

Think Global Thinkpiece 2012 series

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Thinking Differently About Difference

In this thinkpiece Dr Fran Martin looks at cultural similarity and difference within the context of global learning

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Introduction

The use of the words similarity and difference are often heard in the context of global learning. Drawing on academic theory, I explore three different ways of thinking about cultural similarity and difference followed by a short practical example of a teacher study visit to the Gambia. I conclude by promoting a relational pedagogy for global learning in which educators listen, relate to and learn from multiple perspectives. This enables us to foster our own self-awareness and open-mindedness about difference before working with students to foster theirs.

Traditions of thought from the West and the East

Richard Nisbett¹ (2005) discusses two alternative ways of thinking about the world: an object-focused tradition which has emerged from Greece and dominates Western thinking; and a relational, contextual tradition which has emerged from China and dominates East Asian thinking². I will apply these two traditions to my understanding of one aspect of my identity: what it means (to me) to be a twin.

When thinking from an object-based perspective, the focus of attention is on the object itself, and what is similar. I am a twin, I have this in common with other twins; I am thinking about 'twinness' as an object. The effect is of creating a group of 'twins', which has a discernible boundary, in which the idea of 'twin' is seen as fixed and stable. It also creates a binary of twin / not twin. This is problematic for two reasons. Firstly, it focuses on similarity and while this creates a sense of connection (between me and other twins), it also smoothes over difference in ways that ignore twins' uniqueness. Secondly, if culture is understood as an object or "entity" that is somehow autonomous, then when the identification is being done by others, people can be included into, or (unjustly) excluded from the group (what about twins separated at birth, twins where only one of them survived at birth?). Is culture something that is autonomous and can be viewed as an object, or is it possible to understand culture as something that appears only in the interaction between things? In other words, understanding culture in relation to difference³ (Osberg, 2012)?

When thinking from a relational perspective the concept of twin can only be understood in relation to others and through the exploration of difference. I understand my 'twinness' in relation to other twins as well as not twins (which could include triplets, quads etc). Rather than a fixed, stable category, understanding the concept of twin 'in relation to' others brings the possibility of complexity and diversity

¹ Nisbett, R. (2005) *The Geography of Thought: How Asians and Westerners Think Differently and Why*. Boston MA: Nicholas Brealey Publishing.

² Nisbett discusses how these are not intended to be used as stereotypes of thinking in the West and East, but rather used as a heuristic device for understanding different *traditions* of thought and where they are located spatially and philosophically.

³ Osberg, D. (2012) 'Equality, Democracy and Diversity: A critical/philosophical perspective'. Unpublished paper presented at University of Exeter EdD conference, March 2012.

– each relation to another's difference brings another dimension to understanding 'twin' and a recognition that there is as much diversity within the group, 'twins', as there is between twins and others. Understanding culture in this relational sense, as existing in the interaction between people, shows that culture is not something that is static; rather it changes, evolves and modifies itself as it is challenged by people from other cultural backgrounds (by difference). I would suggest that such a perspective would lead to a more open-minded and positive disposition towards difference.

Viewed from a relational perspective, similarity is a problem in culture and identity terms. So too is defining an individual by a single characteristic. Being a twin is just one aspect of who I am; I am also a boogie boarder, a primary geographer, a teacher, a researcher, a sister, a dog owner, English with Scottish ancestry and so on. In other words, there are multiple aspects to my identity each of which has its own cultural traditions. If someone were to define me in terms of any one of these, to the exclusion of the others, it would be a reductive sense of who I am and would be extremely limiting.

This is not unlike what Adichie⁴ refers to as the 'single story' that is often found in Western representations of 'Africa' (as if it is a homogenous country rather than a diverse continent of 54⁵ countries) and which focuses on a mixture of the exotic and what is 'lacking' when compared to Western lifestyles:

If ... all I knew about Africa were from popular images, I too would think that Africa was a place of beautiful landscapes, beautiful animals, and incomprehensible people, fighting senseless wars, dying of poverty and AIDS, unable to speak for themselves, and waiting to be saved, by a kind, white foreigner.

In the context of learning about other people, places and cultures, stereotypes can be seen as founded on an object-based tradition. What Adichie's observations add to our understanding, is that how we relate to each other individually cannot be separated from how we relate to the historical, cultural, social and political contexts that have also shaped who we are. Adichie warns that the danger of the single story is that when 'a people is shown as one thing, and only one thing, over and over again, that is what they become'. She goes on to observe that 'it is impossible to talk about the single story without talking about power'. Stories are defined by how they are told, who tells them, when they are told, how many stories are told. 'Power is the ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person'.

⁴ Chimamanda Ngozie Adichie's TED talk (2009) 'The danger of a single story', can be found at the web address below. The whole talk is only 20 minutes long and well worth seeing in its entirety. http://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story.html

⁵ Although even this 'fact' is contested and the number of countries in Africa can range from 53 – 57 depending on the source. This blog shows how the number of countries changes according to the perspective used to view the question. <http://jfmaho.wordpress.com/2010/12/30/how-many-countries-are-there-in-africa/>

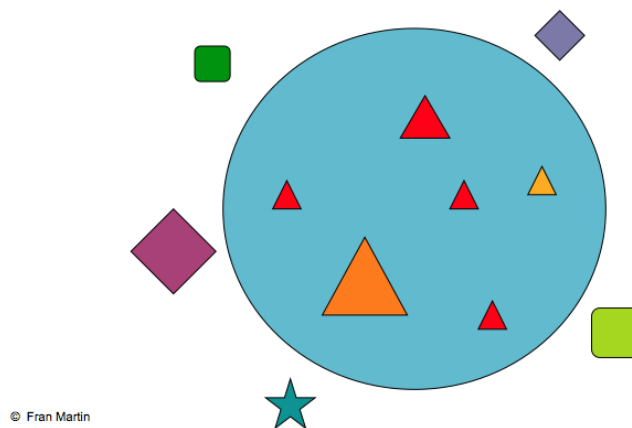
In the next section, I use three models to explore the relationship between similarity and difference more deeply. The first two models are based on an object-focused tradition, while the third is based on a relational tradition.

Three ways of thinking about similarity and difference

Following the Second World War, changes to the cultural make-up of Britain have created a paradox of a spatially proximate, yet culturally distant 'Other'⁶. This has presented a challenge to education of how to develop new ways of relating at a local scale, while at a global scale the 'single story' continues to dominate. The three models represent changes in how cultural difference has been dealt with educationally, as I have experienced them since I began teaching in 1980.

1. Sameness and difference in binary terms

Figure 1



In the first model (figure 1⁷) the triangles represent the dominant cultural group in British society (i.e. the group that holds the power that makes the decisions) while the other shapes represent minority cultures that, because of their differences, are not seen to belong to the dominant group. The properties of the dominant group (triangles, shades of red/orange) are used as the standard against which to judge others. This creates a binary distinction of 'similar – different', 'triangle – not triangle', 'like - not like', in which the not triangle, not red/orange shapes are seen to fall short. In this model these differences are perceived to be external to the dominant group, a property of 'Otherness'.

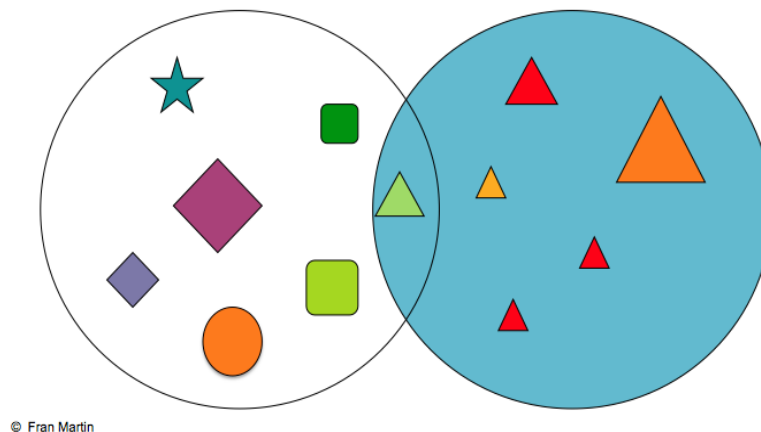
⁶ The 'Other' and 'Othering' are terms used by Edward Said (1985) in his seminal work *Orientalism* (Middlesex, Penguin).

⁷ These figures are dynamic models. To view how the shapes move in each model see the presentation given at the Geographical Association conference, April 2012. <http://www.geography.org.uk/cpdevents/annualconference/manchester2012/>

In the 1980s, when I first started teaching, an inclusive approach to solve this perceived 'problem' was to identify what is similar to all, which led to a focus on the category of 'human' as being an all-inclusive group. This assimilationist model is an issue because there is the danger that important differences of the minority groups are ignored and what is chosen as similar (humanity⁸) is decided by the dominant group. We are all the same because we are all human is arguably another way of saying 'you are (or should be) like us'. A focus on sameness as a way of levelling differences is as if there is no relevance to these differences – and can have the effect of making differences invisible, and thus incomprehensible. To draw on my own situation, my twin and I went to boarding school and were placed in separate dormitories and separate classes. I believe the reason was that it would prevent us from relying on each other, and perhaps there was a sense that twins might form an exclusive 'clique'. I can now see that the concept of 'twin' was being understood from the dominant basis of 'not twin' with twins falling short of that standard. The difference that twin brought was not valued.

2. Sameness-difference understood as aspects of diversity

Figure 2



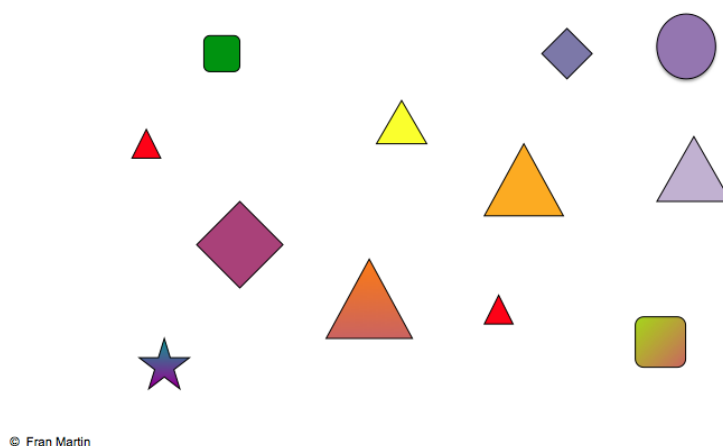
The second model (figure 2) represents recognition of a diverse, plural society that is something to be celebrated. This is reflected in the educational principle of valuing diversity. Ostensibly the focus is on difference and valuing difference, but these differences are externalised and seen to be the property of the 'Other', while the differences within the dominant group (triangles) are submerged. As expressed in education during the 1990s and 2000s, it could be argued that celebrating diversity was merely an accommodation of those aspects of difference that could be comprehended and classified in terms of dominant standards. This is sometimes evident in primary schools when, in order to celebrate diverse cultures, activities such as an African drumming event, or the preparation and consumption of a 'typical'

⁸ Todd, S. (2008) 'Facing Humanity: The difficult task of cosmopolitan education'. Paper presented at the annual conference of the Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain, Oxford, March 2008.

Indian meal might take place. It can have the unintended effect of reducing complex cultures and societies to single story stereotypes. At worst it can exoticise difference as something quaint, charming or curious, and so exaggerate the distance between self and other.

3. Difference-sameness understood as relational

Figure 3



In the previous two models, similarity (triangles) is the starting point for understanding difference, with the latter being seen as a deviation from the defining, dominant group's standard. In the third model (figure 3) *difference* is the starting point from which similarity might be understood. Rather than focusing on external points of comparison and contrast, here difference is understood as elements of enacted, lived identity - difference *within*. The focus therefore begins at the individual level, each shape understanding its own identity 'in-relation-to' the other shapes. What becomes important is not the object of understanding, but the relationships that enable understanding of the differences within.

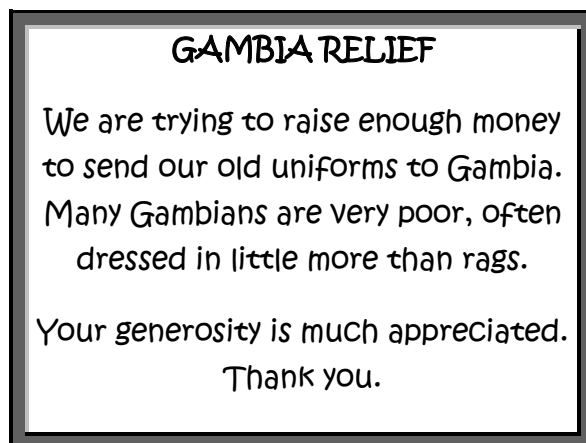
This does not mean to say that sameness should be ignored, or that it is impossible to categorise. The proposal is that difference is the point from which similarities can be identified, rather than the other way around. So, in figure 3 we might identify a group of purple shapes, of four-sided figures, of triangles, but there will be many other groups of things that are not visible. The implication is that more complex, deeper understandings of difference (within and between cultures) are developed through relating and dialogue. In the classroom this might be done by exploring with pupils the differences that exist within themselves, and to use this as the basis for identifying similarities or connections between them. Here difference and sameness are neither 'good' nor 'bad', they just are. If I think of my own differences within (twin, a boogie boarder, a primary geographer, a daughter, an aunty, a global citizen, a vegetarian ...), I can be both aware of my differences and recognise that I have multiple aspects to my identity across which the boundaries are blurred and fluid.

Case study of a Gambian study visit⁹

In an education context, how we understand self in relation to others and the world is profoundly affected by how we perceive the differences that are inevitably encountered, and by how we position ourselves in these relationships. This, usually unconscious, positioning affects how we interpret the experiences we have and consequently what is learnt from them. From a relational perspective, acquisition of knowledge is therefore not value-free. It is bound by the social, cultural and historical contexts within which it is constructed and understood.

How people position themselves and others is discussed by Helen Griffiths and Gill Allbutt¹⁰ (2011). In this extract, Helen talks about her experience:

In April 2010 I paid a visit to my local garden centre (part of a local chain). As I walked out I noticed a poster entitled 'Gambia Relief' that asked customers for donations so that the garden centre could send their old uniforms to people in The Gambia:



The notice positions Gambians as poverty-stricken and helpless, and those in the garden centre and who choose to donate as being compassionate and able to help. Helen describes how two months earlier she had been on a Tide~ global learning study visit to The Gambia¹¹ and that this had resulted in a transformation in her thinking.

⁹ For examples of how the ideas in this article can be applied in two school contexts (teaching about distant places and implications for teaching resources) see Martin, F. (2012) 'The Geographies of Difference', *Geography*, 97(3), 116-122

¹⁰ Griffiths, Helen and Allbutt, Gill (2011) The Danger of the Single Image. *Primary Geography*, summer 2011, issue 75, p. 16-17

At the time of writing, Helen Griffiths was research fellow, and Gill Allbutt a research participant, on a major research project funded by the ESRC, to which I am the lead investigator, and the findings of which have informed this piece.

¹¹ www.tidec.org

Previously, I may have walked straight past the sign, or perhaps have donated some money if I had a bit of loose change in my pocket. ... instead my initial reaction was one of shock. Shock at how the poster was representing the country and its people; a representation that jarred with my own experiences.

As an object of thought, the garden centre staff represented The Gambia from the single perspective of economic poverty. The object of their attention was understood from a Western standard, against which The Gambia fell short, and they were offering a single solution to this issue. Helen observes that she would not have questioned the single story had she not had the opportunity to take part in a study visit course and as a result begun to think differently. For her, developing understanding of poverty was not just a question of knowing 'more', but recognising that her worldview is just that – her own, and that it is one among many. As teachers, being aware of our worldviews is crucial to global learning because otherwise the same single stories and single solutions might be unwittingly passed onto the next generation.

Conclusion

To address the issues above, I propose that *in conjunction with object-based thought*¹² relational thinking and a relational pedagogy is needed. From a relational perspective economic well-being might be understood in relation to other types of well-being. As Graves¹³ (2002) observes, a persistent focus on economic poverty does nothing to value the richness of culture, history, and society that is also evident in economically poor countries. This is not to deny that economic poverty exists, but from a single perspective a single solution is then offered, which does not encourage understanding of the *causes* of global poverty. Access to multiple perspectives (where are the views of those being portrayed in the garden centre notice?) opens us up to a range of possible interpretations of 'poverty'. Multiple perspectives offer the potential for exploring intersectionalities between different aspects of the global issue being considered, of understanding their complexities and of being more tentative and provisional about their possible solutions.

To conclude, as educators, relational understanding challenges our single stories and, as such, suggests we listen, relate to and learn from multiple perspectives. It requires that we foster our own self-awareness and open-mindedness about difference before working with students to foster theirs.

¹² I do not suggest that object-based thinking should be replaced by relational thinking, since this would contradict the argument in the paper as a whole. Rather, the two modes could be used and their effects understood in relation to each other, drawing on each in ways that seem most fruitful to the learning intended.

¹³ Graves, J. (2002) Developing a global dimension in the curriculum, *The Curriculum Journal*, 13(3), 303–311.