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The economy of publications and citations in educational research: What about the “Anglophone bias”?

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Abstract

In this piece, we argue that an economy of publication and citations has emerged that not only changes the notion of what is deemed quality in educational research, but also changes the incentives of us as researchers. With pressure on publishing in “international” journals, education researchers are increasingly pushed to publish their research in the article format, and for many, in their second or third language (English). Additionally, we are to direct the research to an audience that might not at all be interested or knowledgeable about the context under scrutiny. With such pressure to publish in English language journals, the question of *who* is allowed to publish and *who* is cited is of paramount significance. Based on our own empirical research on the adult educational research field as well as other bibliometric research, we propose that there is an “Anglophone” bias in educational research. We end with a discussion on the implications of the current trend to publish in indexed English language journals and suggest that “Anglophone” as well as non-Anglophone scholars need to start citing other scholars than those from the dominating “Anglophone” countries in order to further enhance knowledge and debate within education. The ultimate irony of the developments described in this piece is that the researchers from non-anglophone countries actively engage in a publication game that underscores their own subordination.

Governing academia by numbers

Today, we are witnessing major changes in academia within a framework of a neoliberal discourse on how to govern and shape the university, university managers, teachers and students (Fejes, 2016). New Public Management (NPM) is infiltrating academic life at all levels (cf. Schimank, 2005; Deem, 2004; Gogolon, Åström and Hansen, 2014), externally as well as internally, providing a new language and new techniques for governing. Through goal-oriented governance, universities in Europe and beyond are asked to deliver research and teaching of “high quality” but are left to decide themselves how to best deliver such “quality”. An “audit society” (Power, 1997) emerges, where techniques are deployed externally as well as internally to assess if universities, departments, research groups and individual academics deliver the quality asked for. Techniques deployed for measurement and comparison often draw on quantified data, where things that might not be possible to quantify are nevertheless quantified, a development similar to what Rose (1991) once described as “governing by numbers”.

Governing by numbers operates, for example, through current systems for distributing research funding and/or assessing research quality, e.g. in Sweden, the UK and elsewhere (see e.g. Brown, 2014; Gogolin et.al., 2014; Martin, 2011; Ministry of Education, 2007). Quantitative measures are used for determining excellence in research, such as the number of papers researchers publish in certain kinds of format (articles) in a particular language (English being the most important one), the extent to which they publish in certain journals (those indexed in databases such as the web of science) and how often articles published in these journals are cited (see Fejes & Nylander, 2014; Gogolin et.al., 2014; Larsson, 2009, 2010). Such numbers are also used within universities by rectors and managers when ranking departments and individual scholars, and they affect the way academics behave in terms of

what, where and how to publish (Brown, 2014; Fejes and Nylander, 2014). Such system is part of the emergence of an economy of publication and citations (Larsson, 2009; 2010) where politicians and university administrations tie the distribution of material and scholarly assets (money as well as merit) immediately to the symbolic tokens of publications and citations. When research funding, promotions, and career trajectories become more dependent on the extent and impact of published papers, issues of what ‘counts’ and what becomes recognized as scholarly content in articles are underscored. It also leads to the question of who is allowed to enter those arenas that ‘count’, questions that are explored in their own academic subfields such as scientometrics and bibliometrics.

At the time the bibliometrician de Solla Price (1965; 1975) wrote his seminal analyses of the citation and publication practices within academia, these were – quite rightfully we think – treated as signs of internal recognition among scientific colleagues and peers. With the emergence of standardized evaluation schemes tied to indexed registries of citations and publications, these symbolic forms of recognition are increasingly used as external tools to manage and hierarchically order scientific production. One way to understand the introduction, dissemination and enactment of these standardized evaluation schemes across much of the higher education landscape in the western world is to see them as examples of a broader shift towards “public policy instrumentation” (Lascoumes and Le Gales, 2007) where different forms of quantification “replace trust in persons with trust in numbers” (Espeland and Sauder, 2016: 21). Contrary to the perceived objectivity, neutrality and impartiality of these kinds of standardized evaluation systems might then be conceived as governance strategies and steering devices aimed at exerting control and steering researchers’ behaviour through career incentives and remuneration.

Changing behaviour among educational researchers

The shift towards an economy of publications and citations contains a series of questionable assumptions. One of its core assumptions is that the value of research can be estimated fairly by ranking the place in which it is published, as well as how often a publication is cited. Because research funding is distributed partly based on how much you publish in what are construed as top-ranked journals and on how often other articles in those journals cite your articles, the economy is likely to produce a new behaviour among researchers. Publishing in these journals may become more important than publishing in journals that are a better fit for the specific research area. Or, rather than choosing a publication format based on the research question and content or based on the tradition of the scientific field, the rationality behind scientific publications can be skewed towards very short-sighted proxies of ‘what counts’ (see e.g. Hicks, 2013; Ball, 2015; Hasselberg, 2012).

Due to considerable national, regional, and scholarly differences in the history of science, this potential reactivation tactic among scholars is obviously going to look different depending on what they make of this ‘new economy’, what kind of field they are in, and how much autonomy the field has against value criteria enforced by external actors. However, in places where article publication in journals indexed in databases such as the Web of Science or Scopus become the basis for national, regional, or even local evaluation systems of research output and quality, we as researchers are forced to make a choice: either publish in those journals indexed in these databases that “count”, or resist and risk being set-back in relation to more instrumentally-oriented or strategic-minded colleagues. So what happens when we are more or less forced to act strategically, in this particular sense?

For scholars located in Sweden, the only publications that are officially acknowledged in the current system for research evaluation and redistribution of the basic funding for research to universities are articles published in journals indexed in the Web of Science (Ministry of Education, 2007). This means that the format of articles is strongly encouraged a format that, historically, has not been very common in the discipline of *pedagogik* (roughly translating to educational research). Rather, educational research in Sweden has been similar to other humanistic disciplines in that it has been relying heavily on publishing and circulating monographs as well as book chapters in the Swedish language. With the event of this new national system of governing research quality, we can also observe an increase in article publications by Swedish educational scholars. This has, in a way, made educational researchers more akin to most other scholars within Swedish academia since English language has been the most common research language at least since after the Second World War (Salö, 2010). One could easily interpret this development as a process that finally denationalizes Swedish educational research and makes it more global.

However, when taking a closer look at the educational research journals that have qualified to be indexed in Web of science, the indexing database which “count” in the Swedish, quality audit of research, we see that a great majority of the journals are published exclusively in English and predominantly come from a few Anglophone countries, such as the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia¹. For example, there were 216 journals within the field of education indexed in the Web of Science in 2013. These journals were registered in the following way: United Kingdom (81), United States (80), the Netherlands (15)², Spain (8), Australia (7), New Zealand (4), Germany (4), Turkey (3), South Korea (2), South Africa (2), Croatia (2), and one each for the following countries: the Philippines, Italy, Canada, Lithuania, Brazil, Poland, Belgium, and Mexico.³ When the vast majority of indexed journals are published in the Anglophone world, the issue of language becomes a challenge. Out of the 216 journals within the discipline of education that are indexed in the Web of Science, 194 are published in English, and the rest are distributed in the following way linguistically: Spanish (7), Turkish (4), German (3), Croatian (2), multilingual (2), and one each for the following languages: Italian, Spanish/multilingual, Portuguese, and Dutch. Hence this distribution of indexed journals force researchers in countries where only certain publication outputs count, to publish their research in English, a language which is often not their native tongue.

Thus in the new publication game non-Anglophone scholars are potentially in a operational disadvantage in relation to their colleagues with English-speaking as their first language. Even though articles in English has long dominated the publication format in other scientific disciplines (especially natural science and medicine) (see e.g. Salö & Josephson, 2014) without it constituting a problem for researchers one could imagine that advanced language skills are particularly important in academic disciplines where argumentative strength, interpretative depth and rhetorical rigour tend to be more important than, say, scientific discoveries or formal hypothesis testing. With first language advantages, it becomes possible

¹ There is a great geographical bias in terms of publication origin of journals indexed in the web of science, not only within educational research, but within the social sciences and humanities more widely.

² The rather high number of journals published from the Netherlands is due to Elsevier, one of the big journal publishers, being located there. However, scholars located in Anglophone countries, often act as editors and editorial board members in these journals as well.

³ Being registered in one country does not necessarily mean that editors from those countries run the journals.

to more nuanced, as well as more easily express ideas, concepts, and arguments, than is otherwise the case. Furthermore, native English speaking scholars “only” have to publish their research in journals published in their first language, where editors and editorial board members can be assumed to share a linguistic and cultural frame of reference and to know the education system or context which the authors is researching.

When researchers who work within smaller language areas are more or less forced to publish in journals indexed in the Web of Science and Scopus, those journals are assigned the role of a judge in trials that are very distant to them. The gatekeeping position of editors and reviewers can, for instance, be of vital importance to a young PhD-student in Scandinavia, trying their best to finish their thesis in time or a post-doctoral researcher in Poland fighting hard to land a tenured position at their current department. So no matter if these journals aim to be “international” or not, they are construed as international through national standardised systems for research evaluation elsewhere. Granted this status, it is essential to scrutinize these journals in order to identify, on the one hand, who (is allowed to) enter and publish, and on the other, who is seen as worth citing.

Is there an “Anglophone” bias in (adult) education research?

In an ongoing research project on the bibliometrics of adult education research (Fejes and Nylander, 2014; Fejes and Nylander, 2015; Fejes and Nylander, in press; Nylander, Österlund and Fejes, 2016), we have conducted such analyses of adult education journals. Firstly, we engaged in an analysis of who is publishing in three of the more “central” journals in the adult education research field, and secondly we focused on who in these journals are picked up and cited (see Fejes and Nylander, 2014 for an elaboration on the topic). As there are only very few journals in the adult education research field that are indexed in the Web of Science, we used Scopus as our source when building our database. In the first analysis we focused on three journals: *Adult Education Quarterly*, published in the US; *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, published in the UK; and *Studies in Continuing Education*, published in the UK (but created and edited in Australia).

Firstly, we collected all articles in these journals published between 2005 and 2012 (n=425) and identified the geographic location of each first author. Secondly, we extracted from the dataset those 19 articles in each journal (total n=57) that attracted most citations and identified the geographic location of each first author. In doing so, we were able to illustrate the share of all articles assigned to authors from different countries, as well as the proportion of the most highly-cited articles that were assigned to these countries. Our results are presented in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1. Geographical distribution of affiliated first authorship among all articles published and most cited in three adult educational journals, 2005-2012 (from Fejes and Nylander, 2014)

The results in figure 1 illustrate how the vast majority of all articles have a first author from one of the four dominant Anglophone countries: the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, and Australia. However, not all Anglophone countries are part of the pattern of dominance, e.g. former colonies of the British Empire such as New Zealand, South Africa and Botswana. Together, the four dominant countries represent 66% of all published articles. When focusing on the share of most cited articles, we can see how authors from the four mentioned countries have together authored an astonishing 87.8% of the top-cited articles.

In a more recent study (Nylander, Österlund & Fejes, in press) we explore, in greater detail, the dominant players within this research field. Based on a database of all citations in the reference lists of all articles in five journals in the adult learning field during 2006-2014, altogether amounting to more than 33 000 authors and 151 000 citation links, we outline the bibliographies and field positions of the most cited scholars.⁴ The result illustrates how there is a near total absence of highly cited authors from a non-Anglophone location (except key references of scholars from other academic fields, such as Pierre Bourdieu, Michel Foucault, Ulrich Beck or Jürgen Habermas), this despite us including all references, no matter to what kind of publication outlet (books, book chapters, articles, etc).

Our result is similar to those of Åström (2014). Drawing on citation data from 20 education journals indexed in the web of science, between the years 1998-2007, Åström illustrate how 48% of all authors are affiliated to the US, while 39% of the authors are affiliated to Europe.

⁴ Besides the three journals mentioned, we also included Journal of Workplace learning, published in the US and Journal of Education and Work, published in the UK. Both are indexed in Scopus.

Of the European authors, 46% have an affiliation in the UK, thus the US-UK affiliation is in total 66%.

Based on our empirical investigations as shortly summarised above, in combination with previous bibliometrical research on education and adult education (e.g. Larsson, 2009; 2010; Åström, 2014) we can thus begin to build an argument of an overarching “Anglophone” bias in terms of who is publishing in leading educational journals and who is deemed referable⁵.

Discussion

If it is true that there is an Anglophone bias in leading educational journals, why is this the case and what might be the reason for it? However, as we do not know the number of submitted papers and the geographical distribution of scholars we cannot know for sure if scholars from non-Anglophone locations are rejected more often than others. To fully account for the hypothesis of a bias in the decision-making of publications we would need to know who are the authors for all manuscripts *submitted*, their country of origin, as well as the rejection rate.⁶ Yet despite this reservation, we find it reasonable to talk about a bias in terms of what knowledge, from where, is made available to a wider scientific community as well as who is being picked up and cited by others. Knowledge produced in other locations than the Anglophone regions is to a high extent invisible in the wider scientific conversations, either by not being published in these journals in the first place or by not rendering much scholarly attention. To further discuss the Anglophone bias we set forth a few preliminary ideas that might be of importance for the current state of affairs. This list is far from exhaustive and is primarily meant to spark continuing discussion.

Firstly, neo-liberal governing strategies in the academia have not been implemented simultaneously across countries. In fact the emergence of the economy of publication and citations is a quite recent phenomenon, developing first and foremost during the last fifteen years in distant locations such as Scandinavia. Thus, one can speculate if the policy turn toward an economy of publication and citations happened earlier and more forcefully in the Anglophone countries? As the entire landscape of higher education tend to be viewed as a private good (rather than a public good) in Anglophone countries, the rationale behind research publications might have turned earlier towards a “publication game” in countries like the US, UK and Australia (cf. Marginson, 2011, Butler, 2003).

Secondly, one could perhaps assume that many of the gatekeepers to these journals (editorial board members as well as reviewers) are themselves located in Anglophone countries, and has relatively limited knowledge of what is available in specific research areas, other than what is made available to them in the English language. Thus, non-Anglophone authors might choose to cite publications in English, originating in an Anglophone context in order to increase the chance of becoming understood and further on, accepted for publication. Reversely, editors and reviewers might also choose to reject or critique papers that do not cite the body of literature they are knowledgeable about, most likely literature authored by scholars located in Anglophone countries.

⁵ When we speak about Anglophone bias, empirically, it denotes that the author is located at a university in an Anglophone country. Thus, the scholar might originally come from another country. However, institutional location provides access to networks that could be expected to provide advantages within the economy of publication and citations (active using the English language, benefits of putting the institutional name on manuscripts, co-authorship with colleagues at institutions in the same country, probably a higher chance to have colleagues who act as editors or are on editorial boards for the “international” journals).

⁶ Regrettably, this is not data that we have to our disposal.

Thirdly, some journals that, within the emerging economy of publications and citations, is categorised as international, might not themselves construe their role as being international. For example, as we illustrate in one of our studies (Fejes & Nylander, 2014), the *Adult Education Quarterly*, published in the US, is very North American in terms of who is publishing, who is cited, and who is on the editorial board. This journal is also an example of a journal that serves as a publishing forum for nationally bounded communities of teachers, in this case adult educators. Since there is quite a distinctly different discourse on adult education in the US (Fejes & Nylander, 2015), as well there being so many adult education programs at universities and community colleagues in the US, the journal might not really have an ambition to be international. Or, there might be a big enough North American academic community in the field to fill up the four issues published each year. Thus, the journal might be fully functioning as an arena for conversation among North American scholars and adult educators. The odd thing being that the Swedish state has decided to attach such weight to its publication venue, by subsuming the question of research funding to every journal indexed in certain databases.

One could object to all of this that what kind of research is deemed most relevant should be that of the highest quality. If Anglophone educational scholars are more cited than others, might it not simply have to do with them publishing better papers? Though we acknowledge that it is very hard to disentangle what are linguistic advantages from argumentative strength we do not think that is quite that simple. It seems to us that within the neo-liberal regime of governing academia, when forced to publish articles in English speaking indexed journals, scholars have to become strategic in order to get access to these journals. This includes, on the one hand, reading and citing publications in the English language. Editors and reviewers would most likely not know of, or maybe couldn't read any cited reference published in another language, and thus citation to publication from ones own language region might be construed as obsolete, or at least not as 'powerful' as publications in the English language. Taking into account our empirical results, Anglophone scholars author most of the research available in these journals. Thus, if one wish to cite research published in the English language, by scholars from non-anglophone locations, there is a very limited amount of such publications to choose from (in comparison to the number of publications available in English by scholars located in Anglophone locations).

A need for reflexive engagement with the Anglophone bias

We believe that the turn towards English language publications is a positive development, at least to the extent that it allows education researchers in linguistic and geographic peripheries to be plugged into strong academic communities of the Anglophone world and disseminate their research to a much broader audience that would otherwise be the case. Such dissemination might provide opportunities for research collaboration across geographical as well as language barriers. However, the dominance of scholars located in Anglophone countries as editors, on editorial boards, as authors, as well as those authors being picked up and cited to a very high extent compared to authors in other geographical locations, raise several concerns, some of which we have addressed in this piece. The question then is: how can we reflexively engage in order to challenge the Anglophone bias in educational research.⁷ We will end this argumentative piece with two proposals.

⁷ For more elaboration on these issues see Fejes and Nylander, 2014; Fejes and Nylander, 2015; Fejes and Nylander, in press.

Firstly, if there really is an ambition for journals to be “truly” international, there is a need for editors and those responsible for running a journal, to be more inclusive in terms of who is on the editorial boards and who are used as reviewers. In one of our research projects, we quite distinctly identified a heavy Anglophone bias in terms of who are editors and editorial board members (e.g. Fejes and Nylander, 2014).⁸ This would be acceptable if journals, with a heavy bias, are clear in their aims and scopes that they are national or regional journals, rather than international. With such a bias, there is a risk that papers are treated differently depending on the institutional and geographical origins of the author, rather than say the quality of the content or strength of argument. For instance, based on our own experience, we see a problem in being asked by reviewers or editors to contextualise our own educational system and its institutional particularities, and to include “key references” (which are authored by scholars in Anglophone locations), while we find many papers by scholars from the UK and the US who are not required to do similar contextualisation, nor include what we deem to be key references on our home turf that are even available in the English language.

Secondly, there is a need for education scholars to actually really engage with research published by scholars from a range of different countries, not only what is conveniently accessible. To argue that a paper is situated in international research when only scholars from a few “Anglophone” countries are cited is a contradiction in terms. The irony of the developments and patterns illustrated in our own research, as well as by others (e.g. Gogolin et.a., 2014; Åström, 2014) and as argued in this piece is that non-English speakers actively engage in a game that underscores their own subordination. As non-Anglophone authors do not cite each other when entering an English-speaking regime of publications, but rather import the standard references for the Anglophone academic worlds where they now seek recognition, they are ultimately contributing to the further marginalization of their own peripheral positions.

Thus, one may argue, that there is a need for all scholars engaged in publishing in the English language, Anglophone as well as non-Anglophone, to start citing non-Anglophone scholars more. Maybe we should all ask ourselves when citing an Anglophone scholar if we just cite by routine, or if there might be any reference available by non-Anglophone scholars that would be as good or maybe even better to cite. Such reflexive exercise could be one of many that might contribute to an increase in communication across language regions, and thus enhance the quality of debates moving forward.⁹

To exemplify our argument, we could look at our own citation practices, and more specifically the reference list in this piece. Despite us putting forth a critical argument of the Anglophone bias in educational research, we are ourselves contributing to such bias by mostly citing Anglophone scholars. Furthermore, four out of five scholars whose references were suggested to us by our anonymous reviewers is currently working at universities within the Anglophone world. Thus, it can be argued that this piece to a large extent suffers from the same skewed citation practices as it aims to criticise. What is worse, we contend, is that there

⁸ There are of course scholars from non-anglophone locations who act as reviewers for English speaking indexed education journals. However, based on our experience, there is a bias, and we could expect that if having data available, there would be overrepresentation of reviewers located in Anglophone countries.

⁹ We have in this article not engaged in discussions about the even greater bias in terms of authors from, e.g. South America, Africa and Asia, being very marginal in the English speaking journals in the (adult) education field, as compared to North American, Australian and European (see e.g. Arunachalam & Manorama, 1989).

is probably research out there that is of higher relevance to our argument than the publications we have cited. That is, in short, what is troubling us.

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