

Internationalisation in practice – local experiences and cultural learning

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Abstract Ten experienced teachers at LTH were interviewed about their experiences of teaching in English, as an example of internationalisation. All ten had previously been rewarded with (ETP) for scholarly teaching and they were all self-selected. The interviews focused on personal experiences in the form of narratives, both made by the interviewee personally, but also as narratives originating from other teachers, and then communicated to the interviewee. Results show that internationalisation is materialised in many forms within LTH, often as local practices within sub-cultures, developed by one teacher alone or by groups of teachers. Further, experiences in the form of narratives do generally not travel within the LTH across sub-cultural boundaries. The conclusion is that internationalisation happens as variations of local practices within sub-cultures and that personal experiences made by individual teachers at LTH only to a limited extent contribute to organisational learning. Various limitations of the study are listed.

I. INTRODUCTION

Internationalisation in higher education has been on the agenda for many years, not the least at LTH. “As a leading faculty at Lund University, the Faculty of Engineering LTH embraces internationalisation as a fundamental strategy to maintain excellent research and education.” [1] More than 400 courses are offered in English [2]. These allowed 436 international students [3] to study at LTH during 2009. To teach in English is an explicit strategy to achieve internationalisation “at home” [4]; it prepares all students for future workplaces in an international environment and enhances LTH’s competitiveness [4].

The literature on internationalisation is prolific, and the phenomenon is usually studied as a policy dimension with international policy trends, national implementation [5] and particularly institutional level policy development being the predominant interest. [6]. When implications for students are discussed these often take the shape of evaluative studies of specific programs, such as Erasmus mobility [7] or of research into international students’ experience in particular settings [e.g. 8]. Internationalisation is often also written about as a normative call for teachers to acquire specific skills of building an internationally oriented curriculum and displaying capacity for intercultural communication [9, 10, 11]. There are far fewer empirical studies of the international classroom (IC) from the teachers’ perspective, focusing on their actual teaching practices, experiences and identities in specific contexts.

One exception from this mostly policy driven literature describes 20 teachers teaching in ICs in Australia [12]. (The term international refers to both students not having English as

first language but also students having a cultural background differing from most Australian students.) Findings indicate that the teachers had a tendency to adapt their teaching towards a teacher-focused approach [13] because of a desire to meet students’ different expectations. It is implied in the study that international students prefer a more teacher-focused approach. Several reasons for this desire are discussed.

A second exception explores international doctoral students’ experiences within an institution in England [14]. This study shows that the international students’ degree of integration into a research culture is dependent on the “microclimate” within the research-group. This study discloses internationalisation as a local practice constructed among several group-based subcultures within an institution.

At LTH it is acknowledged that teaching in the “multi-cultural classroom” is highly dependent on the teachers’ pedagogical and linguistic competence [4], and teachers are offered support in the form of competence development [15]. But it is not clear how they experience the increased variation among students in the classroom and the fact that they teach in English.

This study aims at investigating individual teachers’ experiences of teaching in English and the subsequent increased variation among students in the classroom. It focuses on two questions:

I. How do internationalisation in the form of courses taught in English materialises at LTH? Internationalisation at LTH is clearly supported from the policy-level, but it is still unclear how individual teachers experience it.

II. If experiences made are to enrich LTH as an organisation, these experiences must be shared within the organisational culture that is they must travel. Therefore: are experiences made by individual teachers communicated within the organisation?

II. PROCEDURE

To answer the above questions ten experienced teachers were interviewed. The interviews lasted for about one hour, they were semi structured and conducted by a researcher from another university. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed in the light of the above questions, first by the two authors independently and in a second stage collaboratively in order to reach coherent answers to the questions.

All the ten interviewees had previously been rewarded for their scholarly teaching. Six of them were professors, two assistant professors and two expert teachers; nine were male teachers and one female. In many respects the sample are

successful teachers within the faculty and represent a dominant strata within the organisational culture.

III. CONCEPTS USED

In the analysis central concepts are organisational culture, discourse, repertoire, genre, narratives and rumours.

The overall perspective focuses on organisational culture [16, 17]. Culture is constructed as individuals during interaction make sense of events and experiences in their local professional context. These interactions, through habits and traditions, form norms, which over time gain structural properties and thereby influence the individuals. These structures do not, however, control the individuals. They can, as knowledgeable agents, deviate from what is expected of them [18], and sometimes they do; but mostly they act according to what is normal within the culture.

Schein [17] describes organisational culture as composed of three layers: 1) The artefacts, e.g. things done and said and material constructs. Artefacts are overt and visible for an observer. 2) Espoused theories, explanations used by the inhabitants while asked about reasons for observed behaviour. Espoused theories can be extracted during interviews or observation. 3) Underlying assumptions, basic reasons for the culture to exist, its *raison d'être*. These assumptions are almost never changed unless the organisation goes through a crisis. Basic assumptions are only possible to retrieve analytically by an in-depth investigation of the context or the meaning behind the dominant discourses.

In our study we are interested to see two things:

I. Is the organisational culture in relation to the internationalisation homogenous or heterogeneous, that is if LTH constructs internationalisation as one homogenous culture, or if individual teachers, or groups of teachers, construct many forms of internationalisation forming a heterogeneous culture.

II. The second focus for our investigation is how and if organisational learning takes place within LTH, in relation to internationalisation. To explore this we focus upon narratives (as an example of artefacts [18]), in particular if narratives travel within the culture from one part of the culture to another. If so, it would constitute an opportunity for LTH to learn from personal experiences made by individual teachers. If narratives do not exist or exist but do not travel it would be a sign of a lost opportunity for organisational learning.

I. In order to investigate the dynamics of local organisational culture reflected in the interviews we employed the concept of "orders of discourse" from Critical Discourse Analysis (CDC) [19, 20]. The CDC perspective is suitable for tracking the dynamics of social change and social practice through linguistic expression. This broad analytical approach focuses on discourses (understood as ways of reflecting and construing reality – espoused theories can be seen here) genres (ways of acting) and styles (ways of being or identity construction). The former two broad categories were used in this analysis to complement the overall focus on narratives. Discourses (and meta discourses- called 'repertoires') were used to focus on

how the IC is broadly understood and construed among our sample of teachers (and their context). Genres were used in very broad terms as ways of acting in the classroom and the curriculum and allowed us to focus the analysis on the actual ways of implementing the IC at LTH (teaching approaches and behaviours, course design choices, extracurricular activities etc).

II. In order to investigate the issue about organisational learning, in terms of whether narratives travel within the culture, we particularly asked the interviewees about concrete personal teaching experiences; if they talked to others about them and if they have heard about experiences of other teachers.

Basically, a narrative is a story describing an event. It often includes a character that is involved in something taking place over time [21, 22]. Narratives can reveal how individuals make sense of what is happening in their context and have a potential to allow for the "identification of commonly shared positions and meaning" [23 p.93]. A related concept is rumour, a phenomenon showing many of the same features as narratives, but differing from it as it is accompanied by a sense of being unverifiable, "there is little or no authoritative evidence or official information to establish its credibility" [24 p.71]. Understood in this way, narratives often reveal information that *appears* to be verifiable, while rumours, due to the way they are communicated, signal that they are unverifiable.

In this study narratives are assumed to reveal information that is to some extent of higher quality than rumours. An argument for this is that (in this study) narratives contain a character or a specific group involved in an event, while rumours often do not. Narratives therefore are accompanied by a possibility to trace the main character and ask him or her directly, a fact that socially increases the credibility of the narratives.

IV. FINDINGS

The first section I. under this paragraph deals with how internationalisation in the form of courses taught in English materialise at LTH; the second section II. deals with whether experiences made by individual teachers (especially in the form of narratives) are communicated within the organisation.

I. The general findings show clearly that all internationalisation is local (institutional and sub-institutional as well as individual). Regarding the broad institutional context we have found that there is a dominant way of constructing the IC. The dominant repertoire is of *normalisation of the IC*, of acceptance of teaching in English as normal, and of a general drive for future development in this direction. This normalisation is opposed in a very few instances by *problematization of teaching in English* and teaching international students. The few attempts made were all peripheral in nearly all interviews (in 9 out of 10). A discipline-related repertoire of *language as an instrumental tool* was prominent (as opposed to *language as an identity*

marker or tool for creative self-expression).

Many well-established discourses contributed to the construction of the institutional culture, such as: the discourse of Swedish students as very good English speakers, the discourse of English as the scientific lingua franca, the discourse of the intercultural learning as a useful value added for future scientists and engineers. This analysis led us to conclude that LTH has indeed shifted from a national to an international university. This is reflected in a shared way of construing the values of the IC.

The second level of analysis concerned genres, or pedagogical/curricular practices of implementing the IC. Here the individual constructions often gave access to established ways of constructing the IC in subcultures. These ways have shown a remarkable diversity. Although some practices were more or less similar on first sight, such as the practice of placing English language teaching at the upper level of undergraduate study and into the postgraduate curriculum, there was a myriad different ways of implementing the IC. Some lecturers looked at translating course material as a one-off investment, others as a prospect of several years of translation and editing work. In some contexts postgraduate students were employed to put together special English-Swedish dictionaries of terms from the course, whilst in others the matter of translation of technical terms (back to mother tongue from English) was left to the students to deal with in their discussions. Some sub-cultures assigned English speaking TAs to meet the specific needs of the international sub-group of students whilst others insisted that at some level all course work, exam, lab work was delivered in English, even if the course was running in Swedish. In a couple of contexts, the difficulties of undergraduate or MA students with lower language abilities were addressed through ad hoc consultations. In yet other contexts the stress was on intercultural learning through careful mixing of project teams. In one, particularly internationally oriented program, the intercultural experience was of paramount importance and central to the curriculum, and in another more Swedish oriented program it was largely a question of a special skill-building as a one-off course for PhD students. In one sub-culture the PHD students were a special core group assigned to one key researcher and in another they were mixed completely within the whole population of postgraduates and supervisors. In one truly remarkable case, the sub-culture invested into intensive Swedish language courses for their first year international doctoral students so that they could be ready to teach in Swedish in a basic course in a few years time! This was considered to be part and parcel of the experience of being a doctoral student in this particular context, and part and parcel of training the students for teaching. Extra-curricular interventions were mentioned in a couple of cases.

All in all, these different practices suggest that on the level of sub-institutional or sub-cultural level, individuals and groups had been interpreting, negotiating, inventing, innovating ways of doing the international classroom to suit their particular strengths, perceived needs and material limitations (such as availability of textbooks, availability of

funding for translation, teaching, extra-curricular activities the nature of the discipline and its targeted industry or application, the particular research strands and research strengths of the academics within the sub-culture). Far from, or in addition to the global discourse, the IC has been shown as a matter of very local action and innovation.

II. About organisational learning, the general findings show that narratives, describing a variation of events in the IC, do surface in the interviews; but there is only one example, out of 24, of a narrative travelling between sub-cultures.

Respondent (3): *she initiated a project where eh, they made things outside the course, so they had these gatherings, social events where they, eh baked cakes together, and things like that. So they... hehe, so she would, would write a sign on the, on the coffee room door that eh today at five o'clock this room is occupied, and then she took all the students there and then they baked cakes together and had discussions... That weren't really related to the course, but eh, it really, eh... She made a presentation at one of these conferences we have. I think that was in the university level conference, eh...*

I: Teaching and learning conference? That was one of those?

R: Yea.

I: Yea.

R: Yea, and the interesting thing is that it really helped eh, the students to take in the course, because these social events eh, broke through some of the barriers between the students since they're from many different cultures and different language skills and different mother tongue and everything. And, so they became, started to get to know each other a bit, and that really helped them to, to focus on the subject. So, so, yea.

This narrative travelled in the form of a presentation at teaching and learning conference. Possibly influenced by the conference format, the narrative also includes pieces of reflection about how a cake-baking session could help students to understand the course content.

The rumours that surface in the material are more vague about who is the acting character; hereby they illustrate the distinction between narratives and rumours. Sometimes, in the way they are told the interviewee clearly indicates that they disclose more sensitive material and that no further information can be offered.

Respondent (5): *I have heard students complaining about that teachers here at the faculty of engineering, that are not Swedish, of origin, eh, it might be Chinese teachers, might be Russian teachers and so on, their English...*

Interviewer: Yea.

R: ... in giving the lectures might be quite problematic for the students.

I: Oh, okay.

R: But this is only thing that I've heard about, eh, and, well this is all I know about it, I, I...

Respondent (4) *Eh, I think it, it, it's very easy to, you know get rumours about things. ... I think they [the Swedish students] project in a wrong way, eh, that the master's student aren't as good as the Swedish students.*

First of all it is clear that these rumours describe information about things beyond the immediately collegial context. Secondly, the information is depersonalised that is the characters are anonymous. Thirdly they deal with "loaded" or sensitive material, which is to be expected [24]. Rumours typically appear around phenomenon that are problematic or anxiety provoking, and they are definitely related to emotions. The characters dealt with in the rumours, like in the two examples above, can often be referred to as The Others. In the two examples The Others are students and anonymous colleagues. In cultural analysis [25] descriptions of The Others often have the potential to reveal things about the cultural position from which the teller of the rumour is positioned. Here we can limit the analysis to an assumption that there exist potential conflicts within the institutional culture (LTH) involving teachers who favour teaching in English and teachers who do not, and groups of students.

In relation to our research question we can conclude that narratives about the IC do not travel within the culture, but rumours do. These rumours frequently describe The Others as colleagues and students. These results have further implications than for a potentially continued internationalisation; they also question the quality of the material from which the cultural understanding is constructed. Are rumours the material from which individuals within an academic culture should form their decisions upon?

Having said this, it must be noted that the individual teachers interviewed in this project did not take the content of rumours at face value, on the contrary they often critically reflected upon the rumours. But even so, rumours can be problematic as building blocks for culturally formed knowledge.

V. CONCLUSION

The research described here investigated how internationalisation is constructed in an academic culture (LTH). Further it studied whether teachers' individual experiences in the IC travelled from subculture to subculture in the form of narratives.

The results show that LTH emerges in the interviews as an international institution where teaching in English is normal and expected to be even more so in the future. It also shows that internationalisation happens locally, in sub-cultures within LTH, making it very hard to make any claims in general about the process of internationalisation. Individual teachers or groups of teachers construct internationalisation on their own terms and for their own purposes; the resulting practices display an immense variation.

But these locally constructed practices described above also create boundaries to other sub-cultures which may hinder organisational learning. In our study the results show clearly that experiences related to the IC do not travel in the culture as narratives very often. Narratives are surfaced in the

interviews, but they (with one exception) remain within the sub-culture where the initial experiences described in the narratives were made. Therefore, our conclusion is that the organisational learning in relation to the IC within LTH is limited.

Rumours also surface in the material and there are evidence showing that they do travel. Rumours make it possible for the interviewed teachers to construct knowledge about contexts beyond their own subculture. But rumours are depersonalised and cannot be investigated further. They are clearly unscholarly material and appear as questionable as building blocks for individual teachers' knowledge about other sub-cultures and as well as for the organisational culture as a whole.

LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH ISSUES

This is an exploratory study and even though it presents several important results it also raises new questions about internationalisation and organisational learning in an academic contexts. A few of these questions are listed here:

- The teachers interviewed in this study are all rewarded and they in many ways represent the leading strata within the organisational culture. What would be the responses from another sample?

- Narratives and rumours are phenomena that flourish in unclear and anxiety-provoking situations. The teachers in this study are positive about teaching in English. Would narratives and rumours have been greater in numbers and more drastic in nature if the sample were teachers who resisted the current development?

- Would the result have been different if the sample allowed for a gender perspective?

- What is the relationship between global policies about internationalisation, the institutional managerial knowledge and the practices within the sub-cultures we have described above?

- The teachers in this study appear to use rumours as building blocks for knowledge about the organisation. It is in many ways unclear how these and similar processes function: Is it a general pattern in academia that rumours are used in ways indicated here? How is the quality of the knowledge effected by the quality of the material used, that is, would the use of narratives or even more scholarly material result in a better understanding of the culture as a whole than the use of rumours?

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