Educational technology in transnational higher education in South East Asia: the cultural politics of flexible learning

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines appropriateness of using educational technologies to increase the flexibility of learning in transnational higher education in South East Asia. It considers the argument that while interactive educational technologies may be appropriate in countries in which self-directed study and student autonomy are emphasised, the same uses of technology may not be as appropriate in South East Asian countries in which education has traditionally been more tightly structured and teacher-directed. This paper examines government policies toward the use of educational technologies in higher education in Singapore, Malaysia and Vietnam, and considers the experiences of five transnational institutions in these countries. The paper concludes that transnational educators are inevitably caught up in tensions between global modernising trends and local traditional practices. It argues that it is important for educators to recognise how their actions relate to local social changes in countries in which their students are located.

Keywords: Transnational education, cultural difference, cross-cultural teaching and learning

Introduction

'Transnational education' refers to education 'in which the learners are located in a country different from the one where the awarding institution is based' (UNESCO & Council of Europe, 2000). In the 1990s, demand in South East Asia was high, especially in Hong Kong, Singapore and Malaysia, and exporters, especially from Britain and Australia were eager to supply. The growth is set to continue, with the Global Alliance for Transnational Education (2000) estimating that demand for transnational higher education in Asian countries (excluding China) will rise to more than 480,000 students by 2020. Whether delivered through offshore branch campuses, twinning arrangements or international distance education, transnational education increasingly relies on information and communications technology to facilitate the routine crossing of borders by information, staff and educational materials (Bates & de los Santos, 1997; Blight et al., 1999).

This paper points to some possible cultural differences between Australia and South East Asian countries that may impact upon students' reception of online course components and flexible learning more broadly. The use of online learning in transnational education brings together, in an unfamiliar environment, students and educators whose experience of teaching and learning stems from very different cultural traditions. Educators who have taught international students in classrooms come to understand that students from different countries bring with them different experiences and expectations of teaching and learning. A number of useful guides to teaching international students have been published in recent years (Ballard & Clanchy, 1997; Metzger, 1992), but so far there has been little discussion of cultural issues in online teaching.

Some writers have pointed to the possibility of 'educational imperialism' in transnational education if transnational educators (usually Western) expect their students (usually from developing countries) to simply adapt or conform to Western models of education (Evans, 1995). Higher education has always involved the exporting of knowledge and techniques from educational 'centres' to the 'peripheries' (Altbach, 1981). Now, with the advent of information and communication technologies, and the liberalization of trade in educational services (McBurnie & Ziguras, 2001), the speed and volume of the flow of ideas has intensified. The rapid growth of technologically-supported transnational education has led to renewed concerns about cultural impacts. For example, Jacques Hallak, UNESCO Assistant Director-General of Education warned recently that 'I think the danger is that companies selling education outside their frontiers will attempt to impose the same standards everywhere, and this will dissociate education from the social, cultural and political origins of a country' (James, 2000, 19). That is, the implicit social values of the exporting countries will inform curriculum, and the social and cultural context in which students live will be largely ignored. Indeed, since its emergence in the late 1980s, transnational higher education in South East Asia has commonly involved Western educators teaching offshore using educational approaches developed for local students with very little effort to tailor teaching for offshore students (Kelly & Tak, 1998; McLaughlin, 1994; Wells, 1993).

Educational technologies have increased the scale of transnational education by allowing institutions to more easily coordinate operations in different countries, however, there is no evidence that this has resulted in greater localisation of teaching approaches. Some writers on online education have argued that the opposite is the case. Jae-Eun Joo (1999), for example, suggests that 'the Internet tends to reinforce the World Information Order, i.e. the flow of information from industrialised to developing countries, and fails to ensure mutual respect and the protection of the diversity of information, languages, and cultures' (p.247). This tendency, Joo observes, is caused both by ethnocentrism on the part of educational exporters, and by the ease of adoption of electronically reproduced materials. There is a strong temptation, he believes, for teachers and administrators in developing countries 'to simply copy or translate existing materials on the Internet, to save money and time, without considering their own social, cultural, historical, and educational contexts' (p.247). This tends to be a one-way flow of materials. Because of the power of Western mass media, people around the world are more receptive to online materials originating from Western countries than from other parts of the world, 'in the same way an Indian child can more easily enjoy a Disneyland movie than an American child can enjoy an Indian cartoon' (p.248).

More optimistic writers see new technologies as leading to new types of international relationships in knowledge production. Robin Mason (1998) argues that, while earlier forms of educational trade may have undermined local initiatives and perpetuated a cycle of dependency, the Internet facilitates, 'not so much an exporting as a re-engineering of the educational paradigm to include people from many countries, studying materials designed for a multicultural audience, using technologies which facilitate cross-cultural communications' (p.45). The technology of the Internet and the Web, he argues, 'is already breaking down traditional hierarchies and establishing a new kind of democracy about what constitutes knowledge' (p.46). What is clear is that while traditional hierarchies may be being broken down, they are being replaced by more fluid structures, which nonetheless form patterns of inclusion and exclusion on a global scale (Castells, 1999). Against this backdrop, there has been a growing discussion in exporting countries about how one should teach to diverse groups of students located in different countries. These issues have been particularly pertinent in Australia, because 12.5 per cent of students in tertiary education are foreign citizens (second only to Switzerland) (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2000, 177) and around a third of international students in tertiary education are located offshore (Australian Education International, 2000).

This paper focuses on the growing use of educational technologies in transnational higher education, and in particular, the use of these tools to create less structured learning environments. It is worth remembering at the outset that the introduction of educational technologies does not necessarily transform learning, and may simply replicate pre-existing learning practices in a new medium. Educational technologies can be used in ways that rigidly circumscribe students' options, or in ways that lead to greater flexibility for students

and encourage self-directed learning and student autonomy (Laurillard, 1993). In Australia, 'flexible learning' is often used as a euphemism for technologically-mediated learning, so great are the perceived links between technology and flexibility. 'Flexible learning' is an approach that attempts to provide students with greater choice about how, where, when they learn (Wade, 1994), and in practice this increasingly involves the use of educational technologies (Murphy et al., 1998). The British Council's advice to students contemplating distance education courses highlights the new demands on students:

> The new electronic technologies used in distance learning can provide students with far greater involvement in the process of learning. These interactive technologies also allow students the exercise of far greater control over that process than is possible in many traditional learning environments. This means that students must take more responsibility for, and be more active in, their learning... (The British Council, 1999)

Such uses of interactive technologies can increase the autonomy of the learner, requiring them to choose the time, place and pace of study. More study is conducted in isolation and the extent of face-to-face contact with lecturers and classmates is often diminished in the shift from traditional forms of university teaching to technologically-mediated learning.

At the same time, South East Asian international students are often characterised by Western lecturers as being less self-directed learners who defer more to the authority of the teacher and prefer more structured learning environments (Ballard & Clanchy, 1997; Biggs, 1997; Kelly & Tak, 1998; Smith & Smith, 1999). While educational technologies, and the flexibility they bring, may be welcomed by Australian students, these observations would suggest that students from South East Asian countries may not be so comfortable with such innovations (Gunawardena, 1998; Jensen et al., 1997). Jae-Eun Joo (1999), for example, argues that:

> Because the Internet promotes pro-active teaching and learning, it may affect the balance of power in countries where the educational system is centralised and authoritarian…. In societies in where discipline and submission to authority is praised rather than individualism and freedom, teachers might feel too uncomfortable to take initiatives, to accept the scrutiny of peers, or to hand greater control to their students. Likewise, students accustomed to traditional methods may find it hard to adapt to active and innovating learning techniques. (p.247)

There is a compelling argument, then, that flexible learning using educational technologies is not as appropriate in South East Asian countries as it is in more individualistic educational exporting countries. By expecting offshore learners to conform to Western expectations of student behaviour, multinational educators are engaging in a form of cultural imperialism,

seeking to assimilate a diverse student body into an ethnocentrically defined norm. Many have argued that teaching in transnational education should be tailored to the specific cultural context in which the students are located (Kelly & Tak, 1998). Smith and Smith (Smith & Smith, 1999), for example, conclude that,

> …in those cases where a significant difference has been shown, it is prudent to consider adjusting teaching and support strategies to reflect those differences. Failure to take account at all of those differences runs the danger of being new colonialists who assume that the organisational, knowledge and belief structures that we develop in the English speaking West will transfer without adaptation to another culture (p.77).

While these warnings are very important, these writers tend to create a binary opposition between two opposed and internally homogenised cultural types – that of the importing country and that of the exporting country. By focusing on national-cultural differences in learning styles, critics of cultural imperialism treat cultures as unified static entities, rather than constantly evolving and fluid patterns of relations (Rizvi, 1997). In this paper I will focus on forms of difference that exist within nation states and patterns of change that transcend borders (Tikly, 1999).

Biggs (1997) has argued that cultural differences can be overcome by applying the same universal principals of good teaching wherever a course is taught. Transnational educators will point out that, while differences in teaching and learning may exist between exporting and importing countries, the differences are being reduced as common educational philosophies and techniques take hold around the world. Rather than being Western approaches, the educators would argue, echoing Biggs, the flexible and student-centred approaches that educators in all countries are introducing are based on universal principles of good teaching that transcend cultural differences irrespective of students' prior experience or expectations. However, we should not treat the rise of technology-based flexible learning in transnational education as simply the triumph of good teaching. Rather, this model of learning is attractive for particular reasons and in particular places. To illustrate the dynamics involved in the use of flexible learning in South East Asia I will examine some of the understandings by policy-makers and planners about the desired outcomes of the introduction of educational technology in higher education in Singapore, Malaysia and Vietnam. To assess the implications of teaching across borders, it is important to understand the local context and dynamics in which the export will be received.

Educational policy, technology and self-directed learning

In South East Asia, educational commentators are increasingly promoting the use of

educational technology as a way of enhancing the creativity and inventiveness of students. In Singapore and Malaysia, these personal qualities are seen as essential to future national economic development. In these countries there is a clear vision of an emergent form of educational delivery that is challenging existing educational traditions.

The Singaporean government's Masterplan for IT in Education sets out a strategy of using educational technology to encourage self-directed learning. Launching the policy, Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong explained that, 'We will use IT to encourage students to learn more independently, to learn actively' (Ministry of Education, 1997). From the highest levels of government there is an explicit strategy of encouraging students 'to engage in more active and independent learning'. This policy has begun to have an effect on tertiary education in recent years, with Singapore's leading universities stating that they will encourage creativity and thinking skills in the curriculum and move away from a heavy reliance on written examinations as the sole form of assessment (Tan, 1999). The government is setting out to change the way students learn in order to meet the perceived workforce needs of a global information economy (Chen et al., 1999; Pin, 2000). These initiatives have much in common with policy shifts in the West that were widely described as a shift from Fordist to post-Fordist modes of educational delivery (Evans, 1995; Renner, 1995).

Unlike Singapore, which already has a well-developed higher education system, the primary concern of Malaysian higher education policy-makers and planners in the 1990s was to increase the participation rate, both by increasing enrolments in existing public universities (especially through distance learning) and by encouraging the growth of private higher educational institutions (Johari, 2000; Sheridan, 1995). The Malaysian government has expressed a desire to use the educational system to improve the skills of Malaysians, including their 'achievement motivation, their attitude towards excellence and to the fostering of the entrepreneurial spirit' (Malaysia, 1991). In practice, however, this has understandably taken second place to the expansion of student numbers.

While the government has been preoccupied with quantity, many educators have been focusing on questions of quality, and in particular, what they perceive to be a low level of creativity and independence among graduates (Silverman, 1996). Senior administrators in the private higher education sector regularly expound on the links between IT and self-directed learning as part of their efforts to brand their own institutions as being innovative (Education Quarterly, 2000). Perhaps the clearest elaboration of these issues is provided on the Study Malaysia website (http://www.studymalaysia.com/), which is supported by the Malaysian government and both private higher education industry associations and contains comprehensive information on both public and private institutions. Among its comprehensive overviews is a sole article on the future of higher education, entitled 'Shaping education for the future: the role of IT in institutions of higher learning'. This article sees technology playing a central role in transforming higher education:

The education of this and next century must build a knowledge-based society where individuals are expected to be more creative, innovative and productive. The workplace of tomorrow will require employees with multiple skills, who are able to think creatively, to solve problems in novel situations. (Gan, 2000, 1)

In order to bring about such changes, the author explains, 'IT-supported learning must be exploratory and it must promote discovery, with students constantly engaged in finding, organising, analysing and applying information in creative and novel ways to solve problems' (Gan, 2000, 2). In practice, he observes, this transformative potential of educational technology is rarely being realised. Existing patterns of teaching, learning and interacting are proving resilient, even as the medium of instruction changes:

> The applications of IT in higher education are still based on the old models of teaching, mostly a case of reception-based learning migrating to a computer screen. Most of the times, students still read and memorise information. Video-conferencing and certain Web applications still tend to be used primarily for information transmission in a didactic style, no different from the classroom lecture model (Gan, 2000, 2).

Despite the resilience of more teacher-centred and rigidly structured approaches, as in Singapore, there is a widely held belief in Malaysia that educational technologies and flexible delivery can and should transform the relationship between learners and teachers.

While the Vietnamese government has not been so vocal about innovation and creativity in education, it has encouraged the growth of more flexible modes of delivery in higher education. In the early 1990s, enrolments in informal and flexibly-delivered courses (including distance education and part-time studies) in Vietnamese higher education institutions rose much faster than enrolments in formal courses (full-time on-campus courses) (Vietnam, 1995). There are currently around 50,000 students enrolled in distance education at university level in Vietnam (Le & Tran, 1999) and this number is growing rapidly with increasing enrolments in transnational distance education programs.

It is clear that the Singaporean and Malaysian governments and many educationists in these countries see educational technologies as a means to encourage greater self-direction and creativity on the part of students. Flexible learning is not seen as a foreign concept that threatens local educational traditions; nor is it seen as simply good teaching. The appeal of educational technologies is that they will require learners to be more pro-active and autonomous, and these personality traits are increasingly important in the 'knowledge economy'. Technology is not as extensively used in Vietnamese higher education and, as a consequence, discussions concerning the implications of using educational technologies for teaching are not yet on the agenda. In light of this discussion of local policies for the introduction of educational technologies and the desired direction of change of educational

leaders, we can see that educational exporters who seek to introduce similar approaches are not necessarily acting counter to the wishes of governments, but rather they act alongside local reformist educators as agents of change.

Case studies: changing learning in transnational institutions

This section presents five brief case studies, which provide examples of the ways in which transnational institutions are using interactive technologies and how these affected student's learning styles in these institutions. These case studies are based on visits to these institutions by the author in June 1999, and the following accounts draw on observations during site visits, published promotional materials, institutional Web sites and interviews. In each institution, one-hour semi-structured interviews were conducted with one or two senior lecturers or administrators who were centrally involved in the introduction of educational technologies. The institutions were contacted and asked to nominate appropriate interviewees. Nine interviews were conducted in total, of which eight were taped and transcribed. One participant asked not to be taped. Interviews focused on identifying the ways in which educational technologies were being used, whether this was part of a broader attempt to change teaching and learning, and perceptions of any difficulties that had been encountered in trying to make teaching and learning more flexible. The institutions visited included International Medical University (Kuala Lumpur), Monash University Malaysia (Kuala Lumpur), UNITAR (Kuala Lumpur), Asian Institute of Technology (Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City) and TMC Centre for Advanced Seminars (Singapore). These institutions represent a range of different types of transnational institutions – two branch campuses, two private partner institutions and one new Malaysian private 'virtual' university that plans to operate transnationally.

International Medical University

Located in Kuala Lumpur, the International Medical University (IMU) is a twinning institution aligned with several foreign medical schools. Students spend two and a half years studying at IMU and then two and a half years at an international university. Most students go on to complete their degrees in Australia, with smaller numbers going to the United States, Canada, and the UK. The course is designed to be consistent with the courses offered by its overseas partners (Mei, 1997). From 2000, IMU will be offering its own medical degree so students will be able to do their whole course in Malaysia.

In the mid 1990s, the university implemented a problem-based learning approach to medical education, as have most of the medical faculties at which their students will complete the

second half of their medical degrees. At first, modules were presented each week on large display boards, including photographs, charts and text. However, each set of display boards took up a large amount of space and students complained that they could not get access to previous weeks' displays. In response, IMU established an online learning system to house these displays, offering students online access to study guides, lecturers' slide presentations, links to Web-based resources, self-assessments, announcements and discussion forums.

The introduction of problem-based learning required students to dramatically change the way they learned. A lecturer explained that:

> Students come to us expecting to be spoon-fed.… They just want one textbook, and that's it. So they're uncomfortable with that and then they're uncomfortable with PBL [problem-based learning] sessions. Most of them still sit around, especially in the first semester. They do not know how ... they're just scared of saying the wrong things, which happens in the old curriculum. … And second semester, maybe we have less problems, but by the end of the two and a half years, they're completely changed. It's a slow thing.

After several years experience with problem-based learning, the university is finding now that the introduction of electronic delivery 'reinforces the need for them [students] to change their way of learning.' While most students are happy with electronic delivery, some complained about the corresponding reduction in the number of lectures. These students preferred lectures 'because the lecturer talks and you feel you're getting the information, whereas now *they* have to talk. The lecturer is just a facilitator, a guide.' IMU's experience reminds us that new technologies are being introduced into institutions in which there is often already an impetus towards student-centred learning, illustrating a close connection between internationalisation, learning technologies and pedagogical innovation.

Monash University Malaysia

Monash University Malaysia has had a similar experience to IMU in many ways. An offshore campus like Monash University Malaysia is only made possible by telecommunications. E-mail, more than any other technology, is used extensively by administrators and lecturers to connect the university's campuses together. New technologies allow the creation of global universities, in which administration and teaching can be organised across electronic networks that span the globe. Once the university is restructured as a technologically integrated multi-campus organisation, as many Australian universities now are, it is relatively easy to add new campuses as additional nodes to an existing network.

Lecturers felt that, compared to Australian students, Malaysian students expect more

direction, closer supervision and have greater regard for lecturers. The university sets out to acculturate Malaysian students to Australian teaching and learning styles, for example by limiting lecturers' consultation times and providing extensive learning skills workshops to new students. Lecturers reported that in later years students become more confident as they come to understand what is required of them. The Australian character of teaching and learning was seen as an important feature of the campus's claim to be an Australian university campus in Malaysia, rather than one of the many Malaysian institutions teaching an Australian curriculum.

The most interesting feature of Monash University Malaysia for this study is its preference for traditional face-to-face teaching. Information technology is used extensively in administration and communications but in teaching and learning the campus has opted for a more traditional approach, even though Australian campuses of Monash are rapidly adopting technology in course delivery. Monash University Malaysia is able to charge higher fees than its competitors partly because it retains an emphasis on traditional forms of face-to-face delivery while other, less expensive providers, rely more on distance delivery techniques and part-time teaching staff. This is a response to perceived consumer preference for 'traditional' learning environments.

Many subjects are taught simultaneously on other Monash University campuses. In some cases, subjects that are taught by print-based distance education or online in Australia are taught face-to-face in classrooms at Monash University Malaysia. For example, the Bachelor of Communication degree is offered from Monash's Gippsland campus by distance mode in Australia but is taught face-to-face in Malaysia. Parents expect their students to have extensive face-to-face contact with lecturers so at Monash University Malaysia online materials are used as a resource rather than as a primary teaching method. For example, engineering students have access to half of the first year course materials on the Web in an entertaining and flexible form, but these are used to supplement rather than replace traditional lectures. A significant part of Monash University Malaysia's marketing rests on differentiating itself from the distance education based offshore providers by promoting itself as a fully-fledged campus of Monash with quality lecturing staff.

UNITAR

Universiti Tun Abdul Razak, better known as UNITAR, is a Malaysian private university which opened in 1999 as Malaysia's first 'virtual' university. It relies heavily on mediated instruction and plans to expand its network of distributed learning centres beyond Malaysia's borders in the next few years. When the university was first proposed, the Malaysia Education Minister expressed concern about the lack of socialisation in remotely-supported distance education. In short, UNITAR was told, 'no socialisation, no education, no license, no operation', according to a senior administrator. In response, the virtual university model

was altered, requiring compulsory attendance at local study centres in all subjects. In the first semester, attendance is required for 22 hours per subject and in subsequent semesters students must attend eight hours of classes per subject. UNITAR has had to establish a network of local learning centres, some of which will be outside Malaysia, in which students can attend classes, interact with other students, sit exams and access computers and support staff. These are very similar to the learning centres of the established distance education providers in Malaysia, but with more reliance on educational technologies.

Due to the cost and unreliability of dial-up Internet connections in Malaysia, which were then prone to drop-outs and low bandwidth, UNITAR decided to distribute teaching materials to students on CD-ROMs. Students are required to go online to access the library, complete administrative tasks, participate in forums and tutorials. The CD-ROMs for the first year subjects are more tightly structured than those for later years, directing students through a linear sequence of materials and tasks. A senior administrator at UNITAR explained that, 'When you [the student] are starting a class and you have no teachers, you want the content to teach you and guide you—one step after another. … We want them [students] to be on their own, but they do not want to be left alone.' The CD-ROMs for first year subjects are clearly structured in a logical linear fashion. The CD-ROMs for later subjects are more 'resource-based', requiring students to use their own judgement more to make sense of the information provided and form connections for themselves. The later year subjects require students to be both highly motivated and possess the study skills required to manage their own learning.

UNITAR found that their students are generally technically competent and have dramatically reduced the amount of initial technical training their students receive. Instead, according to UNITAR, 'the issue is changing your mindset, being independent, managing your time.' To prepare students for independent study, the first CD students receive from UNITAR is 'Skills for Knowledge Workers'. This covers basic computer competence such as how to connect to the Internet, making use of word processors, Excel, Access and PowerPoint for their work in the university, but also time management, independent study skills and listening skills.

Asian Institute of Technology

The Asian Institute of Technology (AIT) is an international institution based in Bangkok. It was established over 40 years ago as the South East Asian Treaty Organisation Graduate School of Engineering to serve the educational needs of the South East Asian region and it continues to be funded by many governments and foundations. It now has staff from more than 25 countries and students from more than 40 countries.

AIT has two centres in Vietnam. The AIT Centre Vietnam, located in Hanoi, was established in 1993, as the institution's first branch outside Bangkok. It provides postgraduate education, short-term training courses, language training. Vietnamese students constitute the largest group of foreign students at AIT in Bangkok. The Hanoi centre was established to provide a lower-cost alternative for Vietnamese graduate students, enabling them to complete most of their degree in Vietnam. At the same time, the Swiss-AIT-Vietnam Management Development Programme has been established at the Ho Chi Minh City University of Technology. Jointly funded by the Swiss and Vietnamese governments, this centre delivers a graduate diploma programme in Management Development to Vietnamese business lecturers from local universities and working executives. It also provides management training and support to Vietnamese companies that are in the process of restructuring prior to privatization.

In the past, AIT's campus in Vietnam relied heavily on fax communications with Bangkok. Staff now use e-mail and the Web extensively to keep in touch with international colleagues and to remain informed about developments outside Vietnam. Students regularly use online resources and this differentiates them from the public education sector in Vietnam. According to one AITCV lecturer, 'It is a big difference between the international education system and the local Vietnamese universities. They are still closed. Our students have the means to access the Internet every day.' Another lecturer reported that his students at AIT 'use the net very aggressively and in a lot of the courses they are also given references to the Web sites. They also do project work using data on the net.' However, as in most educational institutions, the Internet has so far had a much greater impact on communications between lecturers than it has on teaching. According to a different lecturer, 'the impact on the teaching and research isn't so clear, other than that you can get in touch with people around the world quicker... But in term of using it for instruction and other things, we haven't gone very far yet I don't think.'

One lecturer reported that AIT's older students possessed the independent study skills required to use the Internet as a resource: 'At least the little that we are doing by way of using the net as an education tool, we don't seem to have any problems with the students. They think seem to be able to cope very well. Just giving them broad guidelines, they know how to search, they know how to reach the relevant Web sites. They know how to download the relevant information.' This lecturer teaches in a graduate program for managers who have considerable prior education and workplace experience. He pointed out that younger students straight from high school in an undergraduate course could not be expected to work so independently.

TMC Centre for Advanced Seminars

The TMC Centre for Advanced Seminars in Singapore offers its own short and diploma

courses and acts as a local partner for distance education programs offered by Monash University, Deakin University, the University of Newcastle and the University of London. Since the currency crisis, the demand for foreign university courses delivered in Singapore has increased dramatically (Patton, 1999). While TMC does not providing any formal teaching, it does provides a range of other services to students enrolled in international distance education programs, including advertising and information sessions for prospective students, orientation programs, administrative support, face-to-face study group sessions, student support and counselling, local submission of assignments and library facilities. Before the Internet, TMC students had fax and postal access to their overseas lecturers, and students were issued with a fax allowance for use of the TMC fax machine. Since 1995, TMC have provided students with access to Internet facilities so they can contact lecturers via e-mail, participate in discussion forums, conduct research and submit assignments online. Students are increasingly interacting with teaching staff from the foreign universities via online a-synchronous conference sessions, especially in computing and communications courses. But even with such online interaction, according to TMC administrators students still value local facilities and face-to-face academic support highly and there is little demand for courses taught online without such support.

Emergent themes

These brief observations illustrate some of the ways in which transnational institutions in South East Asia are responding to the challenges brought about by the use of educational technologies to enhance flexible learning. There were a number of common themes in the experiences of these institutions. Firstly, these institutions' students expected to be provided with large volumes of information and expected that recall of this information would be assessed in examinations. This was usually described 'spoon-feeding', and was seen as a major challenge by those who sought to introduce more student-centred approaches.

Secondly, these institutions were consciously seeking to change students' behaviour by using educational technology to encourage self-directed learning. The objective was both to bring local practices into line with teaching and learning practices in the awarding university's home country, and to introduce what were seen as 'modern' approaches. Educators generally understood the difference as old versus new rather than local versus foreign. They perceived the foreign institutions as having more resources and therefore being more advanced, both technologically and pedagogically.

Thirdly, attempts at innovation have met with resistance from students, especially younger undergraduate students. All interviewees mentioned that students generally desired close supervision and direction from locally-available (as opposed to remote) teaching staff. Flexible approaches were more readily accepted by later-year students and those in graduate

programs. Students' reluctance to work independently and teachers' reluctance to relinquish control over learning were seen as major impediments to the introduction of educational technologies and more flexible modes of learning. In different ways, these pressures forced UNITAR to incorporate face-to-face teaching in what was initially planned as a purely distance education delivery model, and forced Monash University Malaysia to take note of its students' scepticism towards any forms of teaching that resembles distance education.

Conclusion

What are the implications of these observations for educational exporters? The common experience described above is of emergent international approaches challenging local traditions. Contemporary globalisation rarely involves a simple 'introduction' of novel techniques from one country into another; instead local traditions in all parts of the globe come under pressure from globalised innovative practices (Evans, 1995). One possible path is to follow Biggs, who suggests that transnational educators should not focus too closely on the perceived historical differences between Asian and Western learners (Biggs, 1996; Volet, 1999), but instead use newer strategies are universally effective and transcend local cultures. To follow this line is to acknowledge that modernisation is also a process of detraditionalisation (Heelas et al., 1996), in which the entrenched expectations produced by existing practices must be undone. If education is conceived as a way of changing students, then educators should accept that they cannot be culturally benign, but invariably promote certain ways of being over others.

Alternatively, one can resist educational globalisation by tailoring teaching and learning strategies to the local context, and by employing empowered local lecturers and tutors (Ziguras, 1999). What the above discussion shows, however, is that there is not a clear separation between local and foreign practices, and transnational educators must still decide which of the local approaches they will embrace. Educators need to be aware of their role in social change and be able to justify to themselves the role they play. Innovation involves the erosion of older practices, wherever it takes place, and educators should be sure that they want to erode these traditions before they encourage change. This means coming to understand the way things are done locally before seeking to change them. Western educators can make such decisions about the local practices they understand, but to dismiss local practices in other parts of the world without understanding them is fraught with danger. But at the same time, they should understand local dynamics affect how their actions are interpreted and perceived by students and teachers abroad.

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Educational technology in transnational higher education in South East Asia: the cultural politics of flexible learning

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