

FROM THE DESK OF ...

Contrasting Context, Systems and Practice Across Global Higher Education

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Contrasting Context, Systems and Practice Across Global Higher Education

As a reflection on global higher education, it may be insightful (given the title of this piece) to sit with me at the sorts of desks I have been working at over recent years. For most of the time I have *had* a desk, but this should not immediately be assumed, as the following paragraphs will show.

Let me begin by telling you about my current desk. As an emeritus professor I now work from home. I write at my desk in a comfortable study. Quite some years ago, with academic prospects looking promising in a permanent and relatively senior academic position, I bought this desk for working at home. Rather expensive at the time, with built-in filing cabinet drawers, it was made by a local craftsman from Jarrah, a native Western Australian hardwood.

Nearing the end of my career, I chose to "retire" early from the distinguished and well-resourced Australian university where I worked. Here I had a large modern, melamine topped, ergonomically designed work surface with accompanying ergonomically approved chair and appropriate designer lighting. My intention in leaving this institution was to share something of what I had learned over the years about higher education and teaching and learning. And my hope was to learn more from other learning environments in other countries, first-hand through a government-to-government volunteering program initiated by the Australian government. Over the past 15 years I have completed assignments of one to two years' duration in Timor Leste, northwest China and central and northern Vietnam.

In Timor Leste, my desk was a very small lightweight structure enclosed in a partitioned cubicle, one of a row of four identical desks, housing colleagues working in similar disciplines. In the tropical climate, no air conditioning, blinds drawn to keep out the heat and glare, it was immediately too hot and too dark to work when the power failed (an almost daily occurrence). While I had the luxury of my own laptop, colleagues worked at old, poorly maintained desktop machines donated by an overseas bank. At the best of times, given the inadequacy of the desk fan, pools of perspiration formed whenever my elbows rested on the desk.

In northwest China, at a newly built remote provincial university, I had no desk. At this institution, I shared a space (whatever was available at the time) in the faculty's work room. The space allowed access to an ageing computer, one of about ten shared around a large table. These gave access to the

institution's computerised administration system and provided "workstations" where one could use common software while storing individual work on USBs. Without any air conditioning, my colleagues and I dressed as appropriately as possible to cope with intense heat in the summer and well below freezing temperatures in the winter.

Two assignments in Vietnam saw, in the first instance, a small somewhat little used meeting room (with large table) made available if ever I should want to sit and work. Colleagues simply didn't sit and work "on-site", except for occasional moments in staff rooms. Most had teaching loads that meant if they were at the university they were in a classroom. My second "desk experience" in Vietnam provided something of a contrast. In this situation, attached to an administrative department that had only a secondary academic function, my desk was basic but adequate. This enjoyably noisy workspace was shared by five other desks and sometimes more colleagues than desks. I should add, it had air conditioning, however to avoid excess use and associated power consumption, the remote control was kept by the head of department, who worked in a different office.

To use a sporting analogy to reflect what appears to be, more and more, a global competition in higher education, our academic working conditions, more broadly our resources and opportunities, do not represent "a level playing field". The image we have of higher education is far removed from the reality of the vast majority of an estimated 25,000 universities around the globe (Hicks, 2016)¹.

Let me turn now to some reflections on what are sometimes termed "Confucian Heritage Culture" institutions, and in particular my recent experiences of teaching and learning in Vietnam and China.

Marginson (2011) identified "four interdependent elements" influenced by Confucian educational traditions giving a "convergence in system design in higher education" in East Asia and Singapore, while noting some exceptions on the part of Vietnam. These four elements were: (1) strong nation-state shaping of structures, funding and priorities; (2) a tendency to universal tertiary participation; (3) "one chance" national examinations that mediate social competition and university hierarchy and focus family commitments to education; and (4) accelerated public investment in research and "world-class" universities. I found that while these elements were evident to varying degrees in both China and Vietnam, the direct influence of Confucian educational traditions was less clear. To talk of a Confucian heritage culture as the context of higher education in both China and Vietnam glosses over the complex and changing influences of assorted philosophies and religions, also

including Buddhism, Daoism, Christianity, Islam and folk religion (Johnson, 2017)². These influences are difficult to disentangle and attribute. They are also living influences in the broader context of Chinese and Vietnamese society.

Marginson (2011) also noted that this model of higher education “has downsides in that it tends to foster social inequities and state interference in executive autonomy and academic creativity” (p. 60). While I agree, I would note the pervasive social inequity in other higher education systems around the globe. I also question the use of the word ‘interference’. In my experience, state involvement in institutional executive functioning and academic creativity was seen as a legitimate and largely accepted engagement—part of the state apparatus.

However, my experience in the classroom was certainly contextualised by the so-called "Confucian Heritage Culture". In 2002, Tweed and Lehman, considering learning in a cultural context, compared Confucian and Socratic approaches. The Confucian approach they saw as one that valued effort, was respectful, and involved the pragmatic acquisition of essential knowledge (Tweed & Lehman, 2002). These criteria dominated the contexts in which I taught. There was a clear expectation by students and teachers that effort was required and would be rewarded, often with ridiculously high grades. Respect for the teacher often placed students in difficulty if called upon to challenge material that was presented in class. Vietnam even celebrates a special "Teachers' Day" each year when ritual veneration of current and past teachers occurs. Learners were typically narrowly outcome-focused, seeking *the* essential information that they could learn to enable them to pass *the* exam. Any new approaches to teaching and learning in higher education faced significant inertia in attempting to gain a foothold in prevailing teaching and learning practice.

What did this mean for my teaching practice? In China I predominantly taught undergraduate English to English language majors. In Vietnam I co-taught, with Vietnamese colleagues, undergraduate English with colleagues, while also teaching English to various groups of staff within the institutions. I was also asked to present a number of workshops on "new" approaches to teaching and learning and "modern" management practices. While I was appreciative of the great respect paid to me as a teacher, I demonstrated a reciprocal respect for my students as learners. I am certain that concern for one's students and the need to develop trusting relations with them are universally necessary for effective learning to take place. In my teaching, I was aware that I was modelling "different ways of doing things". I frequently gave explicit permissions to students to engage in learning activities when I expected they would be hesitant to participate. I often explained why "we", as a class, were engaging in various learning activities, and highlighted the expected

learning outcomes. I was also, to the extent of my awareness and capabilities, accommodating of cultural difficulties experienced by individual students concerning me as a foreign teacher. While explicitly encouraging students to "try without fear of making mistakes", and promoting the idea that we learn through our mistakes, I also acknowledged my own mistakes, highlighting that *I* would learn as a consequence, and *they* would too. Some of my interactions challenged the culture of my students but I was also prepared to see my own cultural context challenged. In all my years as an academic in an Australian university, I never once sang for my students. Not too infrequently, in Vietnam when asked to sing in class, I sang!

The Socratic approach to teaching and learning "valued private and public questioning of widely accepted knowledge and expected students to evaluate others' beliefs and to generate and express their own hypotheses" (Tweed & Lehman, 2002, p. 1). Such an approach is instinctively enshrined in some aspects of my classroom practice and was certainly less familiar to my students. However, for me the learning context needn't be exclusively a "one or the other". Rarely are "new ways" entirely unacceptable, nor "old ways" to be dismissed out of hand. The secret is taking the strengths of both the Confucian and the Socratic approach and blending these into effective learning scenarios. For example, it became clear to me that my students and colleagues made greater use of performance as an instrument for learning than I would have. That is, students were often asked to demonstrate what they knew (had learnt; could do) by some form of presentation before their classmates or even wider audiences. While, on occasion this ran the risk of "a show" without sufficient "understanding", it more often provided an excellent vehicle for authentic learning, for "learning by doing" and experiencing the process of what Barnett and Coate (2002) have called "becoming". For me, this meant more encouraging of students; not to *tell* what they knew, but to *show* what they knew; not to *tell* what they could do, but rather to *show* what they could do.

In conclusion, permit me to make just a few comments on "global higher education". I am not sure that global higher education is what we typically present it to be. I find a resonance in the works of Yat Wai Lo (2011) on "soft power, university rankings and knowledge production", a hegemony working against national self-determination in higher education, and in Amsler and Bolsmann's (2011) claim that global university rankings are resulting in a new, knowledge-identified, transnational capitalist class, to the global exclusion and disadvantage of other levels in "global society". The sector needs to grapple with these concerns. And, let me be bold enough to say, we need to shift some of our attention away from creating *brighter* people, towards creating *better* people. This to me is higher education's greatest global challenge and responsibility.

ENDNOTES

1. Further comment on the total number of universities globally can be found in Hicks (2016).
2. Fascinating insights into this complexity can be found in Johnson (2017).

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