IDEA SHARING:
TEACHING AND LEARNING IN A THAI
UNIVERSITY CLASSROOM: REFLECTIONS ON A
MEMORABLE MONTH

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When I was first invited to teach a short graduate course in the Language and Communications Department at NIDA, I assumed that my subject would be one I had taught before, having to do with metaphor, narrative, or critical thinking. In fact, it involved all three but in an unexpected context, the topic of gender and communications. As a new academic area for me, this topic challenged me to consider my beliefs about knowledge and teaching, particularly when addressing a sensitive issue like gender in a cultural setting that was different from my own. It also enabled me to learn along with my students and reflect on the collaborative nature of both learning and teaching.

My assignment was to teach the second half of graduate topic course, LA800 Language and Communiations, during January, 2004. In order to accommodate my schedule, which permitted only a month's stay in Thailand, class time was doubled, and students had to attend either a full day once a week or two half days twice a week, the latter over the weekend. Such long sessions called for variability in classroom activities and opportunities for students to participate. The schedule also demanded very careful planning for use of time, since, though class sessions were long, a month would go by in a flash. Soon after I learned my topic and schedule, I was sent class lists for the three groups I would be teaching, which ranged from 27 to 42

students. When I summed them up, I would have almost 100 students, more than I was used to teaching in a full academic year across all courses! I also found that they were virtually all women, about 95 percent. So the good news was that I could anticipate that my students would be interested in our topic, perhaps vitally so, and the feminist perspective it evoked. The not-so-good news was that I would have too many students to get to know them individually in so short a time.

Getting ready

I began my preparation the obvious way, by reading. I found books, articles, and websites that informed me about both popularized and more academic perspectives on how gender is involved in communications, primarily from a Western point of view. Reading across these texts, I developed a sense of the many perspectives from which gender might be considered: gender as a socially constructed identity, gender as a biological imperative, gender as an instrument of power and politics, gender as performance, each gender as a separate culture, and gender as a commercial tool. The last, which seemed least salient to me as teacher educator, turned out to be one of the most salient to my students, the majority of whom were involved in the business or service sectors.

Not wanting to privilege only my own values and experiences, I also read about Thai culture and, most usefully, consulted with a Thai doctoral student at Indiana University who was, in fact, also on the faculty at NIDA. She proved enlightening not only in matters of her own culture but in identifying issues that she thought were universal and significant to students at her university. Our collaboration resulted in the focus on representations of gender in popular media, including television, magazines, newspapers, and the Internet.

In this era of global inter-connectedness through media communications, with entrepreneurship and trade at the center, gender easily becomes both a tool for commercial activity and a commodity in itself. As a tool for commercial activity, gender representations often reflect the overwhelming dominance of

Western values in the global marketplace, and this, I thought, might be an issue of importance to students in Thailand, as their society geared up for the changes and challenges of the twenty-first century. At the same time, I wanted to address presumed gender differences in communication styles and the problematic entanglement of gender and social/political attitudes that become incorporated into a culture's common beliefs. The issues of stereotyping and political inequities were important in this regard and, in my judgment, also universal.

The curriculum and classroom dynamics

The curriculum that emerged from these considerations and research, scaled down to fit into a four-week session with a total of 24 hours of instruction for each section of the course, and was organized around these issues:

What are "gender" and "communication," both in general and in terms of Thai culture? How do these concepts interact?

How do popular media project gender images, and what effects do these gender images have on the thinking and behavior of individuals?

What are some major issues regarding Thai gender construction and communications, and how is gender used to communicate Thai culture to the rest of the world?

What roles does gender play in the social and political environment of the university? How do gender-linked communication styles affect academic participation? At this point, I should point out that my reasons for organizing the curriculum around sets of issues was to invite student participation in the construction of knowledge in the course. And because of the bi-cultural nature of these issues, the contributions of my students would be especially crucial in developing knowledge grounded in Thai culture. Thus, from the beginning, I was prepared to invite students to be co-constructors of their own learning and mine. I would organize any graduate course on this principle, and probably at this point in my teaching career couldn't do it any other way. But I understood before ever setting foot in my Thai classroom that the dynamics of this approach might be quite

different from my experiences in the United States.

Being there

And so it was. For one thing, there was the language barrier that made oral participation in dialogue difficult. My students knew English quite well, while I could hardly get out an intelligible "*swasdee ka*" or "*kop kun ka*," but they were not accustomed to exclusively English medium classrooms and were hesitant to speak, as I would be if I had to articulate abstract ideas in any language but my own. Also the classroom, with fixed tables facing a raised dais, fostered a hierarchical relationship between lecturer and students, reinforced by the attitude of veneration toward teachers (much appreciated but also a little uncomfortable) that is part of Thai culture. In the first session, even the regular instructor, who happened to be my own former doctoral student, sat respectfully taking notes.

I devised ways to invite – indeed compel – participation that did not involve talking in front of the whole class. The fixed tables accommodated four students each, so there was a ready-made setup for small group discussion. For individual participation, I had students reflect in writing on issues or answer questions periodically during a presentation and collected these papers at the end of the session. They also formed working groups to carry out the main project, which was to conduct inquiry into the representation of gender, gender roles, and gender values in any form of popular media they choose. Anticipating that these students might not be accustomed to the expectations of a lecturer from the United States, and especially mindful of the shortness of time, I structured activities in many ways: discussion questions in advance for the assigned readings, a detailed list of procedures for carrying out the inquiry project, and modeling of the inquiry process. When the groups were formulating their inquiry topics and questions, I gave them class time to work together, so I could circulate and see how they were doing.

Teacher-student partnership: Collaboration with structure

Indeed, the extent to which I tried to support students' success in the course through structuring and modeling might seem contradictory to my original intent to foster shared construction of knowledge. I was aware of this contradiction even as I led the students through each three-hour session according to the plan I had devised. Perhaps it is not unusual for a teacher to hold the ideal of collaborative learning while exerting considerable control over the use of class time and the procedures of activities, but never before was it so starkly clear to me that I was in fact orchestrating each class session to the fullest extent, making sure that students *received* as much support from me as I could provide. This approach always seemed necessary because of the language challenge, the unfamiliarity of my expectations in this setting, and the compression of time, which gave no margin for students to formulate their own questions and projects.

Nor did the students mind a heavily teacher-controlled classroom. On the contrary, they welcomed it—copied my overheads, followed my models, even took my lecture notes to photocopy during the breaks. These responses seemed reasonable to me and, in an odd way, even collaborative, as students were actively seeking the information on my menu in order to assimilate it into their own learning. As paradoxical as it might seem, I began to perceive that a teacher-directed classroom can be collaborative. Students were not passive, but in the face of a new topic, second language, and teacher from the other side of the planet, they needed a "passive period" to take in, on their own terms, the nature of the discourse in which they would eventually participate. This preference, moreover, is not necessarily due to culturally embedded expectations. It may reflect the cautiousness with which most learners prefer to approach new situations. I also was aware that participation can be silent, and attentive listening to classroom discourse is a form of active involvement.

This flexible approach to participation was, actually, something I had developed long before I came to Thailand, due in part to feedback from international students at my own institution, who were frustrated by their experience in talk-oriented classrooms dominated by native-speaking peers. Not

only did the language barrier slow them down so as to effectively exclude them from the discussion, but often they did not find free-flowing talk conducive to their learning unless there was effective discussion management and monitoring for relevance and quality. In addition, it has always been my own bias to favor written expression. I myself prefer to formulate my thoughts in writing and to have them read rather than heard, due at least in part to my socialization in a print-based academic culture. I can also be easily dominated and silenced by forceful participants even without a language barrier. The downside of this bias, obviously, is that even with electronic tools, written communications limit interactions among participants. However, if groups are too large to allow full participation, rooms are set up only for traditional lecturing, or students are inhibited by language or other background variables, interactions may be limited anyway.

In the case of my Thai classrooms, there was also significant unspoken communication between us, from which I understood that, rather than mutual dialogue from the beginning, they needed me to go first and then they would rise to the occasion, which they did, beautifully, in the final sessions when they presented their inquiry projects to the class. It was then I saw not only how they used the conceptual tools and knowledge-building strategies that had been provided earlier, but how they took over the wheel so to speak and ended our classroom journey at destinations of their choosing.

Apart from mode of communication and procedural directiveness is the question of control of content in what is intended to be a collaborative learning environment. Of course it is common practice for an instructor to determine topics, timetable, readings, assignments, and evaluation criteria before the beginning of a course. In a United States university, this kind of syllabus is not only expected but constitutes a binding contract. The flexibility and sharing come in after the course has begun and are dependent on the degree to which the instructors change to be negotiated in process. Negotiations being two-way, it is necessary for both instructor and students to be willing to undertake them. In the case of my Thai classrooms, I cannot say that there was negotiation, reflecting the flattering but perhaps undeserved trust

that my students put in me, or was it that they were intimidated by the visiting professor whose language they had to accommodate? In place of negotiation, hopefully, there was understanding. I could tell when a reading fell flat or an expectation was unreasonable and changed the syllabus accordingly.

But this point should not be too easily passed over. The truth is that I maintained almost complete control over content in the classroom, and I never felt uncomfortable about it. Teaching a roomful of Thai students is any instructor's dream, because in general they have been socialized to be respectful, appreciative, and conscientious, traits harder to come by in the confrontational environment of many U.S. classrooms. Thai students, at least in my experience, make their teachers feel unfailingly knowledgeable, wise, and eloquent. In this kind of environment, one could easily develop an inflated notion of one's effectiveness and cease to examine one's decisions and actions critically, thereby stunting one's own professional growth. I hasten to add that this outcome would not be the fault of the students but of the instructor's own critical laxity. I was glad when students did ask critical questions, present alternative viewpoints, and share experiences that were novel to me. Over time, I predict, Thai students will become increasingly confident in critical dialogue while retaining their characteristic grace of manner.

What I learned

It was during the marathon of presentations–between seven and nine per class in the last two sessions–that I became highly aware of the idea that a teacher may know what she teaches, but she may not know what students learn. Each presentation was a revelation of how this group brought the members' personal experiences and knowledge to bear on a chosen perspective. Some were mainly interested in commercial aspects of gender in advertising, while others adopted a social justice perspective on the effects of gender representations on women's status and opportunities. A few were full fledged activists, while others were ideologically conservative. In our reversed roles, my students taught me a lot about the topic I had come there to teach them.

Heidegger once said words to the effect that life must be lived forward but it can only understood backwards, and the same is true of teaching. At the end of a course, one realizes what one could have done better, and this understanding is useful only if one has an opportunity to try again. This very insight was the main one I applied also to my students. I should have conducted the inquiry project in such a way that they had time to revise their final papers. I do not say this because they were writing in a second language and needed editorial guidance, though in many cases such guidance would have resulted in a better product. It is in fact my fundamental belief that any kind of feedback is useful only if one has a chance to apply it. Because the papers were turned in on the last day, and I left Thailand literally within hours after receiving them, there was no opportunity for students to make use of the comments I sent them all by e-mail from home. As for the papers themselves with my comments and editing, for reasons of cost, even as I write this reflection they are en route by surface delivery, so there will be a lapse of weeks or months before students have the opportunity to see them, if, indeed, they see them at all.

Were I to give this kind of assignment again even in a very short session, I would have students begin early enough, in fact right at the beginning, so they could hand in drafts for my comments before revising for a final copy. I would not follow the common-sense sequence of introducing concepts, then modeling, and then beginning inquiry. Rather, I would braid all three strands together, so that students were simultaneously learning and conducting their own inquiry from the start. I believe that not only would that approach better support the inquiry-writing process, but being engaged in inquiry would enhance critical understanding of readings and class discussions.

In my imagined revision of the course, I would start by having students tell me what they know and want to know about the topic of the course. As I mentioned, my students were almost all women, and career women at that. Certainly they had had many experiences that sharpened their awareness and raised issues regarding gender and communications. The handful of men, too, finding themselves in a society in which more and more

of their colleagues and supervisors were women, had vital experiences and perspectives to share. I had fallen into the time-old teacher trap of being so concerned about what I was to present that I overlooked the most valuable resources available: the knowledge and experiences of my students. If I had begun with them, I believe, they would have been ready to formulate their inquiry issues the first day. I am also certain that the course would not have been as teacher-centered and controlled as it was but would have been collaborative in a way that was meaningful to all.

Wind beneath my wings

No guest leaves Thailand empty-handed and certainly not empty-hearted. In the last hour, each class had prepared a speech of appreciation and gift that would become a treasured memento of an unforgettable 31 days. Most of all, they thanked me for helping them develop critical thinking and an interest in a topic that might become the focus of future research. And the largest group had prepared a karaoke version of the song "Wind Beneath My Wings," which the whole class sang out while tears ran down my face. The Western concepts of teacher as facilitator, of learning as inquiry, and other constructivist notions, in which I do believe, have certainly brought teachers down to ground level in my own culture, and I had never experienced anything like this concert of appreciation at home. Indeed, in those moments, I was the one soaring, and my students' voices were the wind beneath my wings.

I mention this scene in closing because it seems to me that if Thai learners can retain their great respect for the learning process that is embodied in their attitude toward teachers while experiencing notions of shared learning, peers as resources, and active collaboration, they will have the best of both worlds. Although the discourse of social-constructivist theories of learning may be unfamiliar to Thai students, in fact they are natural practitioners of its principles of dialogical construction of knowledge even when they appear to be in a traditional receptive mode as learners. There is no contradiction between appreciative respect and taking a critical stance. In this era of globalization

and strong winds of outside cultural influences blowing their way, such a stance is more important than ever, and I believe from my experience that Thai students are aware of this importance and more than keen to meet the challenges of their times.

The Author

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