

Faculty Reflection: Beijing, China

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by Margaret Osborne, School of International Business and Management

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What could the following people have in common?

- an app developer from Tel Aviv whose start-up was just acquired by a German media giant
- a computer chip sales manager from Belgium who just travelled through 16 Asian airports in the last 10 days
- three biotech engineers from India
- a reserved Bulgarian business manager

On our small tour bus together in Beijing this summer, I learned that they shared the same specific and unique challenges of doing business in China. Through fractured English, they expressed similar experiences, frustrations, and laughter of working in a cross-cultural setting. This was an unexpected and delightful take-away from my teaching experience at the Beijing Vocational College of Agriculture.

Coincidentally, *Harvard Business Review* has titled their summer issue, *The Truth about Globalization*, and expands on the very topic of my bus tour experience, "Being the Boss in Brussels, Boston and Beijing."¹ How fortuitous for me now to be able to interweave findings from this high-profile business publication with my own rich personal observations as I return to the Seneca classroom this Fall. There will undoubtedly flow many enriched classroom discussions related to global business, culture impact, and the effects on personal practice that I have gained through this teaching trip.

It is well-documented that teaching internationally expands a professor's subject knowledge, whether through random encounters with fellow travelers or in organized engagements and follow-up projects with faculty at diverse international partner institutions. There are four dimensions of growth derived from teaching overseas: knowledge gain, change in attitude, increased skills, and aspirations.² Other studies highlight the value-added of having a post-graduate study-abroad experience, especially as the dynamics of the workforce are changing and the workplace is no longer constrained by a single custom or culture. Among the skills gained from a cross-cultural experience are an "ability to work effectively in international settings, an awareness of and adaptability to unfamiliar cultures..., and a capacity for communicating across both cultural and linguistic boundaries."³

These gains could be equally cited for faculty who undertake a short-term international teaching experience, which I did recently in Beijing. Unlike the international business projects I have undertaken abroad, this teaching opportunity was life-changing. Gone were the western comforts that often greeted me in previous corporate international settings: the hosts, who spoke solid English, guided me to nice western style hotels, with western menus, and helped me set-up in conference spaces that were 'just like home.' And gone, especially, were the corporate goals that often drove the whole experience, complete with obligatory stops at local tourist destinations. Beijing was different and my cross-cultural teaching experience was of altogether different sort. Total immersion.

From ordering morning coffee to asking directions to teaching key concepts across language barriers, I was entirely immersed in a culture that was not my own. Language was a barrier, differences in cultural practice were a barrier, extending pleasantries, making a purchase, teaching a classroom example were all barriers – not to divide, but to show that 'the way I've always done it' was not how I would do things now, here.

The classroom was my first immersion. Overcoming jet lag, dealing with equipment failure, adjusting to a new audience are all obstacles I've encountered and overcome in the past. This time, however, I was unsupported by my go-to back-up plans. My practiced years of teaching evaporated into gestures, pantomime, and the simplest of words as I called upon spontaneous creativity to teach content that has previously rolled out with ease. In a room of full of exuberant students, my 'foreign' nature was no barrier to their eagerness to learn and together we built bridges of understanding that effectively managed all differences between us. Overcoming these barriers and seeing the successful completion of student projects proved to be, without any exaggeration, the highlight of my entire teaching career.

Yet students were not just eager to learn, they also wanted to immerse me in their culture, their food, and their opinions about life. Along with local faculty, we went shopping together, sight-seeing, and to lots of real Chinese food restaurants (enjoying cuisine far more delicious than anything 'Chinese' I'd tasted in the West).

Faculty shared concerns about teaching and learning that were similar to my own. They spoke of the impact of technology on teaching, the generational changes witnessed in the classroom, and the way their teaching practices were being impacted by these environmental and socio-cultural changes.

Students also expressed views on their education, their future concerns, their goals and aspirations similar to those I've heard from Seneca students. It was refreshing to discover how similar students and faculty are despite the distance of continents and cultures.



I couldn't read a single sign or menu or news headline during my entire Beijing stay, yet I was constantly surrounded by people so much like me (and in China you are very much "surrounded" by people!). I began to connect with people on the subway, at the market, in the tearooms. My conversations were almost child-like by necessity, yet across the great gulf of language I was understood and I understood them. My simple noun-verb phrases were a gateway to something far more authentic, a second naïveté that revealed a deeper and more genuine experience.

Removed from my own cultural familiarity, surrounded by otherness at every turn, I was surprised to discover how much my personal essence remained despite so much that I had to change. I discovered how much my new-found Chinese friends and neighbours could relate to me – could read me, consistently – despite my inability to cross a road or order a coffee without assistance. My demeanor, attitude, and expressions were decoded reliably despite a shared language or cultural heritage. Opportunities to collaborate with overseas faculty have increased despite our socio-linguistic differences, resulting in projects that deepen our global connectedness and offer new directions for scholarship. A pleasantly inspiring side benefit of working across time-zones is to be greeted most mornings with WeChat and WhatsApp messages from our diverse faculty teams as we work together toward publication goals long after my return flight landed and the jet lag passed.

There is still room for reflection and application of the many insights I gained in my personal and professional development. Business leaders around the world are letting cross-culture saturate their lives, like the businessmen on my tourist bus, and despite all the awkwardness and unfamiliarity of speaking beyond languages, my greatest personal reward from China was discovering this truism attributed to Confucius, "And remember, no matter where you go, there you are."

Thanks to Resource Librarian Bill Mann for generously and extensively editing.

¹ Meyer, Erin. "Being the Boss in Brussels, Boston, and Beijing: If You Want to Succeed, You'll Need to Adapt." *Harvard Business Review*, vol. 95 no. 4, 2017, pp. 70-77.

² Gouldthorpe, Jessica L., Harder, Amy M., Roberts, T. Grady, & Stedman, Nicole L.P. (2012). Understanding perceived short-term outcomes from a faculty travel abroad experience in Ecuador (Report). *NACTA Journal*, 56(3), 17-23.

³ McPherson, Bill. "Cultural Adaptability among American and European Business Students." *Journal of International Business and Cultural Studies* 1 (2009): 1.

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