Knowledge Mobility and Willingness to Engage

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Abstract

Knowledge mobility is an ever growing phenomenon worldwide. The expanding European Union has hosted many programs for academic mobility exchanges since the late 1980s. At the same time, the leading immigrant-receiving countries, including Australia, have enhanced their immigrant recruitment techniques to attract highly educated and experienced people in the last two decades. Academic migrants become well-recognised agents of knowledge transfer, knowledge interchange and, ultimately, knowledge creation.

This research explores diverse aspects of intercultural dialogue to reveal conditions for successful cultural knowledge transfer and creation. The value of this research is seen in engaging a group of academic migrants to share their experiences, views and perceptions of intercultural communication, with a goal of producing a better understanding of the symbolic processes in which people from different cultures create shared meanings. This paper analyses evolving empirical manifestations of emerging cosmopolitanism in everyday intercultural interactions. I argue that postmodern cosmopolitan milieu facilitates intercultural integration and enables knowledge transfer and creation of shared cultural meanings. Empirical research on academic mobility and intercultural dialogue was conducted on the premises of the European University Institute (EUI) in Florence, and LUISS Guido Carli University in Rome, Italy. These two distinguished international institutions present perfect sites for examining modern intercultural encounters in a cosmopolitan academic milieu. I argue that cosmopolitan dispositions create mutually beneficial conditions for effective transfer and creation of all types of knowledge.

Key words: Academic mobility, knowledge transfer, cosmopolitanism, cultural dispositions, power distance

Introduction

Knowledge mobility is an ever growing phenomenon worldwide (OECD, 2012). Growing numbers of academic mobilities create new opportunities not only for economic development, but also for cultural enrichment and ultimately knowledge creation (Bedford, Ho & Lidgard, 2005). An objective of my research is to examine academic intercultural encounters and interpersonal experiences with a view of locating cosmopolitan values that enable successes in professional communication. Mobile academics were found to display certain cosmopolitan dispositions in everyday discourses, situations and experiences of interpersonal interactions. Cultural habitual standpoints describing “long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body” (Bourdieu, 1986: 243) that
individuals display in relations with others, were found to be the crucial components of successful intercultural dialogue. This research aims to present empirical testing and discussion of the growing cosmopolitan values and dispositions in everyday social interactions. The central argument of this article is that various expressions of cosmopolitan dispositions facilitate and promote intercultural dialogue, knowledge transfer and creation of shared cultural meanings.

Knowledge Mobility

Academic mobility as an international phenomenon has become the more evident after mobility programs were introduced in the evolving and expanding European Union in the late 1980s. Now the European Union hosts many programs for academic mobility exchanges, such as Erasmus, Socrates, Marie Curie, Tempus and others. The most prominent and widespread of them is Erasmus. Together with its newer addition - Erasmus Mundus - it now truly involves the global academic community.

The Erasmus Programme which stands for EuRopean Community Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students started in the united Europe in 1987 as a program for student exchange. It was established by the European Union (EU) and forms a major part of the EU Lifelong Learning Programme 2007–2013, and is the operational framework for the European Commission’s (EC) initiatives in higher education. The Erasmus Programme was replaced by the Lifelong Learning Programme 2007–2013 on 1 January 2007 (EC, 2011a). The Erasmus Mundus Programme is an additional Programme that is oriented towards international and truly globalised education. Whereas the Erasmus Programme is open to Europeans, the Erasmus Mundus is open to non-Europeans. This is a programme in which I have been fortunate to participate on a postdoctoral exchange from Australia to Italy.

In the last reporting year (2009/10) there were 213 266 Erasmus student mobilities of which 177 705 students studying abroad and 35 561 students doing traineeships (placements) abroad. Among staff, there were 37 776 Erasmus staff mobilities of which 29 031 held teaching assignments abroad and 8 745 staff had training periods abroad. In total, 2 982 Higher Education Institutions sent students and staff on Erasmus mobility. The total number of Erasmus student mobilities for studies and placements combined in 2009/10 was 213 266, an annual increase of 7.4%. From 1987 – when the programme was established – to 2009/10 almost 2.3 million students have benefited from the Erasmus programme. Almost all the 32 participating countries experienced growth in outgoing and incoming student mobility. Erasmus supported a total of 37,776 mobility periods for teaching and non-teaching staff from Higher education institutions, and staff from enterprises. This represents an annual increase of 3.8% from the previous academic year. Teaching assignments were conducted by 76.9% of the staff mobilities (EC, 2011a).

The Erasmus Mundus programme has included Australia in what previously was European-only scheme of academic mobility. Australian scholars have been gradually developing their participation in this programme in the six-year period from 2004/05 to 2009/10. By now a total of 86 people (65 males and 21 females) from Australia participated in the exchanges (EC, 2011b). In the first four academic years the level of participation was rather low: 9 people (all males) 2004/05, no one in 2005/06, 8 people (7 males and 1 female) in 2006/07, and 11 people (9 males and 2 females) in 2007/08. Then the numbers have jumped to a relatively high 25 exchanges (20 males
and 5 females) in 2008/09 and 33 people (20 males and 13 females) in 2009/10. If we look at the gender breakdown, males considerably predominate in every academic year. Females made a significant breakthrough only in the last reporting year (EC, 2011b). It is striking that academic mobility from Australia is a gendered phenomenon.

Empirical Research

Empirical research on academic hyper-mobility was conducted on the premises of the European University Institute (EUI) in Florence and LUISS Guido Carli University in Rome, both in Italy. These two universities are perfect sites for examining the experiences of mobile academics of the modern times in a cosmopolitan milieu. The EUI is an international educational institution overseen by the European Union. LUISS Guido Carli stands for Libera Università Internazionale degli Studi Sociali (Free International University for Social Studies). Both the EUI and LUISS have consistently strived to attract big numbers of international students and staff. These two Universities are truly synonymous with academic mobility internationally and represent a vivid example of liquid academic hyper-mobility (Kirpitchenko, 2011). Their academic environments provide an excellent opportunity to explore how social and intercultural interactions develop among academic professionals from all over the globe.

For this study, research data were collected utilizing the qualitative techniques of participant observation, focus groups and in-depth interviews. My lengthy stays at the EUI and LUISS provided me with ample opportunities for participating in all types of educational activities: lectures, classes, seminars, conferences and recreational events. As a crucial part of my fieldwork research I conducted valuable insider’s research by taking part in diverse doctoral and post-doctoral training activities as a participant and observer. I was offered unique advantages in experiencing academic research environments enriched from cross-fertilization of research traditions and academic approaches which are unique. I gathered plentiful qualitative data on students’ learning experiences by participating and observing academic presentations, discussions and debates.

The EUI and LUISS are leading research and teaching institutions devoted exclusively to social sciences. They especially emphasize comparative studies and international links which are of particular interest for academic migrants. Both are renowned academic institutions which promote academic mobility by recruiting their full-time teaching staff, fellows and research students from all countries of the European Union and many other parts of the globe. These two universities presented exceptional opportunities for exploring academic intercultural dialogue through first-hand interaction with mobile academic participants. I conducted formal interviews with twenty-five post-graduate researchers, post-doctoral fellows and professors from twelve Eastern European countries who were randomly selected for my fieldwork research.

Willingness to Engage

This paper presents discussion based on collected empirical data on cosmopolitan dispositions among mobile academics. An objective of this discussion is to examine empirical evidence of the growing cosmopolitan values and dispositions in everyday social interactions. In this paper, I will discuss some of cosmopolitan dispositions that became salient in my empirical research. These
cosmopolitan dispositions can be described as **willingness to engage** or **deeper interpersonal engagement** in which I include the notion of **minimal power distance**.

The notions, described as **willingness to engage** or **deeper interpersonal engagement**, have been featured as profound sentiments among my respondents. This study relies on the grounding work of Hannerz (1996: 104) who defined **cosmopolitanism** as an “orientation, a willingness to engage with the other ... intellectual and aesthetic openness toward divergent cultural experiences, a search for contrasts rather than uniformity”. This noteworthy definition has been appropriated by many scholars of cosmopolitanism. For example, Calcutt, Woodward & Skrbis (2009: 172) believe that “cosmopolitanism includes Kantian universalism, cross-cultural competence, and either a willingness to tolerate or engage with otherness”. While the idea of “tolerance of otherness” brings to mind negative connotations of intercultural conflict and resistance, its counterpart idea of “willingness to engage with others” has more resonance for my study.

Among my respondents the desire to be involved with others often sparked out of a perceived greater isolation and emotional detachment that almost every respondent felt at the beginning of their stay abroad. For example, Gabrielle lamented that her status was a Visiting Researcher did not provide her with a ready opportunity to take a very active part in the educational activities. She explained: “My expectations were higher ... I wanted to be more actively involved. For example I began attending seminars... Then I went to [another university] for six months and I was really involved there. I was a part of the working group and so on. It was much easier there”. Similarly, Anna admitted: “For me it really disturbed me to be lonely and be by my own. Maybe that’s why I don’t like my Ph.D. work because I think it gets very-very lonely. It is a lonely project and lonely thing. ... I like to be with a group of friends”.

In relation to successful strategies for intercultural communication, Anna said that it was very important for her to have support of her friends and her family and people around her. She continued: “So you are not left on your own, it is important to have good friends and people who can support you - your friends or someone you can talk to: your professor, or supervisor, or maybe somebody else your boss, somebody who can advise you what to do, so you are not left on your own. This is very important not to be lonely because you’ll get depressed and want to give up, or feel like giving up”. Stefan also said that during a long time of his academic career he was left alone and he would have liked more team work.

Positive changes that everyone desired were described in terms of developing closer connections to other people and having a network of people to rely on and help each other. It was an interesting observation that in general respondents found that communication between people becomes easier as hierarchical relations become less pronounced. A level of hierarchy in a society can be measured by a notion of **Power Distance** which was proposed by Hofstede & Hofstede (2005). Power Distance index measures the degree of equality or inequality that exists in a society and it is one of the principal indicators to measure societal cultural differences. Hofstede & Hofstede (2005) noticed that hierarchical relations could be differently pronounced depending on the societal culture. Hierarchy tend to be overly emphasised in the societies which do not allow significant upward mobility of its citizens. Other societies which promote equality and opportunity for everyone, also tend to deemphasize hierarchical relations.

Power distance index preconditions relation to authority and it is one of the key traits that is embedded in the culture of the individual. Relation to authority was also one of aspects of work
and study relations that many respondents were keen to comment throughout the interview without being guided by direct questions. Authority in the cosmopolitan environment was “not very pronounced” in Gabrielle’s words. She continued that you could address any authority figure by their first name unlike in her home country where the Dean was “almost the God or someone very close to it”. It was also Sophie’s experience that in the course of her PhD program everyone among professors was her colleague. Louisa had the same opinion that professors were closer to students and there was no strict separation between the professors and the students. Everyone was trying to be friendly: “Here ... professors put themselves on the same level with you, [and] it makes it easier to approach and talk to them.”

Susan said that in her home country it was not easy to communicate with professors: “It was very like you really felt that they are superior and they wanted to be superior to students and they kept their distance. ... There was certainly a hierarchy”. Here professors were gentler. Similarly, in his home country, Alex always felt subordination and certain dependence because supervisors established the hierarchy when “they are your supervisor and you are nobody”. In his view, in the cosmopolitan institutions there was a dialogue between students and professors: “When you are discussing your research project for example, you can debate and argue and defend your position. Your supervisor here guides and does not dictate.” Similarly, Nick said that he was very lucky because he was given lots of independence and autonomy in his research work and could work with his supervisor in a collegial and friendly manner.

Informal style of communication was noted in many daily aspects: from the dress code to the way authorities are addressed. Jane, Ellen and Gabrielle also believed that the relationship between students and professors were very formal in their home countries. In a new environment, it was not as easy for Gabrielle to address her supervisor simply by the first name. She still preferred calling her supervisor “Professor such and such”. Gabrielle said that she unconsciously always put a boundary between herself and authority. In the learning process many noted that less reverence was demanded to the expert opinions. It was shown in the fact that students were encouraged to speak up in class and express their own ideas, whereas in a more hierarchical class settings students learned by memorizing and reproducing what authorities said on the subject. Many respondents praised this cosmopolitan openness and acceptance of diverse cultural expressions in academia.

**Conclusion**

This paper presented a discussion of empirical manifestations of some of the evolving cosmopolitan dispositions in academic intercultural interactions. This paper argues that emerging cosmopolitan values are preconditions for successful knowledge exchange. Empirical evidence revealed that the capability of mobile academics to be successful in knowledge exchange depended to a great extent on the person’s habitual dispositions, propensities and inclinations rather than situations presented to them. Some participants learned to thrive in the new cosmopolitan culture and found it even to be more comfortable and enjoyable for them. Sophie noted: “It is a different culture but it is probably in some ways better than [at home] in terms of acceptance and appreciation people have toward you. ... You feel different but I don’t think it is a hindrance”. Jessica noted that there were always cultural differences, but what mattered was which of them had any significance after being mediated by cosmopolitan dispositions.
All types of learning programs on cross-cultural communication tended to be highly regarded. Cosmopolitan cultural training was discussed by many as a way of mediating intercultural differences and promoting cultural intelligence. Susan spoke very highly of the cross-cultural training she received on “how to manage people from different cultures and what kind of difficulties we might face”. In her opinion, lack of cross-cultural training “creates many problems. … and many problems arise because of the cultural differences and people do not even realize it.” Discussion of conscious and unconscious cultural dispositions in a supportive teaching program had a great effect. Intercultural training aimed at developing effective communication skills across cultures is a new thriving field of study and research (Ang and Van Dyne, 2008) and this study testified to its increased significance.

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References


