Working Cross-Culturally: Identity Learning, Border Crossing and Culture Brokering

Michie, Michael
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Book Review

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Michael Michie's 2014 publication of his dissertation argues that previous research into cross-cultural teaching has focused on skills, methods, and curriculum, but ignores teachers. To address this lacuna, Michie interviews six professional, western, K-12 science teachers of indigenous students and investigates what qualities characterize successful cross-cultural teachers and how teacher training can prepare instructors for cross-cultural contexts.

Michie's work makes three contributions to pedagogical discussions of cross-cultural teaching. First, Michie provides a sustained examination of the ways cross-cultural experiences shape teachers into "culture brokers" or "border crossers." Michie claims the most successful teacher of indigenous students *learns* to be a border crosser in his or her identity formation even before entering the classroom. Second, Michie analyzes successful border crossers and constructs a profile of a border-crossing teacher. Finally, Michie suggests what kind of training shapes teachers to be successful culture-brokers.

Michie claims an "international" framework for his study (1), but limits his subjects to those teaching in western, English-speaking sites (Australia, New Zealand, and Canada, 141). Michie argues that his focused data allows him to speak more precisely, and leaves expansion of this deep, thorough analysis to successive studies.

Michie's project unfolds in six chapters. In chapter one he defines the project and identifies himself as a "participant-researcher" with his subjects (2). In chapter two, Michie reviews the literature on western teaching of indigenous children. He sifts the anthropological, biological, and ethno-historical studies on "border crossing" and "cultural brokerage" (5) to refine the

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terms. He defines culture “as the social environment in which an individual is raised and lives and includes a range of concepts and beliefs that is accepted by individuals as defining their group identity” (14). The role of education is to “help those growing up in a culture find an identity within that culture” (Michie cites Bruner 1996, 15). This move brings identity studies and questions of power into the forefront of pedagogy – the (western, powerful) identity of the teacher and the (indigenous, marginalized) identity of the students. Thus teaching requires dexterity and self-awareness in crossing cultural borders.

Michie’s first contribution is to distinguish between terms in the literature. In his subjects, Michie finds that “border crossing” (“the ability of people to move metaphorically between cultures,” [50]) is a specific *identity* formed in “marginal people” (51). In contrast, “culture broker” (“a strategy which an individual can be used to promote cross-cultural understanding,” [51]) is the “role” that an “intermediary” chooses when mediating between cultures (52). Next, Michie proposes that teachers in cross-cultural situations can choose a mediating role while actively cultivating respect and appreciation for the cultures they move between (as border crossers do; 52, 79).

In chapter three, Michie analyzes the participant interviews looking for evidence of border-crossing experiences and cross-cultural encounters earlier in life. Teachers of indigenous students report positive affective and cognitive experiences when they engaged (pre-professionally) indigenous and first nation people (73). Michie identifies three successive degrees of engagement in the teachers. “Border crossers” choose a transitory role and show “interest in the culture and aspirations of indigenous people”; “border workers” “continue to work at the border as allies of the indigenous people”; “border mergers” exhibit a fully bi-cultural identity and do not distinguish between the cultures they navigate (80-81).

Chapter four examines how participants understand the role of culture broker or border-crosser and for what purpose they use that role. Chapter five evaluates participant ideas of how to enable teachers to cross cultural borders in their classrooms. Michie then defines what kind of training can best shape K-12 instructors to teach from a culture broker role. Finally, chapter six summarizes Michie’s conclusions and applies the best teacher training practice to specifically preparing western instructors to teach science as foreign cultural knowledge to indigenous students.

This study can be applied to the pedagogy of religion in at least two situations. First is for college or seminary instructors to consider teaching the academic study of religion as a “foreign” way of knowing. How might students of deep religious conviction respond differently to a perceived exercise of dissecting their sacred text if instructors cross that cultural divide

between confessional faith and academic study first? The same cultural crossing might bring "nones" into a new world of thinking about and reflecting analytically on religion. Second, Michie shows that, as professional teachers, our cultural identities and our ability to meet students have already been shaped – positively or negatively. Reflecting on the degree(s) to which we are able to meet our students, cross metaphorical and cultural borders, and broker academic culture with newcomers is critical to our growth as teachers.

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