

ARTICLE

Southeast Asian studies in context

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ABSTRACT

As pressures mount to adopt new or alternative instructional delivery methods to achieve innovative education, there has been a strong orientation towards emphasising the need to integrate the latest technological applications to achieve the best in teaching and learning experiences. Moving away from this approach, this article calls for an examination of one important concept in innovative education, that is, context sensitive education. The case study of an annual joint Singapore-Denmark-America summer school programme to teach and study Southeast Asia in Context is discussed here.

INTRODUCTION

There is general consensus in the science of education that teaching and learning aim to relate to the procurement of knowledge and intellectual advancement to produce opportunities for skill and cognitive development (cf., Entwistle, 1988; Pereira & Murzyn, 2001; and Haag & Palais, 2002). Pedagogical practice and theories are constantly being refined to attain these educational objectives. High on the agenda in institutions of higher learning is therefore the constant search for innovative education. In view of the enormous complexity of educational reality, the most challenging question that remains is, "What defines and constitutes innovative education?"

Innovative education, while something of a buzzword, can take many forms and has a wide range of useful applications and outcomes. However, frequent emphasis on instructional delivery methods has resulted in forms of instruction in which the technology itself is the innovation. Web-based education mirrors the current trend in electronically-mediated social networking and thus suffers from the same shortcomings relating to reliance on silicon and electricity and distraction by gadgetry. Such a mode of instruction encourages interacting through technological means only, and thus a decoupling of learning and environment. The image of a "classroom" full of students looking at their own screens and having contact only with (electronic representations of) people and data that they themselves choose, is no longer novel. The result can be to nurture a high level of technological

skill but a lack of real-world interaction, amounting to a decontextualisation of learning in which what is gained tends to be information rather than knowledge.

This article presents a case study of an experimental endeavour based upon the combined efforts and pooling of resources by educators from Singapore, Denmark and America to look for innovative approaches to a qualitative change in teaching Southeast Asian Studies. It goes beyond the traditional method of a classroom-based education. In focus here is the formation of an annual five-week "Southeast Asia in Context Summer School". Its principal aim has been to work towards the "disappearance of the transition period" (Savel'ev, 2002, p.33), that is, to diminish the gap between the acquisition of classroom-based knowledge and its use in actual situations. The Singapore-Denmark-America collaboration is by no means accidental. In contrast to other traditional forms of summer schools, this summer school is a carefully designed synthesis of Asian-European-American knowledge and approaches to broaden as well as deepen the study and understanding of the region of Southeast Asia.

CONTEXT SENSITIVE EDUCATION

Among recent attempts to break from what some perceive as the dry crust of tradition and the fetters that blind us to inherited conventions is the move away from emphasising the social processes of schooling (Entwistle, 1988). The tendency now is to lay more emphasis on alternative instructional delivery methods. Based upon published works, in the fore of current experiments to achieve innovative education are seemingly the fields of natural, physical and computing sciences. Advocates of the movement on alternative instructional delivery methods argue that to achieve the core of our educational objectives, we should think more seriously about integrating new instructional technologies. Today, the stress is on implementing web-enhanced and internet-based applications as new and effective modes of pedagogy. Traditional formats such as classroom-based seminars are integrated or replaced with computer-mediated discussions and conferencing to enable students access to content experts on an ongoing basis (Pereira & Murzyn, 2001, p.31). Experiments with simulations and animations are targeted to create virtual learning environments. Undoubtedly, great breakthroughs have been achieved with these new approaches and great leaps are also being achieved in the fields of social sciences and humanities in online education.

Nonetheless, the very success or failure of new styles of teaching and learning is ultimately evaluated in terms of “student performance outcomes, satisfaction and retention rates” (Haag & Palais, 2002, p.285). Developments in this field of educational research have reached a point where even the staunchest of advocates for online education are voicing their concern that there are still gaps in interaction which could adversely affect student performance, course completion rates and student attitudes (Ferrari et al., 2009). There is now the race to develop online synchronous chat and online office hours for student-teacher and student-student interaction. A recent report by the European Union reminds that innovative education should embrace a framework of lifelong learning and meet the needs of personal fulfillment and development, social inclusion, active citizenship and employment (Ferrari, Cachia & Punie, 2009).

Our discussion develops out of this concern. Our stance is not to devalue online distance education. Rather, we argue that the preoccupation with integrating new instructional technologies as the most effective way forward in innovative education should be systematically evaluated and reconsidered. Henceforth, we call for an examination of one important concept in innovative education, that is, context sensitive education.

CASE STUDY: “SOUTHEAST ASIA IN CONTEXT SUMMER SCHOOL”¹

The “Southeast Asia in Context Summer School” is a collaborative programme of the International Alliance of Research Universities (IARU)² and is held every summer at the National University of Singapore (NUS). The majority of student participants come from NUS, Yale University and the University of Copenhagen (KU); other universities that have sent students include the Australian National University, Peking University, Cambridge University

¹ Comments by students and teachers about the programme can be found in the following two clips. These clips were made during the Thailand portion of the field segment in 2010: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P5GX8mcti3k>. <http://www.youtube.com/user/WongchaumPanu#p/a/u/0/F18R-bMrw1s>

² IARU was founded in 2005 as “a collaboration between 10 of the world’s leading research-intensive universities who share similar visions for higher education, in particular the education of future leaders” and comprise the Australian National University, ETH Zurich, National University of Singapore, Peking University, University of California, Berkeley, University of Cambridge, University of Copenhagen, University of Oxford, the University of Tokyo and Yale University (<http://www.iaruni.org/about-us/about-iaru> accessed on May 30, 2011).

and the University of Tokyo.³ Southeast Asia in Context was initiated by senior administrators at IARU institutions, reflecting increasing interest in international networks. This initiative has been formalised with the signing of a formal agreement and has been successful, in part, due to the enthusiasm and material support at the top. However, the actual content and workings of the programme are very much a bottom-up initiative i.e. by the teaching staff. Thus, the highly positive outcome in the end must be credited to the energy and commitment of the instructors, student participants, and the coordinator. The programme was first taught in the summer of ²⁰⁰⁶, with NUS and Yale as the main collaborators; KU joined in ²⁰⁰⁷. While the exact details have varied, the overall pattern has been retained as follows. The number of students is typically about ⁴⁰ (primarily undergraduates with some MA students as well), with up to ²⁰ from NUS, up to ¹⁰ from Yale, up to ¹⁰ from KU, and the remainder from other IARU universities. On arrival at NUS in the third or fourth week of June, students immediately attend to settling into the dormitories and taking care of administrative issues such as immigration status, university registration, library access, etc., as well as familiarising themselves with Singapore and the campus. A traditional buddy system is used where each student arriving from abroad is paired with an NUS comrade, thus easing the adjustment and supporting the social learning facet of the programme.

The first Monday is spent in orientation where they are being introduced to the university, the programme, instructors and the support staff. The regular classroom segment of the programme begins the following day. In most years, the students have had a schedule in which they all take a common course in Southeast Asian Studies for two hours every morning; then, for two more hours in the afternoon, they take either a history- or a social science-based course. Of these three courses, two are taught by regular full-time NUS instructors and the other by a member of the KU Southeast Asia programme teaching staff; all instructors have a PhD degree, many years of teaching experience and extensive first-hand knowledge of Southeast Asia. Classroom instruction lasts for two weeks, during which the students are taken on field trips, usually half a day but sometimes a full day, to

3 While the programme is specifically open to students enrolled at IARU universities, on occasion a student from a non-IARU institution may be invited to participate in the summer school. An example includes invitations that have been extended to students from the University of California at Santa Cruz. In addition, a few students sent by KU are in fact full-time students at Roskilde University but are able to enroll in the programme through the Danish university elective system. All of the Danish students are given a preparatory course in Copenhagen during the spring preceding the summer school in order to strengthen their English skills, group cohesion, and background knowledge of Singapore and Southeast Asia.

local sites in Singapore or nearby Malaysia. These field trips encourage the students to apply what they have been learning in class (and from reading) to real conditions in Southeast Asian locations. In addition, the trips act as introductory experiences in empirical settings that prepare them for the second phase of the programme.

After two weeks of classroom instruction, the students and instructors (and some administrative assistants) leave for a study trip of 12 days or so in Cambodia and Thailand. This phase of the programme is what attracts many of the students in the first place, and is indeed the heart of the programme. Although a number of the students may have travelled to these places previously as tourists, this programme offers them a unique opportunity to follow a carefully planned itinerary aimed at increasing their understanding of Southeast Asia while drawing on the classroom teaching that immediately preceded it. Indeed, the structure of the programme allows a tight integration of pedagogy and experience in which each is moulded to augment the other and maximise the value of the total. For example, after intellectually coming to understand the centrality of rice in Southeast Asia, students spend an afternoon meeting villagers and joining them in planting rice seedlings;⁴ the theoretical discussion of the theatre state gains empirical heft when students scrutinise its remains at Angkor and witness its continuing activities in Bangkok. Throughout the trip, in addition to the organised activities, students have time to go off on their own to make observations and discoveries, and they are expected to take notes and photographs; periodically, the whole group comes together to process what they are experiencing and to relate it to their more formal work.

At the end of the trip, everyone returns to NUS, where students have a few days to finalise their field reports in which they choose a particular theme or topic to analyse and discuss the trip in the context of concepts and theories from their two courses. After submission of the reports, the instructors lead a concluding discussion, a farewell dinner is held, and the students go their separate ways the following day. Many, of course, especially those from outside the region, take the opportunity to continue to travel and learn about Southeast Asia. Furthermore, students stay in touch and sometimes visit each other later in their various towns and universities.

One of the obvious strengths and innovations of the programme is its diversity. Bringing together students from Europe, North America, and

⁴ The farmers who allow the students into their fields seem to enjoy the novelty of it and are graciously tolerant of the agronomic shortcomings of their visitors.

Southeast Asia for an intensive programme of study and travel necessarily results in a widening of horizons. While not always painless, this can happen in unexpected ways, and tends to break down stereotypes, which after all are generally the result of ignorance and lack of experience. The students bring different abilities and strengths to the programme, and thus often come face to face with aspects of themselves and others that they may not have had to consider previously. Study and eating habits, ways of socialising, views of the world, feelings of nationalism, and levels of maturity and competitiveness, plus the socio-cultural meanings that are attached to these things, are all elements that may vary widely in such an environment. The demands of daily study, frequent writing assignments⁵ and living in such close quarters present challenges and rewards for all: for students from outside Singapore, the physical, cultural, and social environment is something that they are unaccustomed to; for the Singaporean students, the Southeast Asian milieu which they live and breathe and perhaps take for granted is suddenly subjected to inquiry and interpretation in new ways.

The diversity among the students is paralleled by the heterogeneity of instructors, among whom are a Thai who studied in the US and resides in Singapore, a Singaporean who studied in England and resides in Europe, an American who has lived and taught in Southeast Asia for decades, and a half-American half-European who has studied and lived in Europe, North America, and Southeast Asia. Disciplinarily, their fields encompass anthropology, history, archaeology, art history, language and literature. This multifariousness is naturally reflected in their academic approaches and teaching styles, contributing to the innovative character of the programme and the richness of the experience for the students. One commonality, though, is that all take advantage of the unique conditions of the programme.

For example, in the classroom-based segment, as part of the investigation of practices and results of social science or oral history interviewing, students are given the assignment to go into the community in greater Singapore and find a subject with whom they can do an interview project. Working in groups of students from the different universities, they must cooperate to achieve a successful end, often with the help of the connections of a Singaporean member of the group; they write up the final product, including consideration of issues related to method and analysis, and then present the results to the class. While the assignment has certain guidelines, there are

⁵ Grading is a combined effort of the various instructors working together to evaluate students' work.

always inherent elements of unpredictability in such interview projects, and students are inevitably challenged and even astonished by the outcomes of this non-routine experience. Part of the educational innovation here lies in relinquishing control, allowing the unexpected and unplanned to happen and requiring the students to deal with spontaneous developments. The insights they gain, not just into social and historical phenomena, but also into their subjects, themselves, and each other, are often profound and striking, and tend to have a lasting impact on the participants. For example, one student stated afterwards that she had reconsidered her entire BA education and came up with a completely new plan as a result of what she gained from this assignment (personal communication, Yale student – 2010 cohort).

While inevitably there are challenges with such a programme relating to logistical, administrative and financial issues, these can be overcome with proper commitment of energy, staff and funds. Perhaps the level of engagement of students, teachers and administrators in the Southeast Asia in Context Summer Program is one of its innovations. It is clear from the consistent results of this programme that working cross-culturally and cross-disciplinarily in such a strongly contextualised educational framework enormously enhances students' understanding of the social and historical forces that have contributed to making Southeast Asia what it is today, producing real and enduring benefits to both students and instructors. The success of the programme in the IARU, and the recognition of its importance in international studies, has led to an increase in both the number of IARU institutions and the number of students participating. An inherent element of that success is that the programme takes place in Southeast Asia and thus could not be reproduced outside the region.

CONCLUSION

The Southeast Asia in Context Summer School represents a movement in an opposite direction from current inclinations in innovative education that emphasise the heavy use of technology and electronically mediated social networking. This programme physically places participants in a cross-cultural milieu in which they continuously and inescapably experience phenomena which they are also studying. Students encounter unexpected and unpredictable situations every day and must deal with them in concrete ways (both practical and academic) that draw on and enhance their skills at observation, analysis, communication, and social interaction, all in a context of cultural difference and flexibility. While technology here obviously

still plays a role in life and learning, it necessarily reverts to being one of many tools that overall are secondary to the rich immediacy of the learning environment, including the diversity of students and teachers. The variety of activities and interactions taking place in the classroom, on the campus, and in the field blur the distinctions between the theoretical, empirical, and everyday realms.

Judging by student and teacher comments in the days, months, and years following each summer, the Southeast Asia in Context Summer School provides a tangible and lasting educational experience, the diversity and variability of which are inherently innovative, with valuable and enduring results that continue to be realised long after the intensive five-week programme has concluded.

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