



Faculty of Design

2022

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Suggested citation:

Bagchi, Pushpi (2022) At the Intersection of Cosmopolitan Elitism and Oppression: A postcolonial analysis of transnational education systems. In: Proceedings of Relating Systems Thinking and Design, RSD11, 3-16 Oct 2022, Brighton, United Kingdom. Available at <https://openresearch.ocadu.ca/id/eprint/4269/>

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Relating Systems Thinking and Design
2022 Symposium
University of Brighton, Brighton, UK,
October 13-16, 2022

At the Intersection of Cosmopolitan Elitism and Oppression: A postcolonial analysis of transnational education systems

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This presentation makes a case for using postcolonial discourse as a critical lens to study transnational education (TNE) to identify the structural inequalities and neo-colonial nature of globalised education systems. TNE is an educational system where students live in a country different from their degree-awarding institutes. Higher education services, not students, cross national borders, creating a global flow of knowledge commodified for those who can afford it. These socio-economic networks are a product of globalisation and the internationalisation of higher education which facilitate the connectivity of people and communities across borders. Postcolonial discourses offer a collection of perspectives and theoretical concepts which capture how colonial, neo-colonial, and postcolonial practices shape contemporary educational systems.

Using the example of an academic franchise between a university in England and a private design institute in Sri Lanka, this research offers critical insights into the power structures embedded in British transnational education systems. Ethnographic narratives of stakeholders situated in the design franchise reveal nuanced insights into engaging with TNE. Their lived experiences synthesise social, institutional, and economic motivations with contextual specificities, illustrating the complexity of such educational systems. In this case, analysing empirical data using postcolonial discourses such as agency alongside theoretical

concepts such as friction challenge current definitions for franchised higher education programmes and the promise of a global design education offering a neutral, universal experience to all students and facilitators.

KEYWORDS: Transnational education systems, globalisation, design education, postcolonial discourse, systemic design

RSD TOPIC(S): Learning & Education

Introduction

The export of educational services makes a significant contribution to the British economy. For example, the total revenue of education-related exports and transnational education activity generated over 25 billion GBP in 2019 (GOV.UK, 2021). Within the context of the commodification of educational services and the continuing trend of academic institutes functioning as private businesses rather than public institutions (Altbach, 2004; Knight, 2013), this research offers critical insights into the power structures embedded in British transnational education systems (TNE).

Globalisation and communication technologies have enabled the fast-paced digital flow of information across borders, creating socio-economic networks which have catalysed the internationalisation of higher education (Knight, 2004). TNE is an educational system where students live in a country different from their degree-awarding institutes. Higher education services, not students, cross national borders, creating a global flow of knowledge commodified for those who can afford it.

Based on my doctoral thesis (Bagchi, 2021c), this presentation makes a case for using postcolonial discourse as a critical lens in studying complex socio-economic systems with multiple stakeholders, such as TNE. It is in response to the conference's focus on "confronting legacies of oppression in systemic design". Mobilising postcolonial discourses with systemic design helps identify the structural inequalities and oppressive, neo-colonial nature of globalised design education. Postcolonial discourses provide a collection of perspectives and theoretical concepts which help identify and

confront the systemic nature of oppression in globalised education systems to inform a more equitable approach. The proposition is based on an analysis of definitions of TNE frameworks for British higher education alongside narratives shared by stakeholders situated in a franchise partnership between a university in England and a private design institute in Sri Lanka. By analysing the empirical data using postcolonial concepts such as agency (Ashcroft et al., 1998; Eteläpelto et al., 2013), ambivalence (Bhabha, 1984), and translation (Bhabha, 2004), this presentation challenges the notion of globalised design education as a system which offers a universal experience to all students.

Borrowing from the Systemic Design Toolkit's methodology (n.d.), this presentation is divided into the following sections:

Framing the system

The first section will introduce the contextual landscape of TNE using the example of an academic franchise between design institutions in England and Sri Lanka. The students and their families who buy into and finance this franchise partnership are part of a social category termed new cosmopolitans (Dilrik, 1994). New cosmopolitans are those who benefit from global capitalism and have historically produced desires and aspirations, in this case, from when Sri Lanka was colonised. A brief overview of Sri Lanka as a postcolonial state helps understand how TNE systems help fulfil the new cosmopolitans' aspirations of accessing educational qualifications from the West locally. However, a critical examination of the key terminologies that define this educational system reveals how they perpetuate imbalances in power and knowledge production.

Listening to and understanding the system

This section presents ethnographic narratives of multiple stakeholders who engage with design education in a transnational setting to provide a nuanced view of the system. Conversations, observations and field notes have strength in revealing a social world and that every day, micro-events can illustrate broader social processes and systems (Brewer, 2004). The empirical data illustrates how the definitions of TNE systems and their prescribed format for facilitation specify a hierarchical process of dominance and oppression over what must be taught in institutes hosting a foreign curriculum which

creates ambivalence (Bhabha, 1984). At the same time, a systemic review of interactions amongst stakeholders reveals how individuals use their agency (Ashcroft et al., 1998; Eteläpelto et al., 2013) to adapt and translate (Bhabha, 2004) the system to suit their needs. Although this translation is critical in upholding TNE systems, it is done in the margins of defined frameworks and remains unacknowledged.

Defining the desired future

The concluding section will discuss how postcolonial discourse can complement the practice of systemic design by providing key concepts for critical analysis to “overcome the ahistoricity of contemporary globalisation/global systems” (Rizvi et al., 2006, p. 249). In this case, it helps identify how current definitions for transnational franchise partnerships exemplify Britain’s higher education institutions will to power over others by presenting a British education as universal and superior (British Council and McNamara Economic Research, 2013; British Council and German Academic Exchange Service, 2017).

Using the postcolonial state of Sri Lanka and design education as an example, the presentation demonstrates that to evaluate the effectiveness of TNE, academic programmes need to be culturally contextualised. As a theoretical framework, postcolonialism can extend and complement systemic design principles of appreciating complexity, purpose finding, and boundary framing (Jones, 2014) as analysing systemic design challenges using postcolonial discourses helps identify links to historically produced desires and cultural specificities. A postcolonial approach can make space for critically evaluating the appropriateness of any globalised educational system exported and imposed in a different country or region as it questions context-free rationality. It also aligns with systemic design principles of acknowledging the interrelatedness of issues arising from globalised systems, the need to develop empathy with diverse stakeholders within a system and strengthening human relationships to enable learning (Bijl-Brouwer & Malcolm, 2020).

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