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Paul Tarc’s *International Education in Global Times: Engaging the Pedagogic* applies a critical lens to contemporary issues and tensions regarding international education. Tarc’s overarching purpose is to bring a “level of criticality to the largely celebratory and Western-centered imaginaries of international education” (Preface, xv). Specifically, he is concerned with challenging simplistic and idealized notions of transformative learning and forming global citizens that currently permeate the discourse of international education, with particular reference to the U.S. and Canada. Through analyzing the complexity of identity and subject formation that occurs

through international – or in his terms, ‘trans-local’ – experiences, Tarc proposes a new concept of ‘cosmopolitan literacies’ in order to recapture deeper humanist and progressive visions of international education that have arguably fallen to the wayside in today’s neoliberal global times. Tarc’s critique is productive in that there are clear pedagogical implications for educators that engage students who have had or will participate in an international experience.

I approached this text from my role as an instructor of teacher education candidates who participate in international immersion student teaching experiences. As such, many of the tensions and challenges raised in this text resonate with me. I sympathize with Tarc’s assertion that it is difficult to find readings and other curricular materials that are nuanced, accessible and push students’ thinking beyond the mediatized messages of international travel and learning they receive. I hoped that this text would provide me with some useful tools to incorporate into practice, and on many levels it delivers. I especially appreciate the pedagogic emphasis of Tarc’s theoretical perspective, and how he proposes in a non-prescriptive manner how to engage students to think critically, relationally, historically, and reflexively about their learning through international experiences and across differences. I believe my role as an educator of international education makes me the ideal audience; however, the text’s generic title is indicative of a broad audience of educators, practitioners, administrators, and students Tarc attempts to reach. In many respects, this brief text with 120 pages of content is accessible to a variety of audiences. As Tarc acknowledges, the current expediency of international education itself takes myriad forms, including but not limited to study abroad, volunteerism and service learning, cultural immersion experiences, and teaching internationally. Nonetheless, by attempting to be inclusive of these various audiences and practices of international education, Tarc perhaps overreaches the intended audience and reduces the potential impact of this text.

As Tarc explains in the Preface, the impetus for this book began as a curricular object to be used with his university students in an international education course he developed. Tarc briefly discloses details about his background as a
Canadian who taught for several years in international schools in the global South. This disclosure aligns with the critical epistemological stance he assumes about how knowledge is constructed and one’s understanding of reality is situated and mediated by political, economic and social structures. Tarc contends that such a theory of knowledge is necessary for intercultural communication and engaging across difference to create opportunities for reflection and learning about one’s own self, others, and the world. This is the key assumption undergirding his critique, theorizing and pedagogical approach and is apparent throughout the text.

Tarc’s main critique is directed at the simplistic and overly deterministic conceptualizations of “transformative learning” and becoming a “global citizen” that permeate the rapidly expanding international education movement. In Chapter 1, Tarc makes a case that instrumental neoliberal agendas for international education overshadow progressive, humanist visions. Consequently, while perhaps not altogether lost, the aspiration of creating a more egalitarian, peaceful world through educational exchanges across borders and between cultures takes a back seat to the ‘cosmopolitan capital’ individuals can gain through study abroad and other international experiences. These “resume-building” opportunities are commonly promoted as “making a difference” and “life-changing” as one becomes a competent and active “global citizen”. He notes that while at odds with each other, in practice, both pragmatic and idealist orientations overlap and are synergistic. The remainder of Chapter 1 is dedicated to defining his usage of various contested terms including globalization, pedagogy, critical, neoliberalism and performativity, thus clarifying for the reader Tarc’s theoretical perspective and underlying assumptions.

In Chapter 2, “The Challenge of Learning across Difference”, Tarc points his critique at the frequently promoted outcome of international education of developing the capacity to “see the world through another’s eyes.” Tarc describes in detail how he employs the parable of “The Elephant and the Blind Man” in his classroom to engage students and foster understanding of the difficulty of communicating across cultural difference. By extending the parable beyond the most surface-level message (i.e. that each person’s view of reality is
inherently incomplete and that increased communication among people of different beliefs could broaden our worldview and common understanding), students are guided to consider imbalances of power that dictate which perspectives are dominant and which are marginalized. Through a series of thought exercises, Tarc explains how students can identify structural barriers that inhibit the equal exchange of ideas and limit the possibilities to access others’ ways of seeing and knowing the world. Each subsequent intercultural interaction and engagement across difference is mediated by one’s own cultural background and previous experience. Tarc’s motivation is to impress upon students the difficulty, if not ‘impossibility’, of learning and communicating across difference. As such, he contends that it should not be construed as a skill to be acquired through international education, but rather a struggle humans engage with throughout the duration of their lives.

In Chapter 3, relying primarily on his analysis of a widely-circulated essay about a student’s disillusionment of study abroad and other previous research, Tarc further troubles idealized conceptualizations of transformative learning that abound in the international education discourse. Building upon the previous chapter’s analysis of the difficulty of learning and communicating across difference, Tarc rejects the notion that one progresses developmentally from ignorance, or ethnocentrism, to enlightened critical consciousness, or ethnorelativism, as a result of international experience. Rather, learning, personal transformation and meaningful reflection are much more complex processes and the changes that occur may not necessarily be positive or empowering. The essay, written by Zemach-Bersin (2008), articulates frustration and disappointment in her semester-long study abroad experience in India, Nepal and Tibet that encouraged “total cultural immersion” and “to act like the locals.” Her principal grievance is that the university failed to prepare students for recognizing the power, privilege and “cultural baggage” they carry as Americans. Because of this cumulative privilege of race, class, nationality and education, the intended aims of the program and meaningful engagement with local people were impossibilities. Tarc uses this example to argue that students ought to be prepared to examine their own culture, past, and assumptions prior to embarking, and that
this student indeed underwent a transformation, albeit not necessarily the positive, “life-changing” experience that was promoted or expected of her. As educators of international education, the main take-away from this chapter is to consider how pedagogically we can refrain from placing idealized expectations on students for pre-determined, positive, transformative outcomes.

To continue exploring notions of transformation and identify formation through international experiences, in Chapter 4, Tarc introduces evidence from his current research with Canadian teachers who taught at international schools in the global South. His main interest is the transformation and learning that these teachers attribute to their experiences abroad. Tarc’s analysis of his data finds key issues related to power dynamics between Western teachers and host nation teachers, students, and communities. The teacher participants identified common difficulties and struggles in how they negotiated social and economic disparities they encountered and how they grappled with their own privilege. Indeed, each teacher identified examples of learning and ways they were changed by their experiences, yet struggle, frustration and dissonance were key components of this learning. Tarc contends that sharing these accounts with students or teachers preparing to teach internationally could be useful to contrast more critical, realistic reflections with idealized messages. While these narrative accounts from teachers could certainly provide others with a sense of issues they may encounter, in this instance, Tarc offers little guidance on how to pedagogically or otherwise prepare students or prospective teachers to cope in these situations. Young idealists may consume these stories with unease and be turned off toward pursuing international teaching if the predominant message is one of frustration or that little or nothing can be done to alter existing structures of inequality. Additionally, Tarc recognizes that there is a dimension of ‘unpreparability’ for international experience and, as he asserts in the final chapter, this critical learning is an ongoing process.

Tarc’s main theoretical contribution, which he terms “cosmopolitan literacies,” is laid bare in the final chapter. Tarc displays some trepidation about introducing a new term into the international education lexicon and suggests
that his proposal is truly a re-assemblage built upon other ideas to re-orient our pedagogical trajectory and aims for international education. Drawing closely from Rivzi’s (2009) conception of ‘cosmopolitan learning’, Tarc’s term ‘cosmopolitan literacy’ connotes the emphasis on identity and subject formation. Tarc explicates his use of cosmopolitan as distinct from theories of cosmopolitanism that speak of an abstract future of global, yet ‘rootless’, citizens. Rather, he uses it as a modifier to capture the importance of political boundaries and affiliation to one’s home country to processes of border crossing and subject formation without limiting boundaries to those defined by the nation-state. Thus, this notion of cosmopolitan emphasizes the importance of trans-local intercultural engagements within and across nation-states and considers subjects as having multiple affiliations within and across political boundaries. In his words, Tarc states that a cosmopolitan orientation is “outward-looking, interested in engaging and learning from other both inside and outside of one’s own local or country, and reflexively aware of how one is situated within these webs of relations” (p. 101). Drawing from postcolonial theory, critical pedagogy and Freirean notions of literacy, and new literacy studies, Tarc uses a broader and deeper conception of literacy that emphasizes reading both the word and the world, necessarily and intimately linked to one’s understanding of self and one’s place in the world. Joining the concepts, ‘cosmopolitan literacies’ “finds its use when discussing processes of learning and becoming in explicitly defined international/transnational/intercultural contexts” (p. 107). After introducing the concept, Tarc argues for ways in which international education can be educated through this theoretical frame. He contends that “cosmopolitan literacies represents an intervention in current, dominant discourses of international education – a way of more fully acknowledging and responding to the complexities of learning and subjectivity and the challenges for pedagogy inherent to this expanding and morphing enterprise under globalization” (p. 107)

Throughout the text, Tarc’s examples and data demonstrate his principal concern with individuals from the West – namely white, middle-class North Americans – who study, volunteer or teach in the global South. Yet many North American university students and teachers opt for an experience where power and status dynamics are
minimized, or perhaps less obvious, such as locations in the UK, Europe, and Australia. And many North American university students may not identify with these dominant race and class categories. Developing the “cosmopolitan literacies” for all students is equally important, yet the challenges for educators to critically engage the diversity of students within their classrooms are not adequately addressed. Tarc’s text would benefit by incorporating some Western examples and addressing not only broad differences between countries, but also difference within countries.

As aforementioned, I think the attempt to reach a broad audience limits this book’s potential impact and the vague, uninspired title fails to capture Tarc’s critical perspective. The subtitle, Engaging the Pedagogic, makes slight reference to Tarc’s aim to “educate international education.” Tarc is also clearly most interested in individuals who are seeking opportunities to teach internationally, not solely study, volunteer or learn in an international/trans-local context. This crucial distinction has important pedagogic implications for not only how we as educators critically engage with our students pre-departure, but also how our students are able to apply these insights within their future classrooms and schools. I believe Tarc just scratches the surface with this humble contribution, and this text provokes the need for further investigation and dialogue on international education specifically with regards to teaching internationally.

Overall, this book has helped me to push my thinking and reflect upon the teaching and learning opportunities I create for my students in preparation for their international student teaching experiences. Tarc succeeds at highlighting key tensions in the field that merit critical examination and he provides concrete yet non-prescriptive approaches for educators to engage pedagogically with the international education movement. There are narratives, metaphors, theories, and examples I can draw from in this text to incorporate in my classroom. I anticipate with excitement Tarc’s future publications that provide a more thorough analysis and presentation of Western teachers and their experiences teaching internationally. Tarc’s thoughtfulness and reflexivity are apparent in his writing, and I am optimistic that he has the potential for ground-
breaking work on teacher identity formation in global contexts.

About the Reviewer

Maggie Remstad is a PhD candidate in Education Policy Studies at Indiana University. Her research interests include teacher education, intercultural and multicultural education, and education for democratic citizenship and human rights in the Americas. She is currently working on her dissertation which is a qualitative case study of human rights education and teacher in-service professional development in rural Quechua-speaking communities of Peru. She is an associate instructor for the Global Gateway for Teachers program, which provides opportunities for teacher education candidates to student teach in 18 countries, Chicago Public Schools, and the Navajo Nation.