Toward theorizing spatial-cultural 'othering' in networked learning and teaching practices

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Abstract

In response to networked learning community members' calls for theorizing the underpinning causes of "othering," this paper examines the concepts of transculturalism, boundary crossing, and third spaces to provide insights into cultural issues that can occur within networked learning environments. Suggestions are made for working from a transcultural perspective, working within and across boundaries, and teaching and learning in Third Space. We begin by examining challenges posed by increasing cultural diversities among learners in universities and then focus on how these challenges play out for both learners and tutors. In particular, we focus on issues that impact international learners who remain in their home contexts, but engage in university learning via networked learning opportunities. In the introduction, we discuss the complexities learners face when they are simultaneously "land-locked" within their own cultural and educational settings and being acculturated into new learning opportunities in a foreign university. We then draw upon transcultural scholarship to examine instances of encountering vulnerability and instability and possibilities for shifting conversations within teaching and learning contexts first to celebrating difference and then to negotiating potential academic consequences of acknowledgements of differences. We move on to discuss tensions that arise from boundary crossings that evoke discontinuities. In particular, we examine points of exclusion and inclusion where decisions are made about whose voice is heard and whose knowledge is deemed valid and relevant. Within our discussion of the complexities and tensions of boundary crossings, we draw upon the concepts of identification, coordination, reflection, and transformation. At this point, we introduce Third Space theory as a meeting point for recognizing tensions, but also problematize provision of a restrictive definition of a Third Space with a view to maintaining an open approach to theorizing spatiality that retains sufficient flexibility to propose practices that can lead to overcoming otherness. Within this context, we examine dialogical collaborative spaces where individuals share values, meanings and priorities, but also acknowledge Third Spaces as spaces as potential sites for encountering antagonism, conflict and incommensurability: tension-filled messy sites of seemingly insurmountable cultural difference and competing powers. We conclude with implications for theorizing otherness in networked learning practices.

Introduction

FATHER, Mother, and Me
Sister and Auntie say
All the people like us are We,
And every one else is They!

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All good people agree,
And all good people say,
All nice people, like Us, are We
And every one else is They!

Rudyard Kipling

With universities' increasing cultural diversity it is important/imperative to recognize students culturally derived needs. This recognition is critical not only for culturally diverse students who reside within Western countries, but also for international and indigenous students, and students from other traditionally marginalized groups studying in online environments who remain within their local contexts. In a paper that discusses inequality in higher education online environment, Czerniewicz (2016) notes, "probably the most important and interesting aspect of online education – especially from a global south perspective – is its increasingly global rather than local orientation. Talk is no longer about "our" students – but rather about students everywhere, and this has changed the entire landscape" (p. 38). Many of these students are being trained/educated to function effectively and efficiently within their societies. The increasing number of students from diverse backgrounds participating in online courses pose a challenge in the teaching learning environment not only for students but also for faculty. Prosen (2015) and Ryan (2011) explored the issues within the context of the migrating student and the physical classroom and suggest a new kind of learning, "cosmopolitan learning", for the migrating student, but what of the landlocked student, that is, the student who does not leave home, but rather, works in an online environment? What kind of environment is it, and how can it be navigated to ensure the emergence of the best teaching and learning experience? Montgomery (2014) warns that "higher education programmes and their concomitant constructions of knowledge cannot simply be transported and superimposed upon a new cultural context" (p. 200).

As technology allows higher education institutions to expand their reach into distant countries across the globe, we need to recognize the cultural boundedness of Western approaches, become aware of the globalizing influence of education (George & Lewis, 2011; Wulf, 2010), and the need to resist its carriage/portrayal of ethnocentric, Eurocentric Western ideologies and subjectivities as the norm while devaluing other knowledges. In this process, it is crucial to recognize cognitive/epistemological diversity and the diverse knowledge systems that underpin the practices of different social groups (Sousa Santos, Nunes, & Meneses, 2008). Considerations of culturally embedded norms is a deeply ontological and epistemological matter that impacts the choice, design and use of technology in networked learning (NL) environments. These cultural norms, values and discourses inform our assumptions about how we know, how we come to know, how we communicate what we know, and our choice of teaching and learning strategies. These cultural discourses are imbedded at the individual, interpersonal, institutional, regional, and national levels (Masoumi & Lindström, 2012). Henderson (2007) cautions that internationalization/globalization of culture can lead to exclusion/marginalization and cultural homogeneity with Western knowledge and culture being conveyed as "natural, necessary, and, in effect, beyond criticism" (p. 132). She asserts that "multiculturalism," "cultural diversity," and "cultural pluralism" have not worked, either in Western societies' educational systems or, in particular, the development of e-learning materials delivered to culturally-diverse learners" (p. 132). Ryan (2011) suggests that we challenge Western universalist teaching and learning approaches in order to understand "how to move beyond academic monoculturalism or interculturalism, and towards transculturalism" (p. 636). Does online teaching privilege Western perspectives, or is space provided for other knowledges, other understandings? We can assess this within the e-learning environment by noting what cultural issues are included or excluded. Again Montgomery (2014) warns that "[h]igher education programmes and their concomitant constructions of knowledge cannot simply be transported and superimposed upon a new cultural context" (p. 200), thus highlighting the need for cultural awareness and the adoption of culturally inclusive approaches. Cadman and Song (2012), speaking from within the Asian Studies Disciplines, ground their book on the theme of the possibility of another pedagogy that responds to the needs of students from cultures not of Western/Celtic origins.

Learning is a process of acculturation, "the process by which learners become collaborative meaning-makers among a group defined by common practices, language, use of tools, values, beliefs, and so on" (Milrad, Björn, & Jackson, 2005, p. 309). Collaboration with others, therefore, is a critical factor in the development of global learning communities online. These online communities can facilitate rich cross-cultural collaboration. Culturally inclusive education benefits both faculty and students since it allows the development of non-ethnocentric views, encourages the thoughtful examination of taken for granted aspects of our culture from the perspective of others, stimulates an appreciation of what is of value in each other's culture, and promotes a

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better understanding of ourselves and others (Chang, 2006). Communication between cultures is important and should be facilitated in the learning environment.

Transculturalism

According to Wulf (2010) culture is not a "self-contained, uniquely definable ensemble of practices, values, symbolizations and imaginations" (p. 34). Henderson (2007) captures the constituents of culture, its vulnerability and instability in the following definition. "Culture is not static; it constantly evolves; it is fluid; it is the way of life of a people. It is the manifestation of the patterns of thinking and behaviour that results through a group's continuing adaptation to its changing social, historical, geographic, political, economic, technological, and ideological environment. Culture incorporates race, ethnicity, religion, class, gender, values, traditions, language, lifestyles, and nationality as well as workplace and academic cultures" (p. 131). Culture is "given" or "handed down," is negotiated as we work through our similarities and differences, and is constantly under construction as we communicate and interact with others/the other (Germain-Rutherford, & Kerr, 2008). Gunawardena, Wilson, and Nolla (2003) draw on several theorists including Bruner, Piaget, Driscoll, and Vygotsky to show that culture impacts our cognitive processes, that is, our perception, thinking patterns and expression styles, language, and non-verbal communication.

Transculturalism, on the other hand, derives from "contact between two or more different cultures' which results in 'a new, composite culture in which some existing cultural features are combined, while some are lost, and new features are generated" (Murray, 2010, p. 52). As Slimbach (2005) explains:

> Transcultural development begins with the realization that, amidst the diversity of cultural expression, we share common human potential and experience. From here, we discover the ways that others make sense of their world. In so doing we expand the range of alternative mores and manners, values and visions that are available to us for running our lives (p. 209).

Transculturalism also shifts the conversation from multicultural education which celebrates different cultures, and intercultural education which promotes deep interaction and engagement among cultures, to transcultural education with its refusal to accept the status quo and its emphasis on the hybrid nature of culture as it propels towards the creation of something new (Aldridge, Kilgo, & Christensen, 2014). While multiculturalism might tend to accentuate the divide among different cultural groups through its focus on group recognition, transculturalism recognizes and respects group differences but encourages integration, the coming together of individuals to negotiate through their differences, locate their commonalities, and arrive at something new. Further, Aldridge, Kilgo, and Christensen (2014) argue that after decades of cultural education, assimilationists, multiculturalists and interculturalists have failed to solve "salient problems in education through culture" (p. 116). They posit that these problems persist because (a) education's often imperceptible purpose is maintenance of the status quo, (b) we both produce and are products of our culture and education has focused on the latter to the detriment of the former, and (c) individuals, if they are to create something new and innovative, need to be able to transcend culture. To explain transculturalism, Slimbach (2005) adopts the travel metaphor. He takes the reader on a "transcultural journey" to transcultural competence and proposes the use of a "cognitive "map" to guide the path of learner development" (p. 206). He outlines six broad categories of cultural competence including (1) Perspective consciousness which involves the constant questioning of the origins of our cultural assumptions and ethical judgements (2) Ethnographic skills, which includes being able to observe social behavior, manage stress, develop friendships across cultures, and document and analyze data (3) Global awareness which is having a basic understanding of environmental, social, political and economic relationships, ideologies and institutions that affect our quality of life. (4) Affective development which is the ability to demonstrate an emotional connection, that is, to be empathetic, flexible, humble, sincere, gentle, just, interested in others, and to show initiative in our response to others. our level of cultural-emotional connectedness determines the ease or difficulty with which we relate to each other culturally, socially, and personally (Gabb, 2006).

Working from a transcultural perspective

Transculturalism then, is multidimensional. To work from a transcultural perspective, Drabble, Sen, and Oppenheimer (2012) speaking from a social science perspective posit the following dimensions that might be useful to bear in mind when working in a teaching learning environment: (i) Cultural knowledge, be culturally aware -since we are shaped by our culture, this dimension acknowledges cultural and individual differences and the criticality of a practice grounded in an awareness of cultural context. The focus here is on both knowledge and the process of inquiry. That is, acquiring knowledge about culture as a construct, and about the process for locating knowledge about the issues and concerns that disproportionately impact different cultural groups. (ii)

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Power, privilege and oppression: This dimension recognizes linkages among social circumstances, human actions and larger social structures and that changes in social structures are indicative of power relationships. Practitioners are not immune since the dynamics of power relations are portrayed in the ways they "approach, analyze, and address social issues, problems, and contexts (p. 208). These power dynamics are explicated by privilege, (unearned advantages, entitlements and conferred dominance), oppression, and structural contexts. (iii) Positionality and self-reflexivity refers to "how positionality or ones' social location in relation to others, influences ... world view, research, behavior, and professional action" (p. 208). Practitioners should be aware of their subjectivities which are shaped by their multiple identities and social positioning within their networks of relationships. These intersecting identities include their race, gender, ethnicity, nationality, and sexual orientation. Our social positioning impacts our epistemology, how we perceive and relate to others. "Constructs of positionality and self-reflexivity" says Drabble, Sen, and Oppenheimer (p. 208), "underscore how individual and social identities and personal experience shape how professionals perceive, approach, engage, and communicate with individuals and groups in both practice and research contexts". (iv) Respectful partnership: This dimension is distinguished by its focus on working cross-culturally, through establishing dialogic encounters, in a "spirit of both inquiry and collaboration" (p. 209). Practitioners are encouraged to be cognizant of individual differences even within groups, within cultures and sub-cultures, be cross-culturally and transculturally empathetic, and because it is difficult to put aside our cultural perspective and see situations through the "other's" eyes, space is needed for communication and negotiation where new meanings, relationships, and understandings can be co-created. (v) Cultural competence: This dimension focuses on the way in which practitioners "effectively apply their growing cultural expertise in work with diverse cultural communities and different contexts" (p. 210). Cultural competency is underpinned by three central points: 1. "There is value in learning about the history, cultural norms, and issues that may disproportionately impact specific populations—with the understanding that application of knowledge about groups may not always apply to specific individuals or communities". 2. Cultural competence should be conceptualized as a lifelong commitment to learning and inquiry about the other, rather than a one-time focus on what might be a narrow stereotypical knowledge base. 3. Our behaviours attitudes and skills should shift and change dependent on the context, the individual, and the situational conditions.

In her exploration of cultural dynamics in the classroom, Gabb (2006) observes that "managing the sociocultural dynamics is often a neglected or unexplored skill" (p. 358), but since good teaching is a valuable part of the learning paradigm, students' social and cultural contexts should be considered. She suggests several practices that can be adopted to help to manage the transcultural class. For instance, from the onset of a course instructors should make group processes, and learning and assessment strategies explicit. Whether it is the class as a group or divided into smaller groups, students should know how and why these groups are formed, how the learning process will take shape, and how they will be assessed. Group work can facilitate students' connection with each other allowing cross-cultural friendships to develop and transcultural learning to occur. Have students add resources (photos, videos etcetera) from their country. Provide a variety of tasks to undercut cultural clashes. Establish an inclusive psychosocial climate by encouraging students to share aspects of their own country, culture, or regional experience. Encourage positive interaction and collaboration ensuring that minority students are not marginalized. Use the first session to shape the social environment -have a "getting to know you" session. Share names and students' name preferences. Discuss the personal, psychosocial, academic, and future professional benefits of developing collaborative relationships. Other strategies include pair share, where students are encouraged to work in pairs in both synchronous and asynchronous environments. During pair share students from different cultures can discuss aspects of the course that are particularly relevant/cogent to each other's cultural values and experience. When explaining content use examples from various cultures. Share links from various cultures to the topic under study. Explore the importance of the subject matter in other cultural contexts. Find out how instructors of similar courses deal with the subject matter in their cultural context.

Boundary crossings

The concept of boundary crossing can trace its evolution to Vygotsky's (1930) cultural theory (2009) and Engeström's (2009) expansive learning theory developed from his Boundary Crossing Laboratory research project. Engeström, like Vygotsky, stressed the importance of cultural interactions in the learning process. While we all might be able to relate to the presence and the crossing of physical geographical boundaries, there are other boundaries that are crossed as well, including psychological, social, cultural, linguistic, personal, professional, political, and epistemological/knowledge boundaries (Mighty, 2010; Willian & Berry, 2016). Traditionally, a boundary is perceived as a perimeter, a demarcation point that divides, separates, hedges, shuts us in with those who are like us and from those we deem different from us, includes what is wanted on one side

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and excludes what is not wanted on the other side. Boundaries then, can be points of exclusion and inclusion where decisions are made about whose voice is heard and whose knowledge is valid or relevant.

Conversely, Akkerman and Bakker (2011) describe a boundary as "a sociocultural difference leading to discontinuity in action or interaction", a place of "sameness and continuity in the sense that within discontinuity two or more sites are relevant to one another in a particular way" (p. 133). Boundaries can be seen as bridges, expansive, constantly shifting (Foreman-Peck et al, 2015; Williams, 2013) connecting the marginalized to conventional discourses. Boundaries are the middle ground, ambiguous, multivocal, in-between, navigational spaces that can be used by individuals to cross into, and succeed in unknown discourse communities. Star (2010) describes a boundary as "a shared space, where exactly that sense of here and there are confounded" (p. 602). A boundary can also be seen as a space for cultural, social, and epistemological change to occur; where "the competing knowledges and Discourses of different spaces are brought into conversation" (Moje, Ciechanowski, Kramer, Ellis, Carillo & Collazo, 2004). When individuals' cross boundaries, they leave the familiar for the unfamiliar, are challenged to negotiate and draw on both contexts, and as a result create something new/hybrid. Even though boundaries are created when activity systems come together, boundaries can also be found at disjunctions between individuals. It is these disjunctures however, that provide opportunities for discussion, negotiation, clarification and new understandings (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011). Given the boundary's multivoiced, ambiguous, discontinuous nature, how does one navigate the boundaries?

Working within and across boundaries

Akkerman & Bakker (2011) have derived four mechanisms of learning actualized at boundary crossings: identification, coordination, reflection, and transformation. Learning here refers to "new understandings, identity development, change of practices, and institutional development." Our focus here is on the possibilities for border crossings and its impact on learning in an online environment. Akkerman and Bakker's four mechanisms help to explain this.

Identification

Identification is a dialogical process that focuses first on difference, "othering", where we define "one practice in light of another" (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011, p. 142). There is a questioning of the intersecting systems, who we, our societies, institutions, and organizations are, our roles, our functions, our practices, and what it is that makes us unique. This is a tension-filled, highly contested process in which we negotiate personal and cultural identities. The process of identification is related to power. The power to discount, to misidentify, and the power to identify individuals, their positions, their roles and disciplines as "other." This process of identification according to Chulach and Gagnon (2016) "implies a regime of truth through which we come to understand the world we live/work in. . . . informs the way we see ourselves (i.e. who holds knowledge, expertise, status) and how we interact with one another" (p. 56). Identification also involves the political and sensitive process of legitimization of coexistence. Identity is neither prescribed nor stable. It is constructed within the dominant discourse on knowledge, expertise autonomy, and the practice/discipline, for example, teaching and learning. The practitioner's role (expertise and knowledge) is interrogated and questions of the validity of knowledge and whose knowledge is valid arise. This disjuncture/identity crisis leads to further self-questioning and tension.

Coordination

Learning at the boundaries also requires coordination "even in the absence of consensus" (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011, p. 143). Coordination requires the establishment of a communicative connection between differing practices or perspectives, coordination also requires "translation between the different worlds" (p. 144). Through coordination the boundaries become so permeable that actions and interactions occur smoothly "without costs and deliberate choice". Finally, coordination requires routinization. Procedures are developed and practiced until coordination is automated.

Reflection

Reflection is another mechanism that enhances learning at boundaries. Boundary crossings can lead to the creation of something new through actuating reflection on differences, explanations of one's understanding and knowledge that shapes particular perspectives (perspective making), and the ability to see oneself through the eyes of others (perspective taking). Individuals are positioned in a third space when faced with discontinuities and here is where reflective learning can occur.

Transformation

The final mechanism, transformation, can lead to a change in practice/perspective or to the development of a new practice/perspective. Transformation results from confrontation at the boundary that causes reconsideration of practices/perspectives and interrelations. This confrontation can be caused by disruption, tension, frustration, and conflict between activity systems, and by the introduction of a third perspective. These open the door to discussion and negotiation that can lead to the creative process of hybridization through which "a new cultural form emerges". Another transformation process is the recognition of a shared problem space. A third process in transformation is hybridization. Given a certain problem space, "practices that are able to cross their boundaries engage in a creative process in which something hybrid—that is, a new cultural form—emerges. In hybridization, ingredients from different contexts are combined into something new and unfamiliar (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011, p. 148). Transformation also results from the process of "recognizing shared workspace" in which solutions can be pursued collaboratively through dialogue. A final process of transformation is the crystallization of the new/hybrid where it becomes so embedded into practice that it has "real consequences" (p. 148). Routines and procedures are developed that embodies the new.

Third Spaces

Third Spaces can be considered in NL conversations about culture because Third Space is a concept that addresses multiple forms of tensions. However, we hesitate to even attempt to restrict the concept of a third space to any definition, since we sense Soja's (2007) subtle warning that "third space is a metaphor for the necessity to keep the consciousness of the theorizing on spatiality radically open" (p. 49). He points to Henri Lefebre as one of the originators of the concept of third space noting that, "he was one of the first to theorize difference and otherness in explicitly spatial terms" (p. 49). Lefebre, he notes, argued "for the right to be different against the increasing forces of homogenization, fragmentation, and hierarchically organized power." This right to be different, he suggested, could be done in "a space of collective resistance, a Third Space of political choice that is also a meeting place for all peripherized or marginalized subjects wherever they may be located" (p. 51). The Third Space, like a boundary, is an in-between problematic space, a place of difference in race, gender, class, values, culture, discipline and so on.

Despite commonalities the third space is not always a dialogical collaborative space where individuals share values, meanings and priorities; it may also be a site of antagonism, conflict and incommensurability, a tension filled messy site of seemingly insurmountable cultural difference and competing powers (Bhabha, 1994; Handa, & Tippins, 2013). Differences in culture, nationality, identity, and in education processes are brought to the environment, as well as brought about within the environment. Hence, Bhabha (2009) posits third space as a dialogic site centred in cultural translation where this "site of in-betweenness becomes the ground of discussion, dispute, confession, apology and negotiation" (Bhabha, 2009, p. x). Our misunderstandings/ incommensurabilities, then, offer a zone for negotiation and re-negotiation, a site of mediation where alternatives can be explored. Individuals within this zone draw on a range of discourses to help them make sense of the world. They feel valued and are given agency. Third spaces are dynamic, offering the opportunity for negotiation, understanding, and clarity, for integration of seemingly incommensurable ideas, discourses, ideologies, knowledge, and practices. Here, differences are allowed to transform each other without reaching consensus, fusing or synthesizing but hybridizing arriving always at something new revealing itself as both unity and multiplicity. Third space, a place where center/peripheral/margin binaries collapse, holds the potential for something new/hybrid to emerge from the process (Bruna, 2009; Cuenca, Schmeichel, Butler, Dinkelman, & Nichols, 2011). According to Bhabha (1994), third space is a place of boundary crossings where "something begins its presencing" (p. 5).

Teaching and learning in a Third Space

If we are to work within third space, we need to first be aware of the strategies/mechanisms that undermine, mitigate and erode cultural understanding. These mechanisms can include: (a) logocentrism, through which we judge other cultures according to the norms of our culture. (b) egocentrism through which we become focused on ourselves at the expense of the community and (c) ethnocentrism where we place a high value on our culture while at the same time we devalue the culture of others. So, how then can we open to the other? We must be flexible, ready to adapt and willing to change our behaviour, and develop strategies that will help us navigate through and meet the demands of the third space. Wulf (2010) suggests that we should first experience our own foreignness/otherness this will help us to experience things through the eyes of the other. When I feel my otherness, it makes me more responsive to the otherness of others. I can empathise. It makes me curious about the other. I want to learn as much as I can about them. Second, we should develop a "consciousness of the non-

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identity of the subject" by becoming aware of the other in our culture, and the foreignness in ourselves, we are able to see things from the perspective of the other. This will help us to see things from the others perspective. As the Chulach and Gagnon (2016) explain, identity is neither prescribed nor stable. It is constructed within the dominant discourse on knowledge, expertise autonomy and the practice/discipline for example teaching and education. Hybrid practitioners (that is, practitioners that span two cultures) do not find an easy fit in the original disciplines for they no longer perceive situations in the old way. This can lead to isolation and marginalization. They also have personal issues adjusting to what they perceive as their new roles. They might find themselves being othered. Their practitioner's role, expertise and knowledge is interrogated. Questions of the validity of their knowledge and whose knowledge is valid arise. This disjuncture/identity crisis often leads to further self-questioning and tension. Bhabba (1994) suggests that this third dialogic space, situated between cultures, is a site where identity can be negotiated and reclaimed. Third, we need to develop heterological thinking that critically examines questions about: "the familiar and the foreign, of knowing and not knowing, and of certainty and uncertainty." We carry our uncertainties and insecurities with us to meet with others (external to us) with their own uncertainties and insecurities. Wulf (2010) explains that we seek to alleviate our uncertainties through "ostensive certainties" which are validated by the exclusion of alternatives, but we are unable to fully regain the "lost certainty." He argues that the processes of exclusion include "societal power structures and processes of setting and excluding values, norms, ideologies and discourses" that results in a lack of awareness of our "othering" of others and a "closing of the mind to the possibilities of perceiving and thinking from the perspective of the other" (p. 39). We see then, the criticality of an awareness of our subjectivities, ideologies, discourses, norms and values if we intend to be open to the other, and to work with the other located in the multicultural class, that in-between space, to create something new.

Implications for networked learning

We can immediately extract actions that can be taken by practitioners to t;Across the past two decades there have been calls from members of the networked learning community to respond to tensions that arise: (1) in debates among members that tend to be rooted in differing "birth disciplines" that evoke methodological cultural differences (Conole, 2010), (2) from assumptions that networked learning communities should be marked by expectations for either consensus (Hodgson & Reynolds, 2006) or prescribed forms of participation and collaboration, (Ferreday & Hodgson, 2008), and (3) from examining complexities in supervisor-supervisee relationships within networked learning post-graduate programs that serve international and interdisciplinary populations of learners, (Parchoma & Keefer, 2016). While these tensions have been identified and recommendations for situated responses to individual dimensions of the overarching phenomenon of othering, there remains a gap in theorizing othering across broader research and practice dimensions of networked learning. If we can first consider disciplines as cultures that constitute a first boundary and the challenges that international students face as a second boundary, it is possible that we can then theorize transcultural approaches to negotiating boundary crossings that allow networked learning scholars, tutors, and learners to enter into authentic Third Space dialogues that allow for reciprocal, respectful presencing and identity formations in networked learning practices that include rather than exclude diverse voices. The challenge will be 'holding the centre," so that networked learning itself can maintain its identity as a distinct approach to theorizing online learning and teaching practices.

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