

Cross-border Communications: Rethinking Internationalization During the Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

In this essay, we set out to explore the ways in which our approaches and assumptions around internationalization, and the experiences of international students, have been challenged. We draw on our experiences as academics in Australia, teaching in an international environment through the years of the pandemic. We have chosen to approach this through a series of reflections related to internationalization at home. Inspired by the concept of groundedness, we reflect on four themes: the university as an imagined community, globalization, home not as a metaphor, and a journey toward humility. In our reflections, we try to share a journey of how members in the academic community of higher education, students and teachers, traversed these changing times with a focus on relations between us and home, and between students and teachers, leading to the discussion toward a culture of humility.

Keywords: equality, globalization, internationalization at home, international students, teaching and learning

The last two years have presented immense challenges for all of us, and our higher education institutions have not escaped the pressures brought on by this global pandemic. Indeed, it has been a challenging time for students and equally challenging for staff. In this essay, we set out to explore the ways in which our approaches and assumptions around internationalization and the experiences of international students have been challenged. We have chosen to approach this through a series of reflections relying on four themes that have emerged from our reflections during the pandemic.

The concept of being grounded inspires this essay, where our own internationalised existences have become constrained through an inability to cross borders or even leave our homes over the last 24 months. By groundedness, we do not only refer to the disrupted mobility of academics and students, but also that we are reflecting on our teaching and learning experience over the last two years with a fresh-eyed and open-minded grounded approach. Before COVID we saw ourselves as citizens of the world, researchers and scholars who not only investigated and wrote about internationalization, but lived lives that were characterized by residing, working and moving across borders. As members of a team of academics focusing on internationalisation, we also hail from three different continents and have always brought these experiences to our work at a global university. However, the last two years have brought lockdowns and closed borders which has grounded us and left us looking more closely at our immediate environment and the idea of internationalisation in the broader higher education community. Our teaching and learning practice over the last two years has been significantly unlike what we were used to. In many ways, there are no connections between now and before. The grounded approach offers us an opportunity to reflect anew on our practice as we investigate in the generation of a new knowledge system in internationalisation. We consider this essay as one of our first steps of the grounded learning process as an institute and as a community. The question we ask here is what does it mean by “being international” and have we ever been truly international. Thus, our notion of groundedness also expands to our approach in undertaking this reflection where we employ a grounded theory approach to ask “what is” rather than “what if” questions (Glaser, 2003, p. 15).

We draw on our own experience of teaching in 2020 and 2021, and our experiences as academics focused on the logistics of delivering teaching during those years. More importantly, we note the ways in which we as academics started to introspect about our drifting role in the classroom and our relations with students, setting the tone of professional reflection on our practice of teaching and learning through these uncertain and challenging times. We would like to think that some of our experiences resonate with colleagues beyond our institution.

We do not pretend that the delivery of teaching over this period was an overwhelming success. All evidence from the Australian context suggests that the lack of the on-campus teaching and learning so anticipated by our students left them understandably less than satisfied with their university experience, especially where engagement and interaction is concerned (Martin, 2020). However, we can make some observations about the revelations that came with online delivery of our teaching and the ways in which we managed to learn about our students in a more nuanced way.

Rather than presenting these ideas within any overarching theoretical framework, we draw selectively from writings in the field of internationalisation and intercultural engagement and use these as stepping-off points for discussions that we hope will be ongoing.

First, we suggest that the pandemic has revealed to us the extent to which the University has long operated as an “imagined community”(Anderson, 2006). Second, and emergent from the notion of

‘imagined community’, we consider how the pandemic has illuminated that perhaps ‘we have never been global’. Following this, we turn to look more closely at the experiences of our students over the past two years and use the phrase ‘when home is not a metaphor’ as a way of opening up the particularities of our students’ learning during the pandemic. Finally, we focus on the relationship between academics and students and the ways in which we have met on different terms. Indeed, our personal and professional lives blurred as our interactions with students took place in our personal space where our homes filled with family, pets and other interruptions became our lecture theatres. We also navigated our own unease with new modes of teaching mediated by technology with which our students were often more comfortable. These realities at times produced shifting power dynamics and vulnerability, which for us led to ‘a journey toward humility’.

The University as an Imagined Community

Like many other research-intensive universities, our university is predominantly a campus-based higher education institution. It prides itself on its grounds, its proximity to the city of Melbourne, its culture, its gardens, its coffee and eateries. The rhetorical framing of the university experience is based on campus life, finding your community, and in so doing finding yourself. This version of university life is somewhat utopian. It aligned itself with the transformative experiences of a residential college, of leaving home and transitioning to adulthood, of finding your tribe, your networks, your lifetime friends. It is as if University is a liminal space, an immersive experience, a rite of passage.

The term “imagined community” comes from Benedict Anderson’s (2006) work on the invention of tradition as a key aspect of nation building. The use of “imagined” is to acknowledge that this is to some extent a fantasy, but a fantasy that nonetheless persists and is reinforced through the traditional practices of university life, images of the University’s campus, snapshots of communities of students learning collaboratively, and of academics and students engaging in scholarly discourse. Indeed, as Taylor (2002) suggests, people imagine their surroundings “in images, stories, and legends” (p. 106). These become part of our imaginery and that of students, and through the performativity of academia, we become part of the perpetuation of a notion of the University as community - as convocation. One key traditional demonstration of the University as community is that of the graduation ceremony, held until 2019 at the historic Melbourne exhibition buildings.

If traditions can be invented, they can also be reinvented. In 2020 we introduced a new tradition – in the form of a commencement ceremony, also at the historic Exhibition Buildings. Excited first-year students came together, witnessed by their parents, and symbolically entered the doors of the University – the imagined community. The symbolism of transformation is profound, as in three years or so these students would leave the same building as graduates.

By February 2020 we already knew that so many of our students could not enter the country, let alone the campus. A large amount of work went into web casting the commencement ceremony to those unable to attend, as we tried so hard to create a sense of “being there” and fulfilling the imaginery we have long created as a shared notion of the university experience. However, “being there” was not going to be a reality for the next two years. In the absence of these traditions and the imagined community of the University campus, we had to recognize that our students occupy very different worlds. We could no longer maintain the fiction that our students seamlessly enter “our imagined community” when they commenced their studies.

We Have Never Been Global (Nations)

So now we want to reflect on what this imagined community looked like, and importantly what type of monoculture we might have been perpetuating. There may never have been a shared experience – an inclusive community, however imaginary. And as Kathleen Manning (1994) observes while “traditions play important role in building community on campus”, and “they are not neutral”, and “can reinforce campus monoculturalism” (p. 275). Van Jura (2010), building on Manning’s work observes that “traditions play a pivotal role in either welcoming marginalized groups into the greater community or further alienating these students” (p. 112). Part of this community was its imagined global student body: coming together in one place, providing exciting opportunities for intercultural exchange, a veritable United Nations of global citizens in the making. We focused on different styles of learning, adopted pedagogical practices and talked about intercultural competencies, as we, largely, Anglo academics sought to learn about “the other” (Patel & Lynch, 2013).

The challenges of teaching and learning during the pandemic have been far more quotidian. As an on-campus university, we privileged synchronous learning, and this was the basis of building our timetable. We were not global when we maintained the same timetable during the pandemic, a timetable that expected students to be in the same place, at the same time. While many asynchronous learning activities were adopted, synchronous classes required large numbers of students to set the alarm at a ridiculous hour in the morning, or to stay up late to attend a class. The best efforts of staff to engage more fully with students, by adding drop-in sessions, would have very little impact when scheduled at 9 AM.

We have never been global when making judgements based on English language proficiency. In conducting on campus classes in English we make all manner of assumptions about the dominance of the English language, the degree of comfort with the language, and then wondered why everyone did not engage in classroom discussion to the same extent. We as an institution, have aimed for shared experiences among our students, transcending language and cultural differences. However, there has been alienation between student groups in multiple areas, primarily through a deficit model associated with “international” students (Bista, 2018; Surtees, 2019). This model accentuates the incongruence between international students’ knowledge and institutional cultural norms, implicitly privileging local students.

The emphasis placed on English as the language of instruction and assessment can translate into an implicit prohibition of multilingualism: a silencing of languages other than English in the classroom. A globalised higher education sector is not one of easy communication across language and culture, but frequently enforces a hierarchy of English and “other” languages (Kubota, 2016; Sperduti, 2017). In our online classes in the past two years, we would rotate around the break-out rooms and sometimes hear lively conversations in Mandarin. Was this the same group who occupied the quiet table in tutorial groups in previous years? The “room” was full of lively and engaged conversation, the contents of which were reported back to the class by one of the more confident English (as a second or third language) speaker and reflected a nuanced discussion of themes through shared cultural knowledge. What has changed? Did not being in “our” space empower multi-lingual students to choose their preferred voice and cultural context?

We have never been global in meeting the challenge of national borders, and the complex choices students must make based on their nationality and their study site. Some of these happen routinely - for example the student from Turkey who had enrolled in a PhD in an Australian university prior to COVID. In the second year of her PhD her request to travel to Turkey to undertake fieldwork was initially declined

on the basis of the political atmosphere in that country. She was told that to travel to Turkey represented an unacceptable risk to her. To be told that you are in danger returning to the country of which you are a citizen, in which you have lived your life, in which your family still resides, a country she calls home, is clearly distressing. She did ultimately obtain permission to travel. But then the pandemic descended on us, and she was denied permission to travel back to Australia, as she was now considered a risk to us.

For many of us, the pandemic was the first time that our travel plans, both personal and professional, were disrupted by travel advisories that listed our historically ‘low risk’ destinations as ‘high risk’. The striking nature of Australia’s recent designation as ‘avoid all travel’ by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in early 2022 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, n.d.) should give us all a sense of how some of our international students felt prior to the pandemic when their home countries were labelled as dangerous destinations by government advisories issued by other nations. Indeed, the example of the PhD student above is certainly not an extraordinary one as many universities in the global north have policies that place restrictions or lengthy approval processes on students travelling to regions under travel advisories, even it is their own home country, under the guise of risk management (Bhattacharya, 2014; Piccolino & Franklin, 2019).

We have also never been global in the way in which we think of our diverse student body. We became aware that home is often not a singular place for our students or indeed for many of our colleagues who call multiple countries home, these homes are separated by distance but not by connection to the people and things that make them home. For many of our international students, home was in Australia in the last two years, but many of those who chose to call Australia home during the pandemic were stranded with food insecurity (Ross, 2021) and loss of income with no government allowance, and over-crowded housing (Morris et al., 2020), often due to their visa status (Farbenblum & Berg, 2020).

So if we could not maintain the imagined community, what had we become? And if we were not a global university during the period of COVID where were we? Put simply, we were largely at home.

When Home is Not a Metaphor

Where is home – we learnt that international students were not all “going home” to their country of origin, but remained in Australia, having established a home here. Home for many was where we were, be it our shared home, office, room, or bedroom. The University was vacant.

The term “when home is not a metaphor” was used in an article by Gerardo Blanco (2021) with the evocative title “Global citizenship education as a pedagogy of dwelling” (p. 433). It struck us that teaching online over the past two years required that we understand the particularities of home for each student. Home was not a metaphor for a country that our students had left, to enter our country, our space, our institution. Home was the place from which we were all speaking, a specific place in which we were situated, and each of us occupied a very different, geographic, cultural, familial, domestic space.

In many cases we were literally inviting ourselves into the homes of our students, and vice versa. This is a bit of a game changer - not quite the imagined community of the University campus - our community, into which students entered. As Kaya (2020) notes “Each international student has a world; not even one world but different individual small worlds that you have to navigate” (p. 124). During online delivery these worlds were being revealed to us, not always through the background of a face on a Zoom screen, but through greater insight into the circumstances of home for each of our students.

In our usual on-campus teaching, we do not confront the practicalities of home as a site of learning. Meeting at this border - or perhaps more accurately crossing the border into the worlds of our students - meant being confronted by the reality of many students' lives.

Our experiences teaching and working with students were illuminating during the last two years for what we learnt about students' homes. The home situations in which many of our students were living, seriously impacted on the likelihood of their success. We were not talking about home countries here, or generalised cultures, we were hearing about very specific domestic experiences and conditions of home.

We certainly know that one of the most fundamental barriers to a successful online learning experience is access to technology, and the degree of comfort on the part of both students and staff with technology (Khobragade et al., 2021; Martin, 2020). We all experienced the heightened anxiety attached to a synchronous teaching activity, with unstable internet connection and a fear that someone else in the household would suddenly draw on what limited bandwidth there was. We know too that this was a real issue for students with unstable internet, or sharing the use of that internet with other members of a household, let alone engaging in online discussion when other members of the household were trying to sleep.

Earlier in the pandemic much was made of the way in which teaching from our home into students' homes created different forms of engagement and indeed a possibility of conviviality. This did occur in some cases, but not all students "invited us" into their homes, many understandably did not want to, and for many it was just an impossibility.

The question of "cameras on" or "cameras off" was one which pre-occupied many of us. Notions of engagement were unpacked (Boardman et al., 2021; Sage et al., 2021), and expectations of students needed to be interrogated (Castelli & Sarvary, 2021; Gherheş et al., 2021). Why were we insistent about cameras on? Did the camera help us to assure ourselves we were somehow replicating the on-campus community? Was our preoccupation with seeing our students somehow part of a privileged expectation that we should know the other? Ultimately, we knew that we could not insist upon students turning on their cameras. This was absolutely within the hands of students. We needed to meet students where they were, and where they were was not always where we expected, and with many students joined our online meetings from workplaces, on transit or from a shared bedroom.

Meeting students where they were, rather than them "being here", in our imagined community, required a significant shift in our sense of self.

A Journey Toward Humility

Thus, as we reflect, we consider that during the pandemic, rather than learning about the other we learnt about ourselves and our institution.

To deliver 100% of our teaching online represented one of the most significant cultural challenges to the University, its sense of self, and our sense of self as academics. It was as if we were stripped of our finery and could no longer draw on the supports of the imagined community, its traditions and conventions. In fact, the delivery of teaching was to be the only measure of the student experience as the on-campus delights of the University, the opportunity to be transformed by an immersive experience in an educational setting, did not exist.

We know that the model of teaching in which the charismatic professor enters the room and provides a spellbinding lecture to swooning students is best left to filmmakers. Nonetheless the physical

teaching environment on our university campuses, especially among Australia's 'Group of Eight' comprising Australia's leading research-intensive universities, in large part still resembles a theatre, with the academic taking the stage. Even in group learning environments, theatres in the round, with tables distributed around the room, we retained agency to move between and among groups of students, keeping our distance or intervening. When teaching online we largely remained stationary and static in front of our screens, further contributing to our sense of immobility and groundedness.

Online was arguably less hierarchical, a more horizontal relationship (Impastato, 2020), flat screen to flat screen. Indeed, we all reached the borders of our technological competence, and tested the boundaries of our technological comfort. Many academics entered a technological zone that belonged more to our students, a digital competence and awareness that wildly exceeded that which we had come to acquire in the course of our teaching, and indeed working lives. Our technological competence was also tried as our Chinese international students educated us on the challenges and uncertainties inherent on relying on Virtual Private Network (VPN), and the inequities associated with accessing our course content without such considerations (Wang, 2022). It was evident that in many ways we were not the experts in this domain, nor have we always been 'global' with how we approach our online communities with our international students in mind.

We were also not experts in meeting students where they were in many locations and homes. We all stumbled around trying to attain varying levels of intercultural competence, based on gross generalizations about largely national cultures (many with their own invented traditions). We as individual educators, and in some cases as a university, wondered whether we needed to be more cognisant of national holidays or particular political events. As we did so it was clear that we were again seeking to know a generalized "other".

Perhaps the most overwhelming experience of the past two years has been a journey toward humility, and here we are drawing on work by Ann Curry-Stevens, in her 2010 article "Journeying toward humility: Complexities in advancing pedagogy for the privileged". She wrote:

"Any privileged body, (and we can agree that universities represent a certain type of privilege, and ours are privileged bodies), even those who work in dedicated ways towards being an ally (as so many of us in universities do), building expertise about the 'other' is ripe with arrogance and error" (p.69).

We like to think that in our ignorance, discomfort and anxiety we had to some extent embarked on a journey toward humility.

Conclusion

With this essay, we would like to contribute to the discussion of starting afresh the investigation of a new epistemic framework of internationalization at the global, institutional and curriculum levels. In our context, we stocktake our experiences over the last two years with internationalization front of mind. We have come to acknowledge the very real role we play as academics in the success of internationalization agendas (Childress, 2010), and realised the way we enact internationalization in the classroom can impact broader institutional level strategic internationalisation policies (Nguyen, 2021). As we reflect in order to move forward, we consider our role in what Castiello-Gutierrez (2019) calls "purposeful internationalization" wherein our actions make meaningful contributions to internationalization focused on the common good rather than market gains for universities (p. 93). Looking ahead, there is still so much to learn about what changes the last two years have brought to us: the interaction in the classroom, students'

learning and socioemotional experience, our role as a teacher, and our relationship with learners. We must also consider how our classrooms may act to privilege English monolingualism as a global academic language (Kubota, 2014) and contribute to the diffusion of Western pedagogical traditions globally (Sperduti, 2017).

When we return to campus, we hope to be able to see the University as so much more than an imagined community. We want to retain the sense that the University is the students, and not only as a class, or a cohort, not as a nationality or linguistic grouping, but also, and particularly, as individuals in and from their own worlds, worlds that we are privileged at times to be able to enter. With the understanding of the University as students, we now also face the challenge of addressing the hegemony of Western pedagogies and of the English language in our classrooms (Beyer, 2022) and broader institutional environments as complicit in generating a global educational regime that is neither neutral nor universally applicable (Begum & Saini, 2019).

Thus, like many of our students coming from diverse learning cultures, in the course of the pandemic, academic staff came to share an experience of being in a completely new territory, one which we needed to navigate our way around. The borders of our knowledge became exposed, we may have been grounded in one place, but we engaged with students in so many places. We crossed borders and re-negotiated the border between academics and students, and in some instances, students took back power.

Of course, imagined communities, invented traditions and the like implicitly hold and perpetuate power. Humility on a personal level may not be sufficient to shake up these conventions, we may need a certain amount of cultural courage to hold open spaces on our campuses, to further unpack “pedagogies of dwelling”, as alternative forms of global citizenship. We put this out as an aspiration, we do not know what it requires of us, or of an institution.

But then one thing we hope we have all learned from the past two years is that not knowing is okay.

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