Voices from the British Studies classroom

by Maria Dasli  

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This *Briefing* forms part of a wider research project which explores the culture learning processes of international students attending a credit-bearing British Studies module in part completion of a foundation/access programme in the UK. It draws on three sets of in-depth student interviews and 15 classroom observations used to triangulate findings to reveal that the module presents partial representations of Britishness through discussion of factual information that neglects the affective dimension of learning. From this, students are seen to construct generalisations about the host culture which the module fails to address despite claims to the development of intercultural competence.

- British Studies aims to facilitate the development of intercultural competence by alerting student sojourners to cultural differences that may affect the relationship between self and others in given cross-cultural situations;

- Most theorists agree that it is possible to discern two major ways of understanding British Studies. The first is derived from the discipline of Cultural Studies. The second is derived from the discipline of Intercultural Communication;

- Yet, there is a considerable body of theoretical literature supporting the view that the ostensible aims of British Studies modules are not always realised in practice;

- For example, some theorists suggest that British Studies modules work within a unifying logic of identity that promotes rigid cultural stereotypes based on overgeneralised typographies;

- However, their suggestions have not, as yet, attracted intensive empirical attention, and therefore competing accounts as to what the field aims to achieve remain open to interpretation and dispute.
**Introduction**

In many British Studies modules in the UK, a primary goal is to facilitate the development of intercultural competence by alerting student sojourners to cultural differences that may affect the relationship between self and others in given cross-cultural situations. But, beyond assertive statements and recurring assumptions about the cultural knowledge British Studies is thought to offer, many students continue to face the stress of adapting to a new country, culture and often language suggesting that the ostensible aims of British Studies modules are not always realised in practice. Some critics, for example, point out that much curriculum content presents a conservative image of Britain which prioritises established public institutions rather than the anthropology of everyday life, while some others argue that many British Studies modules work within a unifying logic of identity that promotes rigid cultural stereotypes based on overgeneralised typographies. Their perspectives have, however, attracted little empirical attention to date, and therefore competing accounts as to what the field aims to achieve remain open to interpretation and dispute.

This *Briefing*, therefore, aims to contribute to the current debate on British Studies by investigating the culture learning processes of international students attending a credit-bearing British Studies module in part completion of a foundation/access programme in the UK. Drawing on three sets of in-depth student interviews and 15 classroom observations used to triangulate findings, the analysis considers how the cultures of Britain are presented by the British Studies module, and the extent to which it can claim to facilitate the development of intercultural competence.

**What is British Studies?**

Most theorists agree that it is possible to discern two major ways of understanding British Studies.

The first is largely derived from the discipline of Cultural Studies. This is concerned to explore the relationship which cultural forms, practices and institutions have with society and social change from a critical European Marxist tradition that interrogates relations of oppressive power within capitalist societies. One of the main influences behind its research agenda was the work which Raymond Williams (1958) had undertaken in *Culture and Society 1750-1950*, a now seminal text marking a move towards an anthropological understanding of culture not confined to the summits of achieved civilizations. In this work, the author formulates the proposition that ‘culture is ordinary’ and identifies two ways in which it must be understood. First, culture refers to a complex set of beliefs, attitudes and practices which social groups negotiate and share; and second, its growth is an active process of meaning-making which no individual can ever grasp entirely.
Associated primarily with the idea of historical cultural materialism that draws attention to existing power structures used to disseminate the ideology of the ruling class over time, this twofold proposition enables scholars of Cultural Studies to come to a deep understanding of how canonical literary texts discriminate between the values of the civilized aristocracy and the culture of non-elite classes when organising knowledge of the social world.

The second way of understanding British Studies is largely derived from the discipline of Intercultural Communication which is framed by developments in the area of language-and-culture pedagogy. This has seen a shift away from the idea of linguistic competence with its emphasis on imitating native-speaker models towards a richer vision of intercultural competence. Intercultural competence emphasises the ability to negotiate the distance between one’s own and other cultures, and encourages language learners to construct an ever-expanding cultural platform of shared knowledge – a ‘third space’ – from which to bring two cultures into a relationship. At its core lie five behavioural objectives that characterise the practices and skills required for students to act interculturally. They can be summarised as follows: (a) curiosity and openness to otherness; (b) knowledge of one’s own and other cultures; (c) knowing how to interpret an event from the point of view of another culture and relate it to one’s own; (d) knowing how to discover cultural information and operationalize knowledge of a culture under the constraints of real-time interaction; and (e) developing critical cultural awareness (cf. Byram, 1997).

The British Studies module

Informed by these perspectives, the British Studies module at the centre of this study aimed to facilitate the development of intercultural competence by inviting learners to reflect upon the shifting nature and role of culture in contemporary British society. In so doing, it claimed to familiarise students with a range of non-academic texts (e.g. newspapers, websites) and accessible academic readings from which they could undertake directed research into the historical, social and political conditions that affected the construction of British identity during the twentieth century. Within limits of knowledge, this approach would enable them to collect, interpret and evaluate data and information from the point of view of another culture while making comparisons to their own where appropriate.

Key findings

During the interviews, most students confirmed that the module referred to the political history of Britain through discussion of some key events that affected the construction of British national identity during the twentieth century. This approach would enable them to understand the structural changes that have taken place in the country by seeing the working class as one force of resistance which has struggled to regain political authority through a number of collective arrangements such as voting and protesting.
Fundamentally though, they asserted that fact-based knowledge constituted the default pattern of learning in the classroom when expressing concerns about possible contradictions between the concrete context of everyday encounters and the passive reproduction of a standardised canon of texts that failed to take into consideration the actual viewpoints of those concerned.

Classroom observations also confirmed the type of learning the participants described as the tutor was frequently observed to distribute hand-outs found on the website of BBC (www.bbc.co.uk). Among them, one can distinguish those referring to ‘British Timelines’ presumed to serve as a non-negotiable set of facts about the political history of Britain. These usually formed part of reading comprehension activities in which students were invited to either respond more generally to a short list of questions or provide specific statistical figures about the ethnic make-up of the UK as one example. Risager (2007) explains that while this approach is part of an established culture-pedagogic tradition designed to offer an objective, all-round picture of a society, it often pays little attention to the affective dimension of learning that emphasises the ability to tolerate cultural difference in the process of understanding and dealing with otherness. Thus, to her, it can have a damaging effect on culture learning as some learners may seek strategies to counter the impact of perceived threats to cultural identity emerging from the arguably patronising curriculum content of the field.

The interviews made an illustrative case of this point as most participants constructed relatively innocent and blatantly negative generalisations about the host culture by suggesting that they had been subjected to unfair treatment or even religious and ethnic prejudice during their extended period of residence in the UK. Realising, however, that their views might be questioned, they attempted to licence them or soften them through the use of mitigating discourse features. The kinds of mitigators they employed ranged from references to personal experience that served to make their statements more trustworthy to face-saving utterances from which they could preserve a positive image in the presence of the interviewer who did not necessarily share their views. To achieve this, they foregrounded a negative other-impression and a positive self-impression simultaneously that enabled them to present themselves as victims who could not satisfy the needs of their British counterparts despite their many efforts.

Regrettably though, the module did not address these cultural generalisations despite claims to the development of intercultural competence. This became particularly evident during the interviews when most participants displayed an arguably misleading understanding of identity formation. Here, some expressed a need to adopt unquestioningly the cultural practices of the other as if ‘going native’ is the best possible solution to approach the host culture, while others assumed that residence abroad demands individuals to deny their cultural backgrounds by adopting surface behaviours.
Although these enabled them to orchestrate effective cross-cultural encounters to a degree in essence they prevented them from constructing a ‘third space’ in which social identities are constantly re-negotiated in-between cultural spaces or at their extremities.

Conclusion

For almost two decades, intercultural theorists have been discussing the importance of embedding intercultural elements within a British Studies pedagogy as a means of optimising the potential of international experience through education abroad. However, despite established models and approaches which provide background influence on culture learning and teaching, simplistic assumptions about culture still underlie pedagogic practices. Drawing on three sets of in-depth student interviews and 15 classroom observations, this Briefing brought empirical evidence to confirm the view that culture is not approached in a principled way in the British Studies classroom; as the presentation of factual information was often seen to overtake discussions that could accommodate the affective dimension of learning. As a consequence, most respondents constructed relatively innocent and blatantly negative generalisations about the host culture which significantly compromised the ability to display an understanding of their own and others' intentions during the communication process. So, what can be done to make the experience of living and studying in the UK less threatening and more accessible to international students? The answer to this question is by no means straightforward; as it requires a major analysis of the history of British Studies, and an understanding of the ways in which teachers are encouraged to reconceptualise their professional roles as the world changes. But, if teachers are to help their students realise their full potential, an awareness of the pitfalls of British Studies may enable them to plan changes in their practices.

References


About this study

The findings reported in this Briefing come from a wider study which has been recently published in Language and Intercultural Communication.
CERES International Conference 26-28 June 2013

Racism and Anti-Racism through Education and Community Practice: An International Exchange

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