

Equity-Minded International Education

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Estela Mara Bensimon, the Director for the Center of Urban Education at University of Southern California, has done crucial work on “equity-mindedness,” offering scholars and faculty a critical framework to develop inclusive and culturally relevant pedagogies that center the lived experiences of Black and Latinx students in higher education. Bensimon argues that an equity-minded pedagogy calls attention to patterns of inequity in student outcomes; it takes personal and institutional responsibility for the success of our students; it entails critically reassessing our own practices; and, requires us to be race-conscious and aware of the social and historical context of exclusionary practices in Higher Education.

Here, I consider the implications of embedding equity-mindedness into a pedagogy that centers the experiences of international students in US universities. This short reflexive essay emerges from an intersection of my own identity as an international scholar, who first came to the USA as a graduate student, and my administrative work to expand diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives in pedagogical contexts. In particular, the ideas explored here are a result of a retroactive reflection on my own needs and experiences as an international student in the USA; my observations and practices in my own classes to engage international students; and the professional development workshops I have developed and facilitated for faculty around inclusive and equity-minded pedagogical practices. In offering recommendations for how to develop an equity-minded approach to teaching and engaging international students, my goal is to cultivate an explicit and intentional pedagogy that:

- 1) is aware of the intercultural networks within which we are all imbricated
- 2) recognizes and addresses the multidimensional flow of power in a global context
- 3) engages the heterogeneously complex contexts from which international students join our programs and institutions.

These recommendations could posit the initial building blocks for a pedagogy that is categorically inclusive of international students and aligns their learning with the principles of equity-mindedness. These could be valuable for all faculty, academic advisors, and more broadly, all those acting in some capacity as mentors to international students.

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1. Be aware of the historical exclusionary practices in American higher education as it relates to international students:

Two years ago, when the Trump administration announced a ban on student visas, creating mayhem for the educational prospects of thousands of international students in the USA, or those preparing to come here, many of us expressed anger at the callousness and xenophobia articulated through these governmental policies. It seemed especially cruel to create bureaucratic complications during a pandemic that had already left many students feeling precarious and uprooted. And yet, it's important to remember that this exclusion-on-the-dime - a pivoting by the powerful in a sudden, disorienting way - has, in fact, been at the core of the USA's relationship to international students for a long time. In "Conditioned Inclusion: The Student Visa as History," Abigail Boggs has done important work to show that the USA has, for a century now, treated international students as simultaneously "desirable and dangerous:" desirable for the tuition money they bring; dangerous because they pose the threat of becoming immigrants. As teachers, administrators, and/or advisors, we need to contend with how this suppressed history continues to inflect the experiences of international students, not only in moments of crisis (when arbitrary policy changes are announced, for instance), but also in an ongoing, everyday way. The pandemic-related escalation in hate-crimes against Asian and Asian-American students has impacted their mental health, exacerbated their isolation on university campuses, and reduced their enthusiasm for coming to the USA to pursue their degrees (Zhai and Du 2020; McGee 2022). These developments cannot be decontextualized from the longer history of American policies such as the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 or the Immigration Act of 1924, restricting Chinese and Japanese immigration to the USA; or the 149% increase in anti-Asian hate crimes against South and East Asian communities after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. As equity-minded practitioners, we have an ethical imperative to stay alert not only to contemporary political contexts that contribute to the vulnerability of our international students, but also to the histories of discrimination that, both sporadically and consistently, inflect their experiences, and their sense of belonging within American higher education.

2. Investigate the nomenclature "international students": We have to grapple with the fact that the designation we assign to students not born in the United States does the work of wiping out the extremely divergent economic, political, cultural contexts from which these students join us. I am deliberately not using the word "diverse," because it has a taming effect. The cohering appellation "international students," rather than fostering a community between these students, instead gives us permission to treat them like a singular entity that stands jointly on the other side of "Americanness." This "tendency towards over-generalization" (Jones 2017) is inaccurate in its homogenizing tendency, and counter-productive, because it leads to a "reductionist" otherization" (Holliday 1999:237) of the needs and experiences of international students. The truth is that even in the ways that international students are united – for instance in that they all need student visas and are vulnerable to the whims of immigration laws here, there's a huge discrepancy in their vulnerability. Someone seeking a visa in South Asia, or the Middle East will have a very different experience of navigating the USA embassy abroad than a student from Europe, for instance. Conflating the extreme heterogeneity of "educationally-mobile students" (Carroll 2015) is also rooted in a deficit conceptualization of international students as inferior, lacking, needing to change so that they can adapt to American standards of education (Hanassab 2006; Heng 2016). and to proactively, as Jones (2017) suggests, to "problematize and reimagine the notion of international student experience" as a monolithic, or even a productive category.

We have to reject the assumption that there is some essential difference between domestic and international students, as well as think about/treat international students in a way that is alive and attentive to the heterogeneity of their contexts – just as we ought to be alive to the diversity among our domestic students (Jones 2017).

3. Recognize not just the differences but also the continuities across national contexts: It is not enough just to learn about the varied contexts of our students, and create space for the differences that exist in our classrooms. We must also invite our students to articulate the continuities in our experiences. I am speaking of an overlap in the precarities that are brought forth by our conjoined existence under globalization and neoliberalism. This is not just about learning that American fast-food chains exist in far-flung corners of the world. Instead, it entails recognizing that while we all live, breathe, eat, die, we do so differently because the same systems of oppression and exploitation operate on us, and interpellate us, differentially. It's to recognize, for instance, that the USA and India both have McDonalds, but in India, the burgers are “more flavorful” (as the students said), the chain offers vegetarian options, and caters exclusively to the upper classes. In my study abroad course to India, I worked with my students to unpack this simple revelation to equip them to see the similarities and the differences between the two geographical settings - similarities and differences that are born out of the workings of neoliberal capitalism intermixing with global corporate power and local culinary, race-caste, and class particularities. To help our students learn about the repetitions and overlaps in how racism and colorism manifest across the globe, or about the casteist nature of racism in America, for instance, could yield powerful cross-cultural connections that grapple as enrichingly with differences as they do with the shared structural conditions of existence that shape realities across global contexts. In post-COVID-19, this is more urgent than ever before. How else can we support our students to understand the deeply disparate outcomes of the pandemic – both, for different racial and ethnic communities within the USA, and between countries across the world? Our goal must be to bring the grief, challenges, and tolls of the pandemic experienced by domestic students, in dialogue with the dislocation, fear, isolation, and tragedies faced by international students. We must recognize, for instance, that the challenges faced by economically underprivileged students in the USA to cope with the educational disruptions caused by the pandemic resonate with the chaos caused for international students. The shared trauma of a global pandemic offers a critical opportunity to lay bare the differentially distributed operations of global power, that must be extended to understand issues and contexts beyond/beside the pandemic. In this context, another interesting possibility is to open up, in our courses and classrooms, comparative-collaborative frameworks not just between the USA and another country, but between countries that are not the USA at all, or frameworks in which the USA exists as one among many nodes of investigation.

4. Develop skills that helps students reflect on privilege in a global context: This recommendation is born out of the conviction that as teachers our goal is not simply to give students what they *want*, but to surprise them (and in the process, often, ourselves too) with critical perspectives, radical modalities that empower us to collectively conceptualize and materially realize a world in which no-one is '*wanting*'. This requires that we develop the political clarity and be brave to steer away from the depoliticized versions of intercultural learning that abound, which confuse “respecting” other cultures while not critically interrogating systems of oppression that exist in other parts of the world. This, of course, needs a lot of care on

our part as faculty, because if done carelessly it can all too easily devolve into USA exceptionalism, and result in a lot of ahistorical, prejudiced knowledge about other countries we know little about. But this doesn't mean it cannot be done right. And, here are two quick points that can help us do this in a way that is pedagogically equitable and productive:

- a. Always attend to the histories of colonialism and American hegemony that have contributed to whatever oppressive structure you are critiquing in another country and bring that knowledge into your engagement with domestic and international students.
- b. Never adopt a "not in the USA" attitude; go for, instead (and this is what I always say to my students) "all countries are messed up; it's only a matter of how." This means exploring with your students how some version of the oppressions that operate in a different country also exist within the USA, and vice versa.

But how does this connect to supporting international students, like all other students, to understand, reflect on, and challenge privilege – including their own? As equity-minded practitioners, who challenge the privileges of students from dominant groups (and I would argue we should all strive to do that), we must develop the skills to do so even with and for our international students. This means encouraging our international students to learn about the subaltern histories from the contexts that they're coming from. Sometimes, these are histories that their domestic contexts would have worked hard to mute; much like the anti-Critical Race Theory campaigns aim to silence the histories of racism and anti-racism in the USA. As instructors, it is our responsibility to make our international students feel safe and seen, so that they can be encouraged to seek out worldviews, voices, and perspectives they might not have encountered previously, including about and from their own countries. We cannot do this by acting like experts about others countries, but it does mean that we don't assume our international students' automatic expertise either. We must embody and model a cultural humility, and inculcate the same in our students too, so that they can come to consider the possibility that their experiences in/of their own countries are perhaps neither exhaustive or representative of the diverse realities that constitute their national-ethnic context.

This means also that we have to recognize the complicated ways in which international students are sometimes implicated within economic, cultural, and educational structures of privilege. We have to recognize that the homogeneities born out of globalization have created educational structures in other countries where students learn more about USA popular culture than the complex power differentials of class, religion, caste, ethnicity etc. that exist in their own countries. This is why, it is important that we don't romanticize international students. As equity-minded practitioners, we need to push them to think about disparities, inequities within their own lives as well as in their USA educational contexts. And, as with privileged students in the USA, international students too need and deserve to learn how to dismantle hegemonic worldviews they have inherited from their national contexts. We must not perpetuate the idea that we can only criticize our own countries because, in reverse, that's a way of silencing anything international students and scholars might have to say about the USA. And, we must not do the disservice to our international students by assuming that, unlike USA-born students, we cannot support them to develop a critical consciousness towards their own identities and national contexts. Otherwise, we risk participating in what is called the *pobrecito syndrome*: the misguided policy of having lowered expectations and goals for certain students (Cepeda 2013).

At the same time, we must be cognizant of the challenges that international students face not only in spite of their privileges (their experience of racism, for instance), but also precisely because it is uniformly assumed that international students are privileged. The fact that 65% international students self-finance their education leads them to being treated as “cash cows” (Stein and Andreotti 2016). This means also that even when international students are financially or meritoriously eligible, they rarely receive university scholarships, or tuition waivers. Rates of currency exchange mean that even when they are from middle or upper-class contexts, they do not enjoy the same financial means as their domestic, wealthy counterparts. Further, visa restrictions make it nearly impossible for international students to hold jobs to supplement their finances while they study in the USA Bhojwani et al (2020) offer a detailed study of the kinds of financial constraints, housing and healthcare challenges international students faced on university campuses during the pandemic, as well as their concerns about future employment. Treating them as a homogenously privileged ignores the fact that it is the west who invites precisely the privileged students to help with the finances of their institutions of higher education. It also mutates the reality that thousands of international students and their parents take loans to pursue education in the USA.

5. Journey from international education to an internationalist education: Explore what it means to push international education out of the vague and opaque generalities of “learning about different cultures” and into a more radical direction, towards a solidarity-building pedagogy. Such an internationalist education would push against the white-hegemonic discourse and myth of “model minorities,” often internalized and weaponized by said minorities themselves (Jin 2021; Blackburn 2019; Chow 2017; Nguyen 2020), and instead invest energies in teaching and learning about oppressions shared between underrepresented and underserved USA students and international students. It would mean, for instance, that all students learn about the Black Lives Matter (BLM), but also BLM’s global resonances. An internationalist education would be vigilant against the induction/co-option of international students into USA-specific histories of violence. When we do programming for international students around Thanksgiving, for instance, let’s be wary of normalizing the forgetting of genocides. Let’s find alternatives that bring us together without making invisible the context of our gathering, in which we can share not just food, but also ideas for building a more just and equitable world. An internationalist education can open the pathway in which students can explore a process of “self-formation within conditions of disequilibrium” (Marginson 2014) that may be largely beyond their control, but which, they can nevertheless, learn to identify, critically analyze, and cross-culturally and collaboratively learn to find alternative modes of being in and engaging with the world.

And, in that sense, what I am proposing in internationalist pedagogy is an occasion and opportunity to do better than we have in the past, not just for our international students, but for, and with, all students!

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