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Belonging - to What? Longing to Be - What? (0213)

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Much of my research in the field of international higher education   has explored, in particular, how our learning, teaching and assessment practices need to be reconceptualised and reframed in order to ensure a learning environment that is vibrant, reciprocal, celebratory of diversity and thus inclusive (e.g. Author, 2011). In our interactions with students who come to the UK from another country to study, it is crucial, in my view, to ensure that, not only do they feel welcomed as people, but also that we welcome different academic traditions and educational experiences as a healthy and important challenge to   the dominant pedagogical theories and practices in our own institutions.

In a recent article about international education in Australia, the UK and the USA, Sidhu & Dall'Alba (2013) claim that it is important that we 'critically examine the embodied subjectivities assembled for these students and read these against the complexities they encounter as raced and gendered subjects' (p.414). By 'these students' read 'international students'. Later in the same article, they argue that 'embodiment' raises several questions about what is meant by an 'international education'. These questions include 'how learning occurs and who international students have the opportunity to interact with in their studies' (p.417). The frustration and disappointment at the lack of interaction between students from different contexts is, unfortunately, well documented in the literature (e.g. Hyland et al., 2008, Montgomery, 2010). There can be complex reasons for this lack of interaction including cultural cliques, language, cultural differences in socialising, and institutional and degree course barriers.   Espino, Munoz & Kiyama (2010), for example, in writing about their experiences as 'Latina doctoral recipients' discuss how the 'multiple strands of our identities collided with institutional cultures' (p.804).   These doctoral researchers describe how they found support outside of their academic departments and, at the same time, muse on whether this excuses those departments from working towards creating more inclusive environments (p.814). Their claim that their ideas are pushed aside or silenced by academics, rather than being explored together, validated and acknowledged is one that troubles and raises further questions for me. How do we enable students/doctoral researchers to speak about what they may be feeling but that often remains unspoken? How do we get beyond the surface of politeness and apparent celebration of diversity so that students in higher education feel able to confront their differences, express their fears without, as Fanghanel & Cousin (2011) suggest, inflating differences? Given all of these apparent complexities, how can we build a strong learning community, one to which all students feel that they belong?

For many Muslim international students their faith enables them to find 'belonging' (Brown, 2009). Brown's observation from her research that 'the discovery of the importance of sameness in a multicultural setting undermines the contrasting claims that…globalisation will lead to an embracing of cultural diversity' (p.65) presents a challenge for consideration.   Similarly, interviews that I

conducted with Iranian postgraduates in Malaysia indicated that a determining factor in their decision to study in that context was that they would be able to practise their faith openly without fear of recrimination. This enabled them to feel at least some sense of belonging in a higher education environment that marginalised them in other ways. Yet a study conducted by Sawir et al in 2008, in Australia, found that 'same-culture networks are not a universal panacea' (p.148), drawing attention once again to the importance of adequate pastoral care in universities or ensuring satisfactory engagement with 'local cultures'.

In this paper, therefore, I want to revisit what is understood by belonging, enculturation, marginalisation and inclusivity in higher education, focusing in particular on the experiences of students from outside the UK. What is it that students want to belong to? Do some long to belong (to something) and others not at all? If students long to belong to an 'academic culture', how can we effect an enculturation process without seeking to assimilate?

 'As we learn to live sustainable and just lives so we form embodied identities that connect us to diverse others with renewed feelings for global responsibility' (Seidler, 2010, p.190). Through this paper, and in light of the discussion outlined in this abstract, I will consider that assertion and reflect on the extent to which it may be realised in UK higher education.

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