverse languages and discourses, as a basis for exploring human, civil and worker creativity, for the formation of locally sensitive communities in interaction with webs of communities including citizens and workers across nations and the planet, committed towards the appreciation, representation and the building of shared discourses acrossing difference and in diversity. This includes the process of conscientisation, engaging vernacular knowledge in interaction with cosmopolitan knowledge to allow for a range of choices through examining the benefits, risks, costs and consequences of the valuing of particular knowledges on individuals, community, nation, humanity and the planet.

Language and education are situated within the complex intersections of indigenous knowledge, globalisation, modernisation, corporatisation, commodification, internationalization, the international movements of learners-workers-citizens, and civil society. Language and education need to be renegotiated in changing times and compressed spaces. Perhaps we could all help weave a tapestry of imagination to transform our society and classrooms as sustainable knowledge based communities honoring the heritage and resources of indigenous communities whilst negotiating the global and the contemporary. In language and education we need to continue to build webs of equitable and socially just communities beyond our 'naturalised' and often unthinking membership in the market place of 'productive diversity' and labour dialogically towards an inclusive and sustainable planetary globalism.

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