



Teaching through diversity

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One of the most significant difficulties that teachers often face is the conduct of their duties within the confines of a culture other than their own. Under such circumstances, one usually has to navigate the subtleties of language, culture, and the adverse reactions from those who cannot comprehend the content you are trying to present. This is something that I have had to face throughout my entire teaching career. Moving from the classrooms of Singapore as a full time teaching assistant at the National University to a private university in Malaysia and finally to Tamkang here in Taiwan, my entire teaching journey has been one marked by diversity and variety. While the years spent moving back and forth in these different environments has proved to be challenging, they have nonetheless given me the richest of experiences throughout my entire teaching career. I have learned to adapt, roll with the dice, and have emerged much more experienced in addressing my pedagogical strategies and goals.

The very thing which has allowed me to do this has been to embrace the differences. To do this, I reflect on my experiences growing up in Malaysia's multicultural environment. As a child and as a student, my world view was often coloured by my native countries taste, smell and sight. Made up of many cultures and religions, this grand Malaysian mixture has become the foundation

of who I am and, therefore, informs my worldview and how I teach. I only realised this during my time in Taiwan when I began my first class several years ago. Having spent years in English language institutions and being immersed in languages that were not Mandarin Chinese, it was initially challenging to deliver my lessons at the speed I am used to. Students, in the beginning, were slightly befuddled, but over time I was able to adjust the speed. As I became more familiar with Mandarin Chinese, I was able to teach and also engage them in Mandarin Chinese after classes. This method proved effective in getting my message across.

Teaching and learning for me as such was a 24/7 venture. This is the nature of the Lanyang environment as our college is set atop a hill ‘far the madding crowd’ . Such a setting brings students and teachers closer together, therefore, making learning so much more intense. As a member of the residential college staff, I was required to spend a large majority of my time on campus to teach and plan out activities for the undergraduates who, like me, were required to remain on campus. This, however, presented several opportunities. The students could have ‘cram school’ sessions with me with after-hours guest speaker sessions or a book club program that I am proud to say is already in its 5th year. Teaching stopped being a formal ‘in class’ activity but now encompassed

my life at the Lanyang campus.

Over the years, I was then given the opportunity to teach courses related to my own research in Southeast Asian studies. This was important for me given my academic training and but also because the region was my home. I then took it on as my own goal to bring Southeast Asia to my students. In the past few years, policies had been put in place to familiarise the Taiwanese public with Southeast Asia. Still, for many, it remained an imaginary backwater, vacillating between stereotypes of palm-fringed beaches, poverty and chaos. What I then did was to make full use of my academic mandate to bring Southeast Asia both into the campus and the classroom. In fact, the classes I taught were not only academic in nature but that they became a way for me to share my own uniquely Southeast Asian perspective with them. I believe that while the students have not exactly become experts in this but at the very least, it is hoped that their exposure to the region through me would spark a sense of curiosity about Southeast Asia. Given the space I was afforded in Lanyang, we also managed to design a program where students could travel to Southeast Asia for internships in various non-governmental organisations. In my years at the Lanyang campus, within its ‘intensive’ learning environment, I have learned to use the many paradoxes of my

upbringing and environment as part of my pedagogical style. This is perhaps something teachers and educators can think more deeply about in terms of how they can engender a deeper form of learning amongst students. For the most part, I do not assume students to be tabula rasa or blank slates but rather as having experiences in and of their own. The question for me is, how can I intersect mine with theirs? In this aspect, I think of teaching not as teaching per se but as a way to share our experiences with others and perhaps even ideals. In that sense, learning ceases to be dull and dreary but rather alive!

