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Transnational teaching practice and the curriculum

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In 2016 it was considered a radical change to propose a curriculum review which put the transnational at the centre of what we teach. Today, ‘transnational’ is a common descriptor in module titles across Modern Languages in the UK. The transnational has facilitated new approaches to the discipline that put migration, mobility, translation, and the legacies of empire at the heart of what we do. It has encouraged teachers and learners to think about the way that cultures and communities have been shaped by their interactions with others, and about the power dynamics inherent in these exchanges. At its best, the transnational is a powerful tool for interrogating not only what we learn and teach but also how we situate ourselves and how we create and disseminate knowledge. However, in practice it can be more complex to achieve these ideals, and embedding the transnational in teaching runs the risk of dilution and vagueness.

My reflections in this article come from three interlinked perspectives: institutional, disciplinary, and as a citizen of a devolved nation. At institutional level, I led a curriculum review in the School of Modern Languages at Cardiff University in the UK in 2016. As Director of Learning and Teaching, I spearheaded a wholesale re-thinking of every module in every language programme. One of the key goals was to embed transnational thinking and practices into compulsory ‘culture’ options in year 1 and 2, in line with the ethos of the ‘Transnationalising Modern Languages’ (TML) project, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC).¹ The second perspective comes from my experience of organising and attending symposia and workshops on transnationalising (and decolonising) the curriculum through work with the University Council of Modern Languages (UCML), the Institute for Modern Languages Research (IMLR), and the AHRC Creative Multilingualism project.² The final perspective comes from my situated experience as a white Welsh academic working in a Welsh institution in a UK context. Many of the debates in the sector in the UK quite naturally focus on the English context, given the relative sizes of England and Wales. However the landscape in Wales, while informed by this broader UK framework, is also shaped by the different transnational and (de)colonial histories of Wales, and by the politics of the current devolved government.³ Compared to the UK government in Westminster, the Welsh government has a more

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supportive approach to Modern Languages and a more open approach to engagement and interaction with other cultures and communities, both within Wales and abroad.⁴ I will argue that the way in which the transnational encourages a focus on the local/regional, as well as the national is one of the most important ways it can shape our teaching not only of Italian Studies but of citizenship and practices of activism. All three of the perspectives above deal with 'Modern Languages' more broadly rather than Italian Studies per se. It is worth noting however that Italian Studies seems to punch above its weight in the transnational recalibration of Modern Languages. The TML project came from Italian Studies, and many of the symposia I have attended have a significant number of contributors from Italian Studies despite the relatively small size of the discipline in the UK.⁵

In 2016 the idea of putting the transnational at the heart of the curriculum met with enthusiasm from some quarters and resistance from others in the School of Modern Languages at Cardiff. Three key concerns emerged. The first was around disciplinary identity and student expectations: if students arrived expecting to learn about Italy (or any other culture), would they understand why they were studying Italy in relation to other nationalities and communities? If the focus shifts to Italy's relationships beyond Italy, what remains of Italian Studies? As the notion of the transnational has gained currency, these fears have been largely alleviated, and it has become clear that a transnational focus does not preclude study of key elements of 'national' culture but rather enhances opportunities for approaching them in more open ways. In Italian Studies this has perhaps been easier than in other disciplines, since some of the more popular teaching topics, such as the Renaissance, migration to and from Italy, and Italy's colonial past (reflecting another recent change in Italian Studies), were already inherently transnational. While this is also true of some other Modern Languages subjects, it was more pronounced in some than in others. In our experience at Cardiff, even the language disciplines which did not immediately see how their teaching could have a transnational dimension now embrace this element. The second concern was around the temporality of teaching. Would the transnational require a focus on contemporary topics only? Again, this is a fear that has been allayed, as scholarship on transnationalism across the ages proliferates and becomes more visible.⁶ This rapidly-growing body of work on the transnational has been important in addressing the third concern with teaching the transnational: resources. In 2016, overt scholarship on the transnational was scarcer and less high-profile than it is today. Work such as the *Transnational Modern Languages* series from Liverpool University Press (n.d.),⁷ the *Transnational Italian Studies* series, journal articles⁸ and other publications have provided stimulating and accessible materials for teaching, overcoming this perceived barrier.

If the obstacles to teaching the transnational as they appeared in 2016 have been overcome, new challenges have emerged through the experience of teaching the transnational over recent years. One concern has been on how to introduce and scaffold the transnational, especially as students increasingly come to university with less knowledge of the languages and cultures that they are studying. In the UK, the Languages Trends surveys carried out by the British Council paint a depressing picture of a steady decline in languages take-up at GCSE (exams taken at 16) and A-Level (exams taken at 18).⁹ As fewer students opt for A-Level languages, universities have opened up courses to learners who may not have studied languages at A-Level. Even those who

have studied for a language A-Level devote less time to culture in the syllabus. This trend is set to worsen as the new languages GCSE in England comes into force, since the new qualification has stripped culture from the curriculum.¹⁰ In Wales, in theory, students should begin to come to university better equipped to study the transnational. Wales introduced a new Curriculum for Wales for all schools from September 2022, structured around four 'core purposes' and 27 'what matters' statements that should be at the heart of all study (Hwb.Gov.Wales, n.d.).¹¹ These include an explicit requirement for students to engage with other languages and communities within Wales and to be ethically-informed citizens ready to participate in the wider world.¹² However, issues of language uptake remain, so even though students may be more prepared for a transnational approach, the number of students coming through this pathway remains challenging. The experience of teaching the revised curriculum at Cardiff over recent years has led to a further re-structure that introduces students more gradually to the concept of the transnational, building up their knowledge more slowly to take account of the changing knowledge and skills base they bring with them to university. This might include providing training on skills and practices for reading a literary text or a film, if pupils have not engaged with cultural texts since the age of 16, or scaffolding the study of different languages and communities with more basic information about cultural landscapes beyond the home nation.

The transnational both opens up the curriculum beyond the national and enables a focus on the local. One of the draws of the transnational for me was not only the way it opened up the subject of Italian beyond the peninsular, but also the way in which it enabled us to locate Italian Studies within a wider Modern Languages discipline. TML's articulation of Modern Languages study as 'an expert mode of enquiry whose founding research question is how languages and cultures operate and interact across diverse axes of connection' clearly sets out a disciplinary identity that goes beyond Italian Studies. At Cardiff we tried to use this to foster a sense of cohort identity as 'Modern Linguists' rather than as students of Italian, or as students of German, and so forth. The transnational offered a means of embodying this mindset by structuring our content teaching around cross-cutting themes for all Modern Languages students, taught together, which could then be developed more fully in individual language disciplines. In practice, some students embraced this while others were more confused and struggled to connect the transnational work with the national teaching.

Assessment also proved a key issue. How could these broader transnational questions be assessed and by whom? If you are delivering cross-cutting lectures to the whole cohort of Modern Languages students, with a view to them developing their thinking around these wider themes to their own disciplines, how do you craft assessments which speak to the diverse study areas? And who might mark these? The languages sections, or the colleagues delivering the thematic lectures? Indeed, the question of how to assess the transnational, once you move beyond individual modules, was a recurring theme in symposia such as the 'Transnationalising the Word' event. There were some brilliant examples of projects and assessment practices across language disciplines set out at 'Transnationalising the Word', with a particularly striking (to me) example from Lusophone Studies. Lourenço Dias (2021) set out how students use research into cultural products such as written texts, songs, podcasts, and YouTube videos to contribute to the construction of a 'Decolonised

Dictionary of the Portuguese Language'. This explores variants of Portuguese words from Europe, Brazil, Angola, Mozambique, Cape Verde, and so forth, to propose a decentralised view of language in the Lusophone world. Students were assessed on their contributions to the dictionary, in terms of their underpinning research and creativity. However, the difference between teaching the transnational within individual modules and teaching it as the essential foundation of the curriculum is important. The former is relatively easy to achieve, especially in Italian Studies where so many topics are inherently transnational in focus. The latter is much harder to implement in practice, but is, I would argue, an important aspiration in a world in which right-wing ideologies, which seek to isolate rather than connect communities, become increasingly prevalent.

The transnational can, in its focus on connecting communities, become a powerful tool of activism too. Indeed, much of the research which underpinned the original TML project came from post-colonial and migration studies which sought to encourage a critical approach to and a rejection of inequalities. In the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement, the transnational has been increasingly paired with moves to decolonise the curriculum.¹³ This emphasises the activist potential of the transnational. The transnational also has a key role to play here, I would suggest, in maintaining an important focus on the local, which mitigates against emerging dominant and homogenising narratives that privilege certain experiences of diversity. The transnational can be at its most powerful when it examines the connections between specific communities. At events discussing decolonising the curriculum I have been aware, as a (white) Welsh researcher, of the risk that the 'diversity' that we seek to embed in our teaching, and the decolonising approaches that we look to embrace, become dominated by the experience of communities in England, and, in particular, in London. The transnational and colonial landscapes and trajectories of the devolved nations, and indeed of the English regions, can be markedly different from those of London and the English South. Similarly, teaching practices and curricula in schools in the devolved nations differ significantly from those in England.¹⁴ Attempts to develop decolonising frameworks for universities or resources for schools which take a London / South-East England model of diversity and seek to apply it uniformly without considering the rich variance in transnational and decolonising relationships beyond London risk creating new hegemonies that alienate rather than connect. To assert the need for a presence of communities which reflect London's diversity (for example Nigerian and Ghanaian communities) in school resources is less meaningful in areas where diversity comes from the co-presence of different national and linguistic communities. To impose a London version of diversity on the devolved nations and regions is to simply recast dominant models of what culture *could* look like, without due regard for the nuances of how diversity is lived in local contexts. The transnational enables us to take a more nuanced, local, approach to the way we study our engagements and interactions with communities within and beyond the nation and mitigates again a homogenising approach to what diversity and decolonisation means. This focus on the local has always been a key part of the transnational, as evidenced in the initial TML projects, such as the work with Scottish schools which encouraged pupils to map their own trajectories and explorations of how people and cultures change as we cross borders.¹⁵ The new Routes into Languages Cymru [Wales] toolkit

for primary schools encourages children to look at festivals in the language community they are studying (such as French or Spanish) and compare them to practices in Wales and in other cultures experienced by children in the classroom.¹⁶ This is a shifting, localised version of transnational practices, rather than one shaped by the dominant cultural landscape of London. In identifying how cultural encounters shape identities both ‘here’ and ‘there’, the transnational enables a more local and immediate sense of connectedness.


The transnational has become normalised in teaching over the past few years. However, we are still learning how to use it, how it can be at its most effective, and how to minimise the risk that it becomes a meaningless label that does not encourage critical thinking and imaginative responses. Italian Studies has been at the vanguard of the development of the transnational. It would be exciting for the discipline if it could continue to play a key role in articulating how it can work in tandem with decolonising approaches to create an activist mindset for teaching and learning.

Notes

1. See: TML (n.d.). One of the TML leads, Professor Loredana Polezzi, was based at Cardiff University at the time and was instrumental in developing the vision, as was Professor Hanna Diamond.
2. For example: Beaney et al. (2020); Cazzoli and Wren-Owens (2021); Wren-Owens (2021a, 2021b). In October 2021 the IMLR changed its name and is now known as the Institute of Languages, Cultures and Societies (ICLS).
3. In 1998 the UK Parliament passed the Government of Wales Act, providing the legal basis for the National Assembly for Wales. Subsequent referenda and legislation have increased the power of the devolved government. For further detail see Senedd Cymru Welsh Parliament (n.d.). In the UK context the Scottish Parliament (n.d.) and the Northern Ireland Assembly (n.d.) also exercise devolved powers.
4. Illustrative examples are the investment in the strategy and policy group ‘Global Futures: A plan to improve and promote modern foreign languages in Wales’ (Gov.Wales, n.d.a); the introduction of the ‘Taith’ [journey] reciprocal student mobility programme following the UK’s withdrawal from the Erasmus scheme in the wake of Brexit (Taith, n.d.); and the importance afforded languages in the new Curriculum for Wales, to be rolled out in September 2022 (Hwb.Gov.Wales, n.d.).
5. The 2022 National Student Survey listed 27 institutions which taught Italian in the UK, compared with 49 teaching French and Spanish (Complete University Guide, n.d.).
6. For example, research published in Burdett and Polezzi’s (2020) edited volume, *Transnational Italian Studies* spans the pre-modern to the contemporary.
7. See: Liverpool University Press (n.d.).
8. See for example Glynn et al. (2020) *Italian Studies. Special Issue: Key Directions in Italian Studies*.
9. ‘Languages Trends England 2022’ can be accessed at <https://www.britishcouncil.org/research-policy-insight/research-reports/language-trends-2022> (British Council, 2022a) and Language Trends Wales – research into the teaching and learning of international languages’ can be accessed at <https://wales.britishcouncil.org/en/language-trends-wales> (British Council, 2022b). Reasons for the decline include the perception of languages as a ‘hard’ subject, hostility towards languages (and other cultures) in the wake of Brexit, especially in economically disadvantaged areas; lack of understanding of the value of Modern Languages and belief that

- knowledge of English is sufficient in a global context; and in Wales, reduced GCSE options and the removal of the requirement to study languages other than Welsh beyond the age of 14.
10. Burdett (2022) evaluates the likely impact of GCSE reforms in his article 'Global Britain and the Question of Communication', available at: <https://www.meits.org/opinion-articles/article/global-britain-and-the-question-of-communication>.
 11. Secondary schools (age 11–16/18) could choose to launch curriculum for Wales in September 2022 or September 2023, although all primary schools (age 4–11) had to launch in September 2022.
 12. Statement 2.4.1 reads: 'Languages connect us with people, places and communities. This Area is designed to equip learners, as citizens of a bilingual Wales in a multilingual world, with the ability to use Welsh, English and other languages in a plurilingual context. Meaningful language learning experiences go hand in hand with learning about one's own cultural identity as well as the cultural identities of others. Engagement with this Area can therefore foster in learners pride in their sense of identity and belonging to Wales as well as the world'. Statement 2.3.5 reads: 'Experiences in this Area can help learners develop an understanding of their responsibilities as citizens of Wales and the wider interconnected world, and of the importance of creating a just and sustainable future for themselves and their local, national and global communities'. 'The Curriculum for Wales. Statements of What Matters Code', available at: <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2021-11/curriculum-for-wales-statements-of-what-matters-code.pdf> (Gov. Wales, n.d.b).
 13. In our own event 'Transnationalising the Word: A Decolonising Approach to the Teaching and Learning of Modern Languages', speakers highlighted ways in which transnationalism can become a means of engaging with decolonising the curriculum.
 14. Having worked with the language advocacy networks Routes into Languages Cymru (n.d.) in Wales and Scotland's National Centre for Languages (n.d.), it seems to me that there is an increasing convergence between practice in the devolved nations, where decolonising processes are already quite developed and embedded in school curriculum. These developments are not always apparent to colleagues working from London.
 15. See: TML (2017)
 16. Routes into Languages Cymru (n.d.) is a pan-Wales collaborative outreach project that promotes the visibility, uptake and profile of languages in schools in Wales. The project developed the primary school toolkit to support teachers when Curriculum for Wales introduced the requirement for teachers to teach 'international' languages in addition to Welsh from September 2022.

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