Fostering intercultural interaction among women at a tertiary institution: research in progress

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Abstract

International students in New Zealand are positioned within internationalisation and export education discourses reflecting market rather than human concerns. These discourses position international students as *consumers* and *commodities* rather than people. In order to change this, there is a need to reinstate human agency and human imagination in relation to international education and the global marketplace. Gibson-Graham's (2003) 'ethics of the local' is a framework that facilitates this. It allows us to question the assumptions underlying current internationalisation and export education discourses, and to recognise the heterogeneity of both 'international' and 'New Zealand' students. It provides a rationale for the creation of spaces where students as *people* can be 'together-in-difference'.

Recent research has suggested the need to attend to the diversity of New Zealand's international student population; consider international students *in relation to* New Zealand students; and implement and evaluate initiatives to foster interaction between international and local students. To date, women have remained largely absent from international education literature, especially women who are international students' partners. The current project aims to attend to the perspectives and experiences of women who are international students and/or partners of international students in the University of Otago student community. An intercultural group (Women Across Cultures) has been established for international and New Zealand women, and data is being gathered through participant observation and in-depth interviewing across two years. This paper discusses the theoretical basis for the project, its key aims, and theoretical and methodological issues encountered to date.

Key Words:

globalisation, neoliberalism, international students, women, agency, discourse

International students in New Zealand: a background context

International students are vital to higher education institutions in New Zealand. Their fees provide an essential source of revenue in a climate where state funding for education has been reduced (Butcher & McGrath, 2004). In policy and public discourse however, their human presence remains an enigma. They are positioned as consumers and commodities, and as 'other' to (so-called) local students (Butcher, 2003; Devos, 2003). While the 2002 *Code of Practice for the Pastoral Care of International Students* at face-value suggests a renewed concern for international students as people, its implementation has revealed that 'market' rather than human concerns continue to take precedence (Butcher, 2004).

The de-humanising of international education is consistent with the neoliberal underpinnings of social policy in New Zealand since the late 1980s. According to a neoliberal perspective, economic or 'market' concerns are primary. This market is assumed to function according to an "underlying rationality" if left to itself, and is therefore best kept free from human interference (Jesson, 1999, p. 26). People are seen as self-interested individuals (Codd, 1999) and education as a "private commodity" (Butcher, 2003, p. 160). 'Intellectual capital' is considered a commodifiable resource (McBurnie, 2001) and students are 'consumers' within an education 'marketplace' (Butcher, 2003). Through a neoliberal lens, international students are both consumers of commodified education and commodities themselves (Butcher, 2003; Devos, 2003; Habu, 2000).

In contrast, recent research calls for attention to international education as a human endeavour. This includes attention to the diverse needs and experiences of particular groups within our international student population (De Verthelyi, 1995; Scheyvens, Wild, & Overton, 2003); international students' experiences *in relation to* the experiences and attitudes of local students (Ward, 2001; Ward & Masgoret, 2004); and ways of fostering intercultural interaction between local and international students (Ward, 2001). The international

education 'marketplace' rests on human action and interaction. International education can be (re)considered in terms of human agency at regional, national, and international levels (see Marginson & Rhoades, 2002; Ong, 1999).

In this paper I discuss a qualitative research project concerned with humanising international education on a small scale at the University of Otago. I begin by providing a background context to the project, discussing the positioning of international students within both export education and internationalisation discourses. Next I discuss some arguments for humanising international education and globalisation processes more generally. I describe the project's methodology and its specific aims. And in conclusion, I discuss the project's progress so far, highlighting a number of theoretical and methodological issues encountered to date.

International students in discourse

Discourses contain and delimit debates. They frame "the issues, enabling a common ground for discussion but also precluding other perspectives" (Monkman & Baird, 2002, p. 499). Discourses are how we name the world, both revealing and shaping our ways of being. They express and create ideological positions, producing and reproducing patterns of advantage and disadvantage (Codd, 1999; Freire, 1998; Macedo & Bartolomé, 1999). Dominant discourses reflect and protect the positions of those who are most powerful (Ballard, 2004; Smith, 1999). But by considering power in relation to *discourse*, we create possibilities for the development of "a politics of the 'otherwise'" (Gibson-Graham, 2003, p. 53). We can identify contradictions and suggest alternatives. We can participate in 'naming the world' differently, creating new possibilities.

In New Zealand, as in many other countries, dominant ways of positioning international students are within internationalisation and export education discourses. Yet within these discourses, international students' positioning is contradictory. They are tradeable commodities and a valued source of revenue, yet also symbolic of the workload intensification and commercialisation associated with neoliberalism (Devos, 2003). While valued for economic reasons, international students remain positioned as 'other' to New Zealand students. A brief explanation of internationalisation and export education discourses is helpful for illuminating and contextualising these contradictions.

Internationalisation

Internationalisation discourses link education with "broader international developments" (Rizvi, 2004, p. 34). They are not new, having shaped the New Zealand imaginary since the early years of European colonisation (Larner, 1998). Some argue that in education, internationalisation discourses are connected to democratic ideals and notions of the common good (for example Jones, 1998). Others highlight their historical connection to Western colonisation (for example Rizvi, 2004). Most agree, however, that since the 1980s, internationalisation discourses have undergone a "qualitative shift" (Larner, 1998, p. 600). In line with neoliberalism, market concerns have taken precedence.

In New Zealand's early days as a British colony, internationalisation was constructed in relation to our economic ties with Britain (Larner, 1998). Universities were charged with producing "loyal colonial subjects" who would willingly serve "the Empire…anywhere in the world" (Rizvi, 2004, p. 34). Indigenous knowledges were discounted (Bishop, 2005) and academic scholarship was decidedly Eurocentric[1] (Smith, 1999). The non-white, non-Western 'other' was pathologised and marginalised[2] (Bishop, 2005; Mohanty, 1991b).

Following World War II, New Zealand began to look beyond Britain both economically and educationally (Larner, 1998; Rizvi, 2004). One outcome was the development of the 1950s Colombo Plan. This was a "foreign aid programme" which provided international students with scholarships to study in New Zealand

[1] My use of the term 'Eurocentric' here refers to the way in which knowledge and its construction was based on Western European thinking and philosophies, and on intellectual debates arising out of historic and social events occurring in Western Europe (Henry, 2000; Scheurich & Young, 1997).

[2] While writing in the past tense here, I acknowledge that 'the project of colonisation' in academic scholarship is seen by many as ongoing (for example, see Bishop, 1998; Bishop & Glynn, 1999; Johnston, 1998; Mohanty, 1991b; Smith, 1999).

(and Australia), in the hope that they would then promote "social and economic stability" in their respective countries during a period of rapid decolonisation "within the broader politics of the Cold War" (Rizvi, 2004, p. 35).

The Colombo Plan highlights the inherent contradictions of internationalisation discourses. Through a postcolonial lens it facilitated the return of "the colonised Other…to the metropoles" (Castles, 1998, p. 227), signalling New Zealand's participation in the project of colonisation. At the same time however, it generated much goodwill (Butcher, Lim, McGrath, & Revis, 2002), producing "a powerful élite in Asia [who were] well disposed towards Australia [and New Zealand]" (Rizvi, 2004, p. 35; also see Butcher and McGrath, 2004). Ironically, this goodwill served to facilitate the emergence of New Zealand's 'export education industry' (Rizvi, 2004).

Since the 1980s, internationalisation in New Zealand has shifted to an emphasis on *trade* rather than *aid* (Butcher, 2003; Rizvi, 2004). Internationalisation discourses reflect economic (rather than political, cultural or academic) rationales (van der Wende, 2001). Lip-service continues to be paid to the democratic ideals of co-operation and goodwill, but within an imaginary of internationalisation "as a set of market activities" (Rizvi, 2004, p. 36). Marketing rather than educational or humanitarian concerns attracts both administrator and media interest (Rizvi, 2004), and the reification of the market is evident in international education policy documents (Butcher, 2004)[3].

Export education

The notion of export education is associated with the application of neoliberal ideologies to education in New Zealand since the early 1980s (Butcher, 2003). Like current internationalisation discourses, export education discourses reflect market concerns, commercialism, individualism and competition. From a neoliberal perspective, education "connects the social to the economic in facilitating the processes of economic globalisation" (Codd, 2002, p.6). Education is fundamental to the development of a 'knowledge economy'. It is also a tradeable commodity that must be internationalised so that it meets the needs of both local and international consumers and serves the purposes of the global marketplace. International students are simultaneously consumers of the education product, and tradeable commodities within the knowledge economy (Devos, 2003).

So while internationalisation and export education discourses may be seen as in some respects distinct from each other, since the 1980s there has been a convergence between them (Larner, 1998). In present-day New Zealand, both reflect neoliberal ideology, positioning international students not as people, but as consumers/commodities in the global marketplace. International education is de-humanised, and economic concerns are paramount. It is ironic therefore that the de-humanisation of international education threatens the very market within which it is positioned (Butcher, 2004).

Humanising international education

For those of us concerned with international education as a human endeavour, it is inadequate to simply critique the dominant discourses within which international students are positioned. Rather, there is a need to "pursue inventiveness" (Gibson-Graham, 2003, p. 71), to re-position international students and international education outside of neoliberal discourses. This requires that we reinstate "human agency and imagination" in relation to international education and the 'global marketplace' (Ong, 1999, p. 22).

Globalisation and neoliberalism as a series of processes are mediated, imagined and conceptualised by human agents at local, national and international levels (Marginson & Rhoades, 2002; Mohanty, 2003; Monkman & Baird, 2002; Ong, 1999). In contrast with the neoliberal assertion that the market operates according to an 'invisible hand', the workings of capitalism rest upon the monopoly power of (visible)

[3] The assymetry associated with colonisation continues in current internationalisation discourses and practice. As Rizvi (2004) notes in the Australian context, international education as a form of trade favours students from wealthier economies; places less emphasis on the provision of scholarship opportunities; and can be seen as contributing to a 'brain drain' of non-Western international students - either to Western countries, or to transnational corporations. In addition, students and academics in Western countries for the most part continue to develop relationships with institutions and academics in other Western countries, few Western students go outside 'the West' to study, and the "global hegemony of the English language" continues (Rizvi, 2004, p. 41).

people (Harvey, 2001). Government members and policymakers are neither passive nor innocent in relation to the functioning of the market (Harvey, 2003). And Western agency is not all there is. As Ong (1999) points out, 'alternative' discourses and 'other' forms of privilege also exist[4]. From this perspective, international students are not only positioned within dominant (market) discourses, but are also active in positioning themselves (Ong, 1999). International students are both constituted and constitut*ive* (Davies, 1997).

Castles (1998, p. 242) calls for the development of "countervailing power" which can democratise and humanise global markets. While globalisation may be here to stay, we need to re-construct it differently (Gibson-Graham, 2003; Harvey, 2003; Mohanty, 2003). Castles (1998) argues that this requires the development of "social networks based upon trust, cooperation, goodwill and reciprocity" (Codd, 2002, p. 13) at regional, national and international levels. Individual agency must be considered within new notions of the "global public good" (Rizvi, 2004, p. 42). It is in this regard that international education has huge potential to realise the positive possibilities of globalisation.

In New Zealand, Ward & Masgoret (2004) have recently highlighted a connection between international students' academic success, social and psychological well-being, and increased social contact with New Zealanders. At the same time, they have noted the level of discrimination expressed by New Zealand students and community members towards international students. Echoing Codd (2002), they call for the development, implementation, and evaluation of "programmes to enhance intercultural relations" between international students and New Zealanders (p. 61). Such programmes have the potential to humanise international education at a local level.

Gibson-Graham (2003) outlines an 'ethics of the local' within which transformative, humanising programmes can be framed. A local ethic involves recognition of "particularity and contingency" in relation to universal trajectories such as international education (p. 52); highlights "respect [for] difference and otherness" both between and within localities (p. 53); and involves the 'cultivation of capacity' "to modify ourselves, to become different, and...to enact a new relation to the economy" (p. 54). For international students in New Zealand, the practice of such an ethic throws into question the neoliberal assumptions inherent in current internationalisation and export education discourses. It recognises the diversity and specificity of people subsumed under the terms 'international student' and 'New Zealander'. And it involves the creation of spaces where international students are positioned as people rather than consumers/commodities. According to a local ethic, education is a human rather than a market activity. While it is necessary for both economic and social development, it can facilitate neither unless it allows us to 'learn to live together' (Codd, 2002, citing UNESCO, 1996).

Getting specific: 'Women Across Cultures'

Within internationalisation and export education discourses, international students are neoliberal subjects, free from dependent others (Kittay, 1999), primarily considered in terms of their economic value (Butcher, 2004). In the international education literature they are homogenised in terms of gender, ethnicity, level of study (Kenway & Bullen, 2003) and family situation (Scheyvens et al., 2003). 'The international student' is assumed to be young, male, and autonomous. Female students and the families/ partners of male students remain largely absent (Kenway & Bullen, 2003; Scheyvens et al., 2003)[5]. To reinstate human agency in regard to international education we must first consider international and New Zealand students as heterogeneous and gendered people. We must also attend to students as situated within socio-historical contexts and networks of human relationships.

[4] I use the terms *alternative* and *other* with reluctance. They are discursive markers revealing the "implicit assumption of 'the Western' as the primary referent in theory and practice" (Mohanty, 1991a, p. 53). But I struggle to find descriptors outside of the Eurocentric academic framework within which I am situated. In line with Mohanty (2003) I acknowledge the situated-ness of my analysis, and like her, I wish to work towards the construction of new discourses, new ways of expressing diversity and diverse ways of being (also see Ross, 2002).

[5] The absence of women in international education literature also reflects a historical lack of attention to gender issues in social science research in general (Leckie, 1995). Important exceptions in the international education literature include Habu (2000), Kenway & Bullen (2003), and Howes (2001).

The current project is concerned with the specific needs and experiences of women who are international students and partners of international students at the University of Otago[6]. It draws on a theoretical framework informed by postcolonial, Third World feminist and transnationalism literatures. These literatures highlight the importance of considering both the specific and diverse perspectives and experiences of individuals and groups of people; and the wider socio-historical, geographical, political and cultural contexts within which they live (Johnston, 1998; Mohanram, 1998; Mohanty, 1991a, 1991b; Smith, 1999). Transnationalism literatures suggest a need to both de-centre Western-ness and Eurocentricity with respect to non-Western people (see Ong, 1999), and to explore the positive possibilities of globalisation (Mohanty, 2003). Postcolonial, Third World feminist and transnationalism literatures are together concerned with the dialectic between discourse and lived realities at individual, institutional, national and international levels. They recognise human agency in relation to both discourse and embodied experience as shaped by the connections between "ourselves and others, the socially and historically constructed spaces between us" (Ross, 2002, p. 431).

This project explores these connections through the creation of a group where New Zealand and international women can be "together-in-difference" (Ang, 2001, p. 200). 'Women Across Cultures' was established in March 2005 in collaboration with the University of Otago international student advisers, and with the support of the International Office and the Otago University Students' Association (OUSA)[7]. While Women Across Cultures is open to all women in the University of Otago community (including staff)[8], it is specifically targeted at international students/students' partners and New Zealand students. The rationale for Women Across Cultures is drawn from Gibson-Graham's (2003) 'ethics of the local'. The group is modelled on one by the same name at West Virginia University, which I was involved in as the partner of an international student from 1997 to 2000[9].

Research methods used include participant observation in the intercultural group context, and in-depth interviewing across two years. 'Participant observation' involves informal conversations, participation, observation, and reflection (Angrosino & Mays de Pérez, 2000; Evans, 1998; Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). As *participant* in Women Across Cultures I am a group member, and a New Zealand woman studying at the University of Otago. As *participant observer* I engage in a "reflexive process" (Laws, 2004, p. 124) recording and interrogating my own perspectives and observations, the perspectives of other group members, and how these relate to theory. Central to this process is the maintenance of a research journal, in which I record descriptive and reflective fieldnotes.

In-depth interviews provide an additional avenue for exploring participants' perspectives on their living and study experiences, and their involvement in Women Across Cultures. A total of 13 women are being interviewed, including both international women and New Zealanders[10]. These women have all been recruited from within Women Across Cultures. The interview phases follow participant observation in group meetings, and are based around a set of general, open-ended questions. Participants are invited to comment on the interview questions prior to the interview, and afterwards, to check the accuracy of typed interview transcripts.

More specifically, the project aims to:

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[6] For the purposes of this project, 'international students' are those enrolled as full fee-paying students, as well as overseas students paying domestic (partial) tuition fees due to a reciprocal agreement between their overseas institution and the University of Otago. 'New Zealand students' are students paying domestic tuition fees on the basis of their status as permanent residents or citizens of New Zealand. Many anomalies are inherent in these categorisations. For example, students enrolled as 'New Zealanders' include recent immigrants who do not identify themselves in this way (Lim, 2004). It is intended that the project will explore such anomalies in relation to the research participants.

[7] Funding support is provided by the University of Otago International Office, and the Otago University Students' Association (OUSA) allows us free use of facilities.

[8] This includes women associated with Otago Polytechnic and Dunedin College of Education, since OUSA clubs are open to students from all three institutions. Women are also invited to bring their preschool children along with them.

[9] The name *Women Across Cultures* is used with permission.

[10] It is intended that the same women will be interviewed twice across two years. However, since the university population is extremely mobile, this may not be possible. In this case, new interviewees will be recruited and interviewed only once.

1. document the process of establishing an intercultural group for New Zealanders and international women;
2. explore the specific adjustment needs and experiences of female international students, and female partners of international students in the University of Otago student community;
3. explore parallel living and study experiences of female New Zealand students;
4. consider whether an intercultural group is a helpful way of supporting female international students and female partners of international students at the University of Otago and associated institutions;
5. consider whether an intercultural group may facilitate a sense of inclusion for women who are international students or international students' partners;
6. consider how involvement in an intercultural group may influence the perspectives of New Zealand women towards international students and their partners;
7. evaluate the intercultural group as a means for promoting intercultural interaction between New Zealanders and international women on campus; and
8. interrogate the international/national binary in relation to the research participants, and their perspectives on their own 'complex subjectivities' (Brooks, 2004).

By exploring the parallel needs of New Zealand women who are participating in this project, I do not wish to reinstate '"the Western' as the primary referent" (Mohanty, 1991a, p. 53). Rather, I intend to consider both commonalities and differences in international/New Zealand participants' experiences and perspectives, consider international and New Zealand students in relation to each other, and disrupt dominant discourses that position international students as 'other' to New Zealand students (see aim number 8).

Research in progress: theoretical and methodological issues

All projects involving human participants are fraught with theoretical and methodological issues, and this is no exception. My initial concern was methodological - how to recruit participants, especially international students' partners, and to earn their trust. Women Across Cultures was the solution. By developing an intercultural group on campus I hoped to bring together women who might be willing to share their perspectives and experiences, and to create a space where rapport could be established. My second concern was how to establish this group in an ethical way. By working in collaboration with the International Office, I hoped to facilitate the group's sustainability beyond the two years of my research. Once ethical approval for the project was granted in February 2005, Women Across Cultures was publicised on campus through the use of posters and flyers, via e-mail, and through key people such as International Student advisers, the University chaplaincy etc. In an attempt to contact international students' partners, posters and flyers were also delivered to local preschools, the Dunedin Central Plunket nurses, Queen Mary Maternity Hospital, and a notice was placed in the local school newsletter. To date, there are approximately 80 women on the Women Across Cultures e-mail list, with 15 to 20 attending meetings on a regular basis. Publicity will continue at the beginning of each semester during the two years of the research project, and hopefully beyond this time.

Women Across Cultures is facilitated in collaboration with the international advisers. Meetings are held fortnightly and are "loose and light – not goal-oriented" (Gibson-Graham, 2003, p. 70). They revolve around food and drink, a presentation of some sort, and conversation. In addition, we hold evening 'potluck' meals three times a year during holiday breaks in order to include those students whose lecture timetables clash with meetings, as well as group members' families and flatmates/friends. While the 'official' meeting time is on Fridays, from 10 to 11am, many women stay on until 12 noon, eating, drinking and talking together. Women Across Cultures is made up of diverse women from European, Asian, South and North American countries as well as New Zealand. Of the regular attendees, three women are international students' partners, two are former international students, one is a prospective student and the remainder are international students and New Zealanders.

Having established Women Across Cultures, my next concern was how to locate this group theoretically. 'Group' literature that I initially encountered came from the fields of psychotherapy, social psychology and nursing, and none seemed entirely relevant to the project. I was relieved to discover Gibson-Graham's (2003) notion of 'locality'. To Gibson-Graham, globalisation discourses (including export education and internationalisation discourses) situate "the local (and thus all of us) in a place of subordination, as 'the other within' of the global order" (p. 50). In contrast, she describes a *local* ethic as respecting difference and autonomy as well as "self understood as capability" (p. 50). Gibson-Graham's work provides a connection

between the theoretical concerns of transnationalism, Third World feminist and postcolonial literatures, and the notion of Women Across Cultures as *community*. It provides a suitably complex theory for reinstating human agency in relation to internationalisation and export education discourses, while acknowledging the tensions inherent in working across difference at a local level.

The tension between *community* and *difference* is central to this project. According to a local ethic (Gibson-Graham, 2003) difference is *central* to community. Community is a space in which everyone is open to re-invention, within a context of trust and interdependence across difference. But developing a community of difference is not straightforward. Gibson-Graham acknowledges that it takes time and patience, the cultivation of "generosity in place of hostility and suspicion", and the creation of contexts in which "language [can] circulate" (p. 67). Not everyone is willing to be involved in such a space. A Chinese student (who is not a group member) confided that if she comes to a group involving New Zealanders, her Chinese friends may become "suspicious" as to why she is choosing to socialise with students who are not Chinese. Another student asked me, "But what do you *do*?" She indicated her desire to be involved in groups that include men as well as women, and outings and events rather than low-key meetings. Also, there is a possibility that the group may promote rather than overcome hostility. During our first few meetings, the sense of risk was palpable.

Adding to the potential riskiness of Women Across Cultures is the inclusion of both international and New Zealand students. Kenway & Bullen (2003) highlight the danger of positioning international students as representatives of their home countries, and thereby reinstating the boundaries between (in our case) 'New Zealanders' and 'internationals'. For this reason, I have taken care never to push group members into presenting to the group. Initial presentations involved myself and the International Advisers, but I made it clear that if other people also wished to present, they were welcome to do so. Initially, Nikki[11], a Norwegian student, and Fiona, a Canadian student who has lived in Norway, offered to do a joint presentation. This involved waffle-making, a powerpoint presentation of Fiona's photographs, and an account of Fiona's work amongst refugee people living in rural Norway. Following this, other women (both international and New Zealand members) offered to conduct presentations, and since then, there have been few group meetings where I have had to arrange an outside speaker to fill a space. Presentations so far have included sharing dances, songs, food and photographs, as well as personal experiences of adjustment. Rather than reifying boundaries of difference, these presentations have resulted in in-depth, lively and respectful discussions traversing subjects such as 'identity' and belonging, diverse experiences, perspectives, etiquette, traditions and languages. Here Yukiko (an international student from Japan) reflects on a session where a conversation developed between Chinese, Japanese, American and New Zealand students regarding their different ideas about appropriate host/guest behaviour. The conversation had been honest and animated, but reflective and respectful at the same time.

> Y. That's really great thing,…even, you know, diversity within women. It's very interesting to see how they have harmonised that.
>
> V. So the group works, despite the fact that everyone's really different.
>
> Y. Yeah, and with agreement **and** with disagreement even…With both we can harmonise (emphases Yukiko's).

Similarly, Xena (an international student's partner from Ireland) highlights the value of Women Across Cultures as a space where 'difference' is normalised:

> X. I was nearly crying one day when… I was chatting to one girl, I can't remember her name, and her difficulty with the language and feeling she can't go out of the house, and I just thought 'oh my goodness it's just' I realised that it was so important to have somewhere... to come where it is all foreigners you know all those..and from different experiences just to help people to feel…
>
> V. … foreignness is actually a point of commonality.
>
> X. Yes a shared experience, 'this is tough'.

This is echoed by Violet (an international student from Malaysia):

> It was like **so interesting** … I mean, anyone from different culture, especially students you know including kiwi, and you can bring your children it's like, also a family concept? So I think it's interesting.., it's a good opportunity to get to know other culture instead of just being, looking for kiwi culture (emphasis Violet's).

[11] Participants' names have been changed.

It is significant that several women in the group have offered to present a second time. It seems that the opportunity to share themselves, their backgrounds, and who they are in this locality is something that these women have valued.

Ross (2002) acknowledges the risks involved in working on the basis of theories concerned with relations between diverse people, but argues that these risks are 'worth running'. As she puts it, relations between people are *always* full of "partial and negotiated meaning…never transparent or completely knowable and…inevitably subject to conflict and misunderstanding" (p. 411). But she asserts the importance of research that works with and across these relations of difference in the current global context "when human violence and the distortion of voices and stories from all corners confound the individual and collective abilities to chart a humane course" (p. 431). Gibson-Graham (2003) suggests that to negotiate these risks constructively, community must be 'knitted' through the development of trust. To this end, even groups of a few people willing to meet across difference are vitally significant.

From my perspective as a participant observer, Women Across Cultures has begun the process of 'knitting'. To me, group meetings now feel settled, relaxed and comfortable. Here Janice (a New Zealand student) expresses a similar viewpoint:

> I like the fact that it's very low key and that you don't, it's not adding on an extra paper or anything like that it's just it's more just fun and…just hanging out.

This is echoed by Xena:

> It's been a very friendly atmosphere, people aren't suspicious of each other, I think it's a very comfortable environment I would say that and I have enjoyed it a lot more than I thought I would enjoy it...I've enjoyed the presentations on where people come from, I mean I know you don't pick up a lot from people in that but just even a taste…and I think the other thing that kind of stood out in my mind,…I've just been aware that for me it's made me feel less like the only outsider.

Several group members are meeting throughout the week to socialise, exchange childcare and meals. One of the international students attending spontaneously offered to assist in the organisation of the group and is meeting with another member to discuss the development of a group website. And those who are regular members keep on coming. However, I acknowledge that my perspective is both partial and preliminary. A number of women have come to one or two group meetings and chosen not to return. Approximately two thirds of the women on the email list have not come to meetings at all. While some women have indicated that course demands and lecture times are the reason for their non-attendance, others have not provided a reason, and I am unlikely to obtain one. Also, my position as participant observer is potentially problematic. Some group members may not be willing to express negative opinions to me in case they cause offence. New theoretical and methodological issues are likely to arise during the course of the project, and group dynamics may change as Women Across Cultures grows and changes in composition.

Nevertheless, initial interviews with thirteen group members have revealed an overwhelmingly positive view of Women Across Cultures. In the words of Laura, a postgraduate 'New Zealand' student (who recently moved to Dunedin from Fiji):

> I just think it's a **great** idea and if there had been something like that when I first started, I would have probably met people a lot quicker, and I think something like that is definitely needed because from my observations what happens is people come and generally stick with their own cultural group, because Kiwi society as a whole is so kind of inward-looking and not really reaching out….I've never really also been part of like a women's group before and I just find it really relaxing (emphasis Laura's).

I am not alone in expressing a sense of "hopeful surprise" at the possibility that Women Across Cultures, however small, may indeed become a self-sustaining community of engagement across difference on campus (see Gibson-Graham, 2003, p. 66).

Conclusions

Currently, internationalisation and export education discourses construct international education as a market activity. International students are de-humanised and homogenised, and economic rather than social concerns are paramount. But international education as a market activity is unsustainable unless social concerns are attended to. There is a need to re-consider international education as a human endeavour, and to explore the opportunities it offers for allowing people to learn to live together in difference. Gibson-Graham's (2003)

'ethics of the local' provides a framework for re-considering international education in relation to diversity, specificity and human agency.

The current project uses a local ethic as a theoretical basis for the development of Women Across Cultures, an intercultural group that includes international and New Zealand women at the University of Otago. The project aims to attend to the perspectives of women who are international students or international students' partners, to consider international women and New Zealand women in relation to each other, and to document and evaluate Women Across Cultures as a way of disrupting dominant discourses which position international students as 'other' to New Zealand students. Central to the project is the tension between community and difference. Not all women wish to be involved in Women Across Cultures, and like all diverse groups, there is the potential for Women Across Cultures to reinforce rather than overcome stereotypes and hostility. The project is still in its early stages, and both it and Women Across Cultures are likely to evolve over time. To date however, it seems that Women Across Cultures has effectively facilitated 'moments of possibility' in which, for those involved, "being together, or being-in-common, [is] both the ground and fullness of community" (Gibson-Graham, 2003, p. 68). From my perspective as a participant observer, Women Across Cultures is becoming a space where New Zealand and international women can be together, not

> on the basis of presumed or constructed similarities…. histories or qualities but [on the basis of] practices and feelings - of appreciation, generosity, desire to do and be with others, connecting with strangers (no matter who), encountering and transforming oneself through that experience (pp. 68-69).

This project may be criticised for its small-scale, localised focus. However, re-constructing international education in relation to human agency requires that we acknowledge the significance of small-scale interactions between international students and New Zealanders, considering the connections between these, policy, and research. Beyond education, interactions between nations rest on interactions between individuals-in-context. In the words of Gibson-Graham (2003, p. 53), a "politics of the 'otherwise'" requires recognition of contingency, particularity, and difference. "Locality is the place where engagement with the stranger is enacted…It is also the crossroads where those who have nothing in common (all of us) meet to construct community" (p. 53, citing Lingis, 1994).

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