

Academics' International Teaching Journeys: Personal Narratives of Transitions in Higher Education

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Draft Foreword

Since Sheila Trahar's groundbreaking volume on Narrative Learning (2006) the comparative education literature has been enriched by various forms of narrative, including auto-ethnography, making it possible for students and scholars to engage with the individual experience undergirding the macro sociological shifts in educational policy and structure that have fostered an increasing isomorphism. In the current era of globalization, attention has been given to processes of deterritorialization and the emergence of common policyscapes in diverse contexts. (Carney, 2009) In the higher education arena, these result from the widespread embrace of global ranking systems for universities, benchmarked by the "global research university," and the imposition of research assessment exercises with a strong corporate flavor. This kind of homogenization makes it ever more important to hear the diverse voices of faculty members.

While higher learning institutions had an international orientation in the composition of their faculty as early as Nalanda in ancient India and Bologna in medieval Europe, there is probably no historical parallel to the current extent of faculty mobility across nations and regions. This volume brings together the narratives of ten scholars, eight of them women, who share with the reader intense and profound reflections on the experience of moving from one university context to another, in most cases to the United Kingdom from diverse countries around the world – Guyana, Trinidad, Taiwan, Sri Lanka, Poland, Cameroon and USA. Also there are two cases of moves from UK to the Caribbean and to Australia. Theoretical frames such as rhythm analysis, social identity, threshold liminality and cultural habitus make possible in-depth reflection on the highly diverse epistemological and pedagogical underpinnings of global higher education.

Several things delighted me in reading these impassioned accounts. One was the sense of individual persona and scholarly identity that had taken shape in the diverse contexts where each author had been educated. Another was the intense reflection on the contrasting experiences of student teacher relations and teaching methods in two contexts. The search for an approach to teaching that is both authentic and effective in the new context is one of the common threads that runs through most chapters. Thus any reader who is concerned about how the teaching function of universities will survive and flourish under the pressures of global ranking systems and ever more widely adopted research assessment exercises will find this volume heartening to read.

Chapter Five, for example, begins with a moving depiction of the teaching and learning of poetry accompanied by piano and drums in a Sri Lankan context while Chapter Eight describes the warm, respectful and harmonious relationship between students and teachers in Taiwan's Confucian context. Virtually every chapter devotes attention to issues of pedagogy, student learning and the evaluation of teaching. This is set against the increasing pressure imposed by an approach to evaluating research that counts products and measures so-called "productivity" rather than looking at either the quality of thought and potential for societal benefit in research projects or the ways in which research may serve to inform and enrich teaching.

Many of the authors are concerned about the extreme individualism and cut-throat competition that shapes the pressured lives of academics in the UK and Australia, contrasting this to the greater sense of commitment to the collective good experienced in their original contexts. Even as they adapt in self-consciously reflective ways to a new and different context, appreciating some aspects of the more student-centric pedagogy and transparent approaches to student evaluation, they seek to bring cultural enrichment from their own contexts and develop a teaching approach that is authentic to their intercultural journey. One describes her identity as "always fluid, co-constructed and continuously reconstructed" with a sense of "hybridity and 'double-consciousness'."

These narratives give hope for a university of the future that values the richness and diversity of a cosmopolitan cohort of teaching faculty, deeply committed to all-round student development and to forms of research that can be incorporated within the pedagogical process. While the global research university, with its German American roots, has much to offer, my personal hope is for a global revival of the normal university, which emerged in post-revolution France and reverberated across East Asia, as “shihan daigaku” in Japan, “shifan daxue” in China. “Shifan,” meaning “the teacher as a model,” embodies Confucian values that emphasize accountability to society, close and mutually respectful teacher student relations and an integrated and morally explicit approach to knowledge development. This was the first higher education open to women in 19th century Europe and East Asia, and it is a model that has persisted in the context of Greater China, with five leading normal universities in the Mainland and one in Taiwan. It may be just one of the future models capable of challenging the dominance of the global research university and bringing back the legacy of civilizations other than the European.

Let me close this preface with a word of thanks to each of the chapter authors, for the candour, sensitivity and sophistication of their narratives, and for the ways in which they are enriching and diversifying the teaching contexts in which they find themselves. I believe their stories will be an inspiration to many readers and give hope for the future as the university re-invents itself in response to changing local and global contexts.

References

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