Globalisation, Societies and Education

Expert interview with Editors Susan Robertson and Roger Dale

Recorded at the Graduate School of Education, University of Bristol on 25th March 2011

1. For researchers or students who have never encountered Globalisation, Societies and Education, what is the journal about in a nutshell?

RD:

It’s interesting from this point of view, nearly 10 years on, looking back to how the journal started. And I can remember very clearly how it arose. I was going to the CIES – Comparative and International Education Society – Conference in Washington, in the airport I bumped into Graham [Hobbs, of Routledge/Taylor & Francis], who I’d known when I was on Sociology of Education Abstracts, and we shared a taxi together, and in the taxi between Washington airport and the conference hotel we had already begun to flesh out what a journal of this kind, with this kind of coverage, would look like. And we were both quite enthusiastic about it. And then it went through the usual development stages, and it was taken up really quite rapidly because there was a recognition that people were interested in this phenomenon of globalisation and how it might affect education. One of the things that’s really quite striking, even in such a short time as 10 years, is how that public conception of what globalisation is has changed, and it’s that public conception of globalisation in essence that we were trying to deepen and strengthen and make more accurate. But 10 years ago if you’d said “globalisation”, somebody might have said to you, “McDonalds”. I suspect now they’d say, “global warming”, or something of that kind – a quite different register, because some of those things that were originally thought of as problematic, are now overtaken by conceptions of political globalisation, as well as ecological globalisation. One of the things where I think the journal does have a unique position is to offer ways of better understanding, offer a platform for a better understanding and a deeper understanding of what’s involved in issues of globalisation, very broadly conceived, and education pretty broadly conceived.

SR:

I’d like to come in here and say that, looking at that link between globalisation and education, quite often those working on the education sector will invoke globalisation and not really look at the relationship between those two phenomena. In other words, to some extent, globalisation is being constructed through education projects that maybe start in one location, they might regionalise, but they also may move out into global space. And we can think of things like branch campuses, or we can look at families who have children who are globally mobile, purchasing education in other parts of the world. So while globalisation is being constructed by education, those global actors, for example international actors or regional actors, also have quite a central role in terms of reconfiguring education so that it’s not the same kind of thing that we’re looking at now that we might have conceived of, let’s say 20 years ago.

RD:
One of the aims of the journal is to show both the extensity and the intensity of globalisation in its relationship to education. So we find it not at all strange to have a single Special Issue on education in Nepal, and how that has changed [educational landscapes] totally in a small and remote country. We can see something about the nature and extent of globalisation and its relationship with education as much by examining what’s happening there, as what’s happening in Newark, New Jersey.

SR:

Two other things that I think the journal has that is quite important as an aim. One is that it tries not just to speak to those people who identify as educationalists, people who classically might be in education departments and so on. Education increasingly is of concern to a range of other disciplines or fields, like geography, sociology or political science. And, I think successfully, the journal has carried content from writers who might see themselves as political scientists. Someone like Kanishka Jayasuriya, who was the Special Editor with myself, looking at what we called at the time [new] regulatory regionalisms. He’s a political scientist, but very interested in looking at the politics of education and the way in which region-building is part of a broader political process.

So the journal is seeking to promote both a multi-disciplinary authorship, and also a multi-disciplinary perspective. We are really trying to encourage writers that write for us to think with the tools of social science and beyond, rather than the tools of one disciplinary field. And that’s in part because I think we would argue that the complexities of what we’re looking at – societies, very complex; globalisation as a process which is both paradoxically interconnected, fragmenting, it is producing new inequalities and so on – requires not just a single lens but a multi-disciplinary lens. Much of the social sciences are complex, and we have tried to use something like the interviews with, to begin with, Robert Cox who is a leading international relations writer, researcher, academic. We invited him to give the first interview with us, as a way of actually kind of laying down the range that would be important for writers thinking about writing for our journal. We also interviewed Boaventura de Sousa Santos, a legal sociologist, and like Robert Cox, has written extensively on processes of globalisation and societies more generally – again as a kind of framing, as an agenda for this particular journal. And I think we’ve been relatively successful in that. I think that if we look at who even notes the success of the journal, someone like James Mittelman who is a major political scientist noted the significance of this particular journal for contributing to the field of globalisation studies in general, of which studies on education are an important part.

2. What do you think are the most contentious issues in contemporary debate and research in education which your journal seeks to address?

RD:

We can distinguish, I think, between issues and approaches. I think there are a number of issues that are very clearly developing and global economic crisis is clearly one of them. But I think also what we want to register – and I would like to think we may have contributed to a bit – is a maturing of the understanding of globalisation academically and publicly. When we started, one of the things that provoked us into doing this was that we got fed up with reading articles that said “Globalisation
“...”, “Globalisation and education”, and it just explained education by reference to something called globalisation. So globalisation then became an answer to almost any question of educational change: Why is this happening now in education when it didn’t before? It’s happening because of globalisation...”. And it’s that kind of thing that we were really keen to overcome.

SR:

We would want to encourage authors writing for us to really look at which actors, which projects, which horizons of action, the relationships to education, how is education itself understood, what are the changing social relations that are then emerging as a consequence? In terms of contentious issues, I think there are clearly growing contentious issues that need to be addressed. We’ve covered some of them, I think, in our journal. Looking at education as an area of trade was hugely controversial. We published a Special Issue that I think still continues to be, as an issue, a touchstone for those writing on the General Agreement on Trade in Services. We were to some extent able to influence some broader debate. The WTO has run into trouble with negotiating those trade agreements [particularly in education]. And not to say that the actors that are involved, looking to broker trade in education services, have simply disappeared. I think what they’re doing raises quite important challenges for us as a journal to try and trace where the next moves are actually being made, as education clearly is under a great deal of pressure as a private commodity for profit firms. They’re the fastest growing sector in the United States for example, in the Higher Education sector, and I think they represent about one-tenth of the sector.

RD:

One continuing contentious issue is the role of national governments in education. Do national governments now control their education system? That kind of question. Now, that wouldn’t have been an issue very much I think 10 years ago, nowhere near such an issue as it is now. But now I think there is a recognition, certainly in Europe, that we have to recognise the possibility, the likelihood, that nation states don’t necessarily have total control of their education policy. I think that’s come about through an increasing awareness of the impact of mechanisms like PISA and, especially in Higher Education, league tables. They’ve helped the recognition that education is not something that is to be explained solely in terms of individual and separate national cultures. And so we start to look at what else there is, and I think it’s developing the conception of what else there is without saying that that also controls everything. It’s that kind of tension that we want to develop, and I think also there’s the idea that we would like to demonstrate different ways in which globalisation might be related to education – not as something external, it’s not an external ‘out there’ that affects the ‘in there’, but in many ways it is in there, globalisation is in the national, not outside the national.

SR:

We published a manifesto from Orlando Fals Borda, who wrote to us and challenged us to think about the way in which globalisation theory was largely Western theory – largely Western writers and writing from the North. The challenge then was, to us, to try and open up debate, to think about not only inviting in so-called writers from the South, and to some extent the invitation that was accepted to talk with Boaventura de Sousa Santos, who I think does also try and speak to some extent for the South. It does raise questions I think theoretically the kinds of theoretical tools that
we use. I think that’s going to become an emerging issue, particularly with China. Some of our students for example, are trying to look at and make sense of China, using theoretical tools that have largely been developed in the West. So for example the state, how do we think about the state in China? Do we use state theory that’s emerged in the West when we’ve actually got a very different kind of state in China? I think the work that the journal could do then, would be to problematize those things but also to invite contributions, new writers to contribute to enriching those debates.

3. Who do you feel are your readership, your core audience?

RD:

I think they are people who we are talking to. We’re talking to people who have some understanding of the importance of the relationships between globalisation and education, and would like some different views on them. They are people who are eager to understand more clearly what’s involved around crucial issues. For instance it seems to me that within areas like teacher education, over the last 10 years, I would say now probably it’s very difficult to talk to teacher education students without having something to say about globalisation, apart from the fact that it’s there, and it’s McDonald’s and whatever. And I think that’s one of the things we want to do. We want to inform a series of publics, a student public, an academic public, a concerned public. And one of things that we try to do through the journal is to offer something that this core audience can’t access easily in another place.

SR:

But that core audience I see as – and maybe it’s a strength and a weakness to some extent – broadly within the social sciences, and not specifically only those who might self-identify as in either pedagogical or teacher education or graduate schools of education. I think we do know that our audience, our readership does come from across the social sciences. We know that because of the kinds of contributions we get. We’ve published very interesting pieces from leading sociologists like Gregor McLennan and Tom Osborne; we’ve published pieces on global education from writers like Mark Boyer, a political scientist. I guess the weakness to some extent is that you become much more broadly dispersed, but there’s always a trade-off in these kinds of things anyway.

4. What do you look for when considering articles and submissions?

RD:

I always start off answering questions like this when students say “how do you know what makes it good?” [by saying] you don’t know what makes it good. There’s a story of Anthony Powell [author] of A Dance to the Music of Time, who had spent a long time as a publisher’s reader, and he said to him “How do you spot a good manuscript from a bad one?” and he said “It’s so much easier to tell you what’s wrong with it than to tell you what’s right with it”. And I think in some ways that is actually a useful and not an evasive response. To take an example, we have coming up shortly a Special Issue on the Political Economy of Global Citizenship Education. The key point there is the
“Political Economy of”. If we’d kept it to “Global Citizenship Education” we would have got a series, I suspect, of manifestos for good global citizenship education. That’s not what we’re talking about. We’re not trying to normatively change the curriculum in any particular area. We are at a different kind of level saying: what are the attempts and where did they come from? Why would people now start, all over the world, talking about global citizenship education? So, not [just] what makes it good, but what makes it important or significant. And the other kind of thing that we avoid is the stuff that is really just ‘here we have globalisation, here we have the outcome, here we have a change in a national education system, the two coincided in time, therefore globalisation caused these changes’. Those sorts of articles tend not to be accepted. More generally I think what we would advise people to do is to read what’s in the journal and see if they can, and they won’t always be able to because those differences might not always be there, but to see how what’s in the journal differs from what’s in other journals in the same area. One of the things is the very wide conception of education that’s involved. Just to think of a couple of examples of the topics that we’ve looked at - the placement of immigrant pharmacists in Canada, or the training of maritime marine officers. That was absolutely fascinating, because it’s interesting to see how a particular industrial sector is industrialising. And in response to this it turns out, fascinatingly, that the education of merchant navy officers is organised by two global firms. Now that, I think, is an absolutely fascinating insight into the changing relationships between globalisation and education, but it’s not one that you would find in many other places, because it didn’t fit.

SR:

I was going to comment on what makes a good article. A good article does try to worry about what it is that the journal is trying to worry about. In other words to take seriously one or more of those relationships between globalisation, education and societies, and add value, interrogate that through the particular kinds of topics or problems that are being addressed. What also does make it good is bringing interesting theoretical perspectives to particular kinds of problems, and being able to craft an argument and hold that argument in a substantive way over the course of the article. But I think it’s also having some kind of confidence and a sense that you’ve enjoyed the writing process as well, and they’re very difficult and quite nebulous things to pin down. Perhaps if we looked at what are the more common mistakes, which is one of the issues to some extent Roger was talking about, you can see what’s good by what’s bad as it were. There’s a number of common things that we see. One is completely forgetting to tell us anything about the ‘how’, the methodology, how the study was conducted or even indeed when. So we might not know that the data was collected in 2003, and perhaps it’s now 2010. And that may not matter, but in some cases it may well matter. The other – this is very common to many forms of writing – is to just assume everyone understands the specificities of your context. It’s not that you need to write endless amounts about this, but giving the reader enough sense of the context, that might include the context around a sector, so not making assumptions that everyone understands the obvious relationship there might be between particular kinds of organisations in that sector. We have a readership that is global, we know our readers come from all parts of the world.

RD:

One thing that strikes me is that if you say “What’s the ‘wow factor’?”, the ‘wow factor’ is a recognition and a revelation of a relationship between globalisation and education that we hadn’t
thought of before, that extends the argument. When you see one of those, and there haven’t been many of those, then that’s fantastic.

5. What are your aspirations for the future of the journal?

SR:

Well it’s very nice to have arrived at the 10 year point, and that happens so quickly that you can imagine that it’ll be 20 years and we’re saying what, at the point of 20 years, are the aspirations for the future of the journal. We would like to see that the kind of writing in the journal has been a very significant resource for framing debates. And I’m thinking for the kind of writing that Phil Brown and Hugh Lauder did for us called Problematising the Magnet Economy [The Myth of the Magnet Economy]. So the aspirations then for the future of the journal I think, is that it would continue to extend its readership, but that it would continue to be ambitious for this kind of form of inquiry. We do know the global is changing, we know societies are changing, we know that there are new developments like emerging regionalisms that will be very important that we watch. I think we’d like to think that we would, as an aspiration, perhaps have more writers writing for us from different parts of the world.

RD:

I think there’s a real irony actually in thinking about aspirations for the future of a journal like this, because the possible aspirations for the future of a journal like this are increasingly framed and limited by the globalisation of the publishing industry. So we really have a tension with people who are saying, ‘We’d like to send you an article, but it doesn’t count for my promotion if you’re not in the SSCI’. And that becomes a real problem, because we don’t enjoy not being able to have those things and we recognise these tie-ups, and indeed we could very well do a Special Issue on them. But I think it’s something that we have to think about because there’s a trade-off there between, do you have greater or lesser control over your aspirations, in or outside the Web of Science and so on. So I think that’s really an important issue that we have to really think through very carefully.

6. What educational and/or policy developments do you feel have particularly shaped the journal and its content in recent years?

SR:

I think Higher Education has been a big topic area for us, and there’s so much going on in that sector – transborder mobility, league tables which have become very important since 2003 and increasingly important. We’ve had quite a strong interest in the Asian region. One of our board members, Professor Mok Ka-Ho, he has been instrumental in ensuring that we’ve actually got not just Special Issues but important commentary on those kinds of areas.
RD:

One of the things that affects the journal a great deal but isn’t explicitly reflected in the content, was 9/11. That changed the whole thing about what might count as globalisation of education and why you would want to do it. And it set up at a political level, it had a number of waves, sort of simultaneous waves towards – and we get this reflected I think in the regionalism stuff that we focussed on – both that groups of countries want to huddle together for warmth and that they expect and assume that they will find some sources of that warmth, that collective warmth, in education. I think that’s been a constant theme that has underlain quite a lot of the material that has been published through the journal. And I think we may find similar kinds of ripples, unpredictable ripples at the moment, running out of the response to the crisis, which is I think by no means yet complete.

7. How do you see the studies of globalisation and its effects on education developing in the future? Are there any particular questions and/or issues which you feel will come to the forefront for researchers, academics and practitioners?

RD:

It seems increasingly, some of them will involve their own jobs. And so I think we can probably expect an even greater number of navel-gazing submissions from academics, most of which we don’t publish because there’s a ready audience in Higher Education studies journals where most of those go. I think we can expect a lot more of that, but we can expect also more delayed ripples of the crisis as it works through, and it’s very, very interesting to see what’s happening now in North Africa – will that be contained? The interesting thing is - and that’s what makes the education part of it so interesting and gives the journal I think an edge over politics and international relations journals – is that education is always pulled into the solution to these things. Whatever they mean by it, they say ‘we’ll have to change the education system, the problem is the education system, and if we can do that, then long term we can do this’. So we will continue to see education invoked as a solution to national and international and subnational and institutional crises but in very different ways, as the ripples of the crisis and as the ripples of things like North Africa continue to extend.

SR:

I thought it might be tempting to assume that we’ll move back to a stage of renationalisation or the assertion of the national as the primary scale and lens through which a social life is contained, and I don’t think that will be the case. One of the effects of digital technologies in particular has been that we are much more interconnected. Even if there’s more of a focus on the national as a container, I think to some extent the genie is out of the bottle in terms of the possibilities that digital technologies give you as modes of communication, as modes of interaction. So in other words, what I’m really saying is that if we understand the global, really, as also a horizon of action, then I think there have been all kinds of possibilities that have emerged, and will continue to stay there. So if we’re looking at, let’s say, important issues for research, increasingly there’s a view that you can’t do that from research teams that are just located in a national context, and that the solutions will come through transnational collaborations, and we’re currently involved in initiatives trying to understand
better how you would actually undertake collaborations for example across national borders and institutional borders and so on. In picking up on what Roger said, the economic crisis, there will be very likely an attempt to think in more creative ways about pooling resources from different sites into a project that will have forms of spacial extension, if we want to talk about it that way. So while I think that the global itself will change, I don’t think the global as a horizon of action will alter. It might take new kinds of forms, but my sense is that it’s here to stay and that will make the journal I think over the next 10 years a particularly interesting place to then look at the kinds of forms that those, the global, actually takes.

8. Looking to the future, which countries or world regions do you feel will feature ever more prominently as areas of study in the journal?

SR:

I think the obvious answer to that is China, but perhaps the less obvious one is the collaborations, for instance between China and Africa, and we’re aware of research coming along in that direction, so the new kinds of relationships that are emerging. For instance, we are aware that Brazil and its Higher Education policy has funded three new kinds of universities, and one of them is particularly interesting, and that is a university that includes all of the Lusophone countries, so this will be Brazil, Mozambique, Angola and it will go right through to East Timor. Now, I think those new kinds of initiatives, where countries with a similar language are connecting themselves together and developing very interesting collaborations. If you take Malaysia for instance, it’s itself linking up with bits of the Islamic world, into Botswana and so on. So I think it’s tempting to say India and China, and of course they will be the big players and we’ll be wanting to look at that. But I think what our journal will also want to do is to go beyond the obvious. So again, we will be publishing in our journal some of these kinds of emerging interconnections that I think add a very interesting layer of complexity to globalisation, societies and education.

RD:

On that last point, I think one of the things that’s changing, and again this goes back to the start of the journal and a bit further, is that the implicit relationship between globalisation and national education systems has historically been ‘this will be another form of imperialism or colonialism’ and I think Susan has suggested is that it won’t. That there may be parallel developments with for instance China in Africa or Brazil in East Timor but they are not the same kind of imperial relationships or colonial relationships as have previously underpinned and informed relationships between Western nations and the remainder of the world, so I think that’s really going to change a great deal. It’s both which countries have become more prominent and in what kind of relationship and I hope we can get some stuff on that.

SR:

We can also see as emerging regions in education being a crucial mechanism to construct these regions, so the South East Asia region now for the first time, coming together looking at ways in which it can recognise qualifications, promoting mobility programmes, to a large extent looking at the European project and the European higher education areas and the Bologna process and the
success of that and taking up those instruments to construct a region in the South East Asia area. That’s not the only one.

9. Which issues or topics in the journal in recent years have been particularly successful or satisfying?

SR:

We did the Special Issue on trade in education services, we’ve done a fantastically interesting issue edited by one of our core editors, Jane Kenway, taking the work of Arjun Appadurai who’s one of the world’s leading anthropologists and commentators on globalisation. It was around how do we do research in a global world, and Appadurai had put out a fairly provocative piece talking about grassroots globalisation. And the different writers in that Special Issue all had the occasion to go into a workshop with Appadurai, and then to write a 4-5000-word piece contribution that engaged with that topic. I think it’s satisfying because the format is an interesting one: a lead piece and then pieces that were perhaps 4000 words, so it’s not the typical 7500-8000 words. I think the other one that I think was a really interesting one was a long piece by Steven Klee who’s been a long-time researcher and commentator on the World Bank and World Bank policies. He did a major review of the Bank’s policies over a period of time, and we then invited key people like Steve Heyneman, who’d worked in the World Bank, and Annie Vinokur, a French [Marxist] economist, who also has worked on development - they came and generated a response. But we also had one of our Consulting Editors have a group of doctoral students all write a 1000-word contribution, and they drew that together into a conversation. So I think that was satisfying because here we have very significant writers in the field going into conversation with early career researchers, and on very important topics that would concern not just fairly seasoned researchers, but also emerging researchers. And that’s been particularly well-received. So perhaps I’m saying also something about format. Sometimes a break in format is enough to fire up the imagination in interesting kinds of ways, but also to think about topics that really do need some digging into, digging around, challenging colleagues to begin to take their students and take them forward with them on a journey, or to really interrogate a particular issue.

RD:

Yes, I think I agree with all that. Those are the sorts of things that you mightn’t have expected to find in another journal, and I think the regionalism one also. The other thing that I would add to that list is the interview with Santos, because I think that’s become one of the places where his work becomes most immediately accessible and I think it’s very significant work.

10. Are there any significant events on the academic calendar that you see being of strategic importance to Globalisation, Societies and Education?

SR:
I think quite obviously the Comparative and International Education Society conference in North America more immediately. I would say though - and maybe this journal hasn’t had a presence there but I think it should - is the AAG meeting, American Association of Geographers. We’ve got the next Special Issue edited by a geographer, Johanna Waters and sociologist Rachel Brooks. But I think this journal could have potentially a presence in those kinds of forums.

RD:

I don’t how much we can say about the relationship we are developing with the Globalisation and Education Special Interest Group of the American Comparative and International Education Society, which is the biggest and most prominent in the world. But I think that that could be a very fruitful relationship in both directions, because it enables them to extend in ways that they’d like to, and it enables us a slightly more formalised relationship with people in the field.