

# Faculty Reflection: Beijing, China

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To my Colleagues:

## **Embrace International Teaching Opportunities!**

Full disclosure: I feel conflicted. For the good of Seneca, and because I wish my colleagues to benefit as I have, I urge everyone who is able to experience an international teaching assignment. Selfishly, these opportunities are important to me and the Seneca Team supporting me (Jos, Mary, Monica, and Maria); I want them to keep coming my way!! I will carry the Seneca flag to any country, anytime.

Three years ago, in my ninth year as a Seneca professor, my life changed. First, I was given the opportunity to take a year-long sabbatical on the island of Jeju, South Korea. Second,  because I was in the 'neighbourhood,' I spent a month of that year teaching at partner schools in Beijing and Shanghai. I remain immensely grateful to Maria Sairoglou, Chris Dudley, and Jos Nolle for their encouragement and help in making it all happen. Since then, I have returned to China twice on teaching assignments. I am aware of how fortunate I am to be at Seneca, which creates opportunities for us to go on adventures that challenge us and make us better. The expected return on this investment in us is, rightly, that we learn all we can, share our knowledge with colleagues, and apply it to our teaching.

Before going to Korea, I spoke with the principal of an international boarding school on Jeju who told me that my year there would be life-changing. I had no idea at the time how right he was. This summer, my colleague Margaret Osborne and I were at BVCA, a partner school in Beijing. Margaret is a seasoned international teacher, and while in Beijing, we discussed how even short teaching stints at Seneca international partner schools challenge our perceptions and even change us, thus influencing how we do our work.



We faculty speak a lot these days about experiential student learning. Well, Seneca offers us the chance to be experiential learners when we grasp the opportunities that Jos and his International team are creating for us. **International teaching is the ultimate experiential**



**learning experience.** We read about and to a degree see the wide spectrum of cultural differences that are present in our classes, but immersion in another country allowed me to test my perceptions and gain depth of understanding. In a classroom in China, my focus and awareness in each moment with students is heightened. Distance gave me a different perspective on what I do here at Seneca, and changed how I teach. Here are two quick examples:

Teaching in China gave me a much better appreciation of language challenges. A student may understand the literal definition of a word, such as 'ethics' or 'empowerment,' but be culturally unfamiliar with the underlying meaning, which leads to difficulty in applying concepts. I teach Ethics and Leadership, and my time in China has directed me towards trying to help students grasp why we are learning something, its importance, purpose, and deeper context. I also changed how I speak, in terms of pace, phrasing, and word usage.

This past July, when at BVCA, I did not feel that I had not fully engaged students in the first two classes. It is even easier to lose students to their phones in China than here. While chatting with my colleague Margaret about what was working, she observed that her accounting class worked well when she showed them something and then gave them a specific defined task to work on. This was my third time in China and yet it dawned on me that, this year, I had slipped into talking too much and having students be "doing" too little. I reflected on my core leadership course at Seneca, wondering if I had indeed slipped into some bad habits over time. What had been a vague feeling at home was brought into sharp focus in China, and the result will be a fresh and more applied leadership course for all my students.



Teaching overseas is, of course, not without difficulty or challenge. Issues can range from fatigue, to painful beds, to software and IT problems, to language. I have had to be flexible in preparation and in class, be patient, and go with the flow. In throwing myself into the experience and engaging with faculty and students, I am sure, despite preparation, that I have committed cultural errors and planted my foot in my mouth. However, the benefits are overwhelming. On each trip, I have done my best to impart knowledge and build lasting relationships and friendships. Yet I know I have learned more than I have taught, and received more than I have given. I know that my host schools were pleased to know that I felt honoured to be with them and that I was learning so much from them. I have returned home



grateful for the experience away, and for what we have here at home and at work.

So dear colleagues, if your current life commitments and circumstances permit, embrace an international teaching assignment. You will be glad you did.

But leave a spot for me!

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