

Conference Paper

The 'Malang Declaration': Models of Engagement within Research Programs

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Abstract

With the rapidly changing 'internationalization' of the educational market in Indonesia, the manner and conduct of 'foreign' models of engagement have a discernable and culturally 'sensitive' impact. We acknowledge that whilst 'foreign models' may be still applicable in an Indonesian context, it is becoming increasingly important that the extent to which these models are culturally applicable in an Indonesian milieu is evaluated. In this article we examine the approach used by Australian practitioners in developing the Malang Declaration, which was an attempt to codify an agreed model for use in scholarly research. We acknowledge that it is essential that the selected 'model' is transparently seen as being applicable in Indonesian circumstances, and that the cultural mores of the site of the intervention are respected and addressed.

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1. Introduction

Within the higher education research sector in Indonesia, there are new perspectives emerging in Indonesian research programs which are being strongly informed by international praxis. The subtle changes in both the matter and conduct of research using these imported models of engagement, are impacting on the output of Indonesian research in particular and culturally sensitive ways. We acknowledge that whilst the incorporation of these new ways of approaching knowledge generation and problem solving may be profitably applicable in an Indonesian context, it is becoming increasingly important to clearly appreciate to what extent these models, with their hidden assumptions, are culturally applicable in Indonesia. With this problem of cultural sensitivity and relevance clearly in mind, this article reflects on the approach recently used by concerned Australian practitioners in collegiately developing the Malang Declaration of research practice. We acknowledge that it is absolutely essential that the selected modes of research are capable of being seen to be transparently applicable in Indonesian circumstances, and that the cultural mores of the local site of the intervention and the national principles affected by the investigations are respected and addressed

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2. Theoretical Basis

This paper honours and respects the writings and contribution to knowledge of the significant 'cultural' theorist Stuart Hall (1983) In an insightful analysis made in 1983, during a public address at Latrobe University-Melbourne entitled 'Ideology in the Modern World', Stuart Hall reminded the audience that when we declare 'of course' in our common everyday speech, we are being at our most ideological:

The moment you say 'of course' to an ideology, you are in the most ideological bit of it, and the only way of coming out of it is to say not 'of course' at all but 'why of course' (Hall, 1983).

Hall posited that what is seemingly obvious and 'common sense' to us, connects directly with our interpretation of the world, because we share, only with our close acquaintances, common (cultural) understandings of the way things 'ought to be'. Thus, in our own cultures, with our own ideologies, things naturally make sense. This approach to making meaning from the world around us, is imbedded in the theoretical discourses of cultural studies.

We believe that by applying a theoretical discourse such as that of cultural studies onto an analysis of 'engagement and collaboration' with international practitioners, it is possible to gain a deeper understanding of the hidden language/messages of program interventions. This can be illustrated when we juxtapose these 'ways of thinking' and 'ways of seeing' about our world, onto, (i) Indonesian contexts of meeting structures, (ii) Australian international engagement and (iii) ultimate outcomes of interventions. It has become clear, in a number of situations, that there is a mismatch or incongruity between, on the one hand, our 'Western ways' and commonsense version of 'what to do', versus the localized version of 'what is needed'. As a consequence, for the Australian authors of this paper, notwithstanding our growing understanding of the complexities of cross-cultural research programs, assisting Indonesian research workers to developing programs relevant to local needs and developing analytical ways of engaging with research programs, will always be infused with deep-seated western approaches which are firmly entrenched in our western dominant cultural/ideological background.

We need to constantly remind ourselves that even when developmental suggestions are accepted as being based on commonsense realizations, the engagement programs are being developed and delivered without adequately questioning, in advance, the authenticity of the assumptions. In this respect, giving some important and insightful reflections in this area, Hall and other cultural theorists (Hall, 1997; Shahjahan, Morgan, and Nguyen, 2015) provided a comprehensive way of assisting the interpreting and

decoding the messages of 'skills development'. Applying this theoretical framework, Roland Barthes, in his influential work *Mythologies* (Barthes, 1973), developed a sign system to deconstruct some of the basic and everyday messages in our society in order to peel back the ideological meaning. This framework became known as 'content analysis' or 'semiotics', and has been used in a wide range of culturally significant debates regarding the uncovering of hidden meanings.

In many ways, semiotics is equally applicable for deconstructing skills development practice, and this approach could include (i) delving into the language of 'engagement' and 'collaboration', (ii) the deconstruction of meaning in developing The Malang Declaration, and (iii) examining the culturally-appropriate concepts based on the expertise of technical experts. The use of semiotic analysis could also, on the positive side, introduce the notion of engagement of local input, an idea pioneered by Clifford Geertz (Geertz, 1973).

Applying content analysis to the term 'international experts' suggests that, at the first level of meaning, the words denote a person of experience in a particular development context, implying that they are knowledgeable and skilled. At the second level of meaning, 'expert' connotes a highly valued, important, and respected member of his/her profession. However, within the 'mythological' frame of reference, a third level of meaning begins to take shape, where the community or society 'accepts' without question the value, intrinsic or otherwise, of the role of the expert and the dominant views of the experts' frame of reference, even in a translated cross-cultural situation. In such a position, an expert (naturally) imparts their dominant cultural views as though these were the time and place-independent natural order of things. However, whilst we hold that international know-how currently operates at this ideological/mythological level, we are concerned that we need to recognize, question and confront a number of hidden assumptions (Fairman, 2017).

3. Analysis of the Process Behind the Malang Declaration

Our analysis begins with an observation which was made around the environment and circumstances of the 'workshop' in which our colleagues at Deakin University were invited to present. We entered a large auditorium, which was laid out with an inner circle of desks and chairs with microphones where thirteen senior staff of Universities sat. A second and third tier of tables and chairs were also equipped with microphones, and it appeared that the stage was set for an obvious, very formal meeting, potentially constrained by hierarchical approaches based on University status and position.

Our approach to data collection involved establishing a representative sample of participants and placing them together into small groups to address key focus questions (see below). Representatives of each group presented to the entire gathering and these presentations were recorded (See Appendix A 'Group Work Comments'). Each member of the audience then 'voted' for the important and salient features of the presentations. This voting formed the nexus of The Malang Declaration which all workshop participants signed, from all collaborating universities attesting to their commitment to prioritized future research agenda.

At the first level of meaning, this arrangement suited a traditional 'Indonesian' way of preparing for a formal communication session. There was a 'Guru' at the front of the assembly, with invited guests sitting in their 'stations' according to their respective university status. To our colleagues at Deakin University, who are very well familiar with these circumstances and presentations in auditoriums involving a number of Presidents and Rectors, past and present, this was a familiar, yet challenging, layout. A 'workshop' in Indonesian terms usually involves a presentation by an 'expert' followed by structured work by participants resulting in a specific tangible outcome, in this regard the Deakin facilitators would have been considered 'Gurus'.

At the second level of meaning, the Indonesians who were present immediately sat in their respective chairs without question or concern, as though this 'layout' was a mere formality for them, and they acquiesced 'of course'. However, for their Australian colleagues who were unfamiliar with this cultural more, the 'layout' appeared to be very controlling and lacking a means of engagement. Whilst, to Australian eyes, it not only discouraged collaboration, we thought that the layout could actually stifle cross-fertilization of ideas.

We would like to address the ideological/mythical meanings created in these circumstances, but before we begin that discussion, it is important to present a few comments on the process of the meeting, beginning with the first ceremony of this very formally structured meeting. The audience stood, due in part to the presence of senior university staff, for the rendition of the Indonesian National Anthem, following which the host University's anthem followed, with rousing music and images of a number of foreign students studying at the international programs.

Immediately, from an Australian perspective, our colleagues were reminded of our personal reflections of 'standing' to attention for the Australian national anthem, and marching into classes in our primary schools. Whilst our Indonesian colleagues, formal events such as these, university staff are more comfortable singing in unison to the

University anthem, but for our Australian facilitators, this would not be a common occurrence, as Australian universities are unlikely to have an individual anthem

Here, we observe that, at the second level of meaning, the group singing of the national anthem represents a significant moment for the Indonesian participants, whereas during a similar occasion for Australians, this would not be as important as the Australia national anthem is reserved for prescribed events and those of national significance. The playing of the anthem in an Indonesian context thus sets up the 'formality' expected by every local participant, but, by comparison, it has quite a different impact on the Australian facilitators.

For the Australian visitors, the constructed formality becomes quite 'confronting' in relation to the facilitators' thoughts and ideas around collaboration for a developmental purpose. Collaboration, in the Australian experience, is a sharing process where views are freely expressed and given respectful attention. It was clear to the visiting facilitators that, if the meeting were to continue in this formal way, the results would likely perpetuate the dominant values and meanings associated with traditional Indonesian ways of communicating.

Clearly, at this early stage the facilitators had to squarely confront this situation of formality if we were to achieve a reasonable outcome in terms of meaningful 'collaboration'. Either we could adopt the Indonesian version of formal dialogue, or we could challenge this version, and create a means and process for interactive collaboration which might produce an innovative outcome.

4. Resolving the Dilemma of Engagement

At this point, the meeting needed to 'explore' what 'collaborative' engagement means for the assembled senior university staff. We note that this process was made significantly more difficult and complex because research aimed at discovering the similarities and challenges each University faced in developing collaborative research priorities. Therefore, in proposing our approach that we work collaboratively, our senior Indonesian colleagues, were perhaps a little hesitant that our approach would work, or even achieve their desired goals for the workshop achieved. There was clearly some trepidation around our proposed re-construction of the morning's meeting schedule.

Nevertheless, the facilitators took the view that in the interests of trying to achieve some outcome around articulating their challenges and priorities for potential collaborative research opportunities as requested by the hosts, we needed an approach that would achieve a more broadly acceptable outcome rather than a single institutional

victory, and thus illustrate in an Indonesian context how collaborating that might work cross-culturally.

Our approach was to place all the participants into small groups with 'butcher's paper' and posed the following two questions:

'What concerns and challenges are currently faced in implementing Halal supply chains in Indonesia?

'What priorities would you set to begin the research collaboration for investigation into Halal supply chains?

The small groups were composed of between 5-6 participants, each deliberately mixed between the 13 different universities represented. Also, the facilitators purposively further refined the group constituents to provide better discipline and specialization diversity. The group participants were also further mixed across area of specialization, recognized academic ability and positional status with each University. Finally, an agnostic approach to title was taken, with formal stratification and status used to filter group members into the final groups' construction by ensuring senior management, practitioners and specialist researchers gave diversity of perspectives. This mixture was deliberately intentionally constructed to ensure that the 'first' tier of participants (senior management staff) could work with 'second tier and third tier' university representatives, communication and management skills among those 'three tiers' are two of the key factors in establishing and sustaining future success. (Helmy, 2014).

The host suggested that it may be better to group those from the same university together, but it was the facilitator's view that this would only perpetuate 'power' relations within those groups and not achieve a broader discussion around concerns and challenges faced at each University.

It was interesting that there was indeed a recognition by some of the participants (with 'smiles') that this was the 'Australian' way of doing collaborative presentations, but for many participants, this approach was quite unexpected. On the other hand, the 'smiles' could have equally indicated a lack of understanding by the participants of the discussion.

At the end of the individual small group work, one or more representatives from each group, explained to the entire audience the critical issues which arose in developing their joint discussion findings as to Halal supply chain research priorities, concerns and challenges. Later, each group openly discussed their agreed positions as a group rather than as a number of individuals. They mostly presented their findings 'collaboratively', encouraging each other to add comments, and openly expressing differences of opinions.

The audience listening to these presentations, posed questions and asked for clarification and expansion on particular points of interest. In addition, the facilitators asked a number of open-ended questions, and it was clear that some participants were a little confused about why this was happening, perhaps due in part to the use of English language and the reading of 'body language'. We explained that this process added a little more 'depth' to the conversations in that different perspectives were encouraged to emerge. Further, we noted that often when you are presented with a one-word descriptor of a conversation, having the fuller meaning behind this explained requires the participants to reveal the details of their discussions, Thus by using this open-ended question technique, and asking the presenters to elaborate and expand on the points which were raised, we were able to achieve a broader understanding.

This questioning process began with the first group who presented, and it had the effect of encouraging subsequent groups to elaborate their own positions in more detail. We observed that both the presenters and participants were fully engaged in the process of sharing and working collaboratively, which were circumstances that might have been quite different in a more formal Indonesian setting. As each group presented, each presentation became more structured, focused, and responsive with each later group learning from earlier presentations.

A final aspect of our approach to working 'collaboratively' was to ask the participants to vote for the research areas 'presentation aspects' that they deemed the most immediately relevant and important to them. They were informed that they would have 'three votes' each, and would vote using 'post it' notes which would be placed publicly onto the communal 'butcher's paper'. It was interesting to note that the participants did not gravitate toward their 'own' group during the voting session.

These 'votes' formed the broader context for the development and refinement of The Malang Declaration. The top five areas of 'collaboration' on the statement were based on the largest number of votes. To emphasize the collaborative nature of this exercise, this declaration was signed by every participant in the room creating not only a sense of individual ownership of the declaration but a sense of cross-constitutional agreement. Post-discussion feedback indicated that the participants, at all status levels, enjoyed the process and felt valued as individuals in the process, unlike with other Indonesian approaches to decision-making.

We were very encouraged to see that there was a consistent theme regarding the posed problem statement that emerged across each presenting group. This was quite a revealing circumstance, as it suggested that this experience might be able to create a platform for further collaborations using a multi-disciplinary, multi-status, collaborative

approach. Of interest is that this group decided to construct a 'whatsapp' facility, providing not only photos of the event, but also giving a vehicle for any publications arising from this activity. This facility is a good way of closing the developmental activity from a reflective double loop-learning situation (Lawler and Sillitoe, 2013), allowing participants publicly comment on the sessions, and to respond to any formal evaluation or relevant publications.

We believe that the approach used in developing The Malang Declaration has provided us with a significant background in 'cultural' richness and context, and in a theoretical sense, provides significant evidence for the possibility of deconstructing cross-cultural myths.

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