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“Difficulties in Teaching a Western-style Education in Countries with Non-Western Paradigms: Recognizing Conflicts, Designing Strategies, and Making Changes”

In L. Frank Baum’s imaginative books about the mythical land of Oz, the main character Dorothy looks around upon finding herself in Oz and says: “I don’t think we’re in Kansas any more.” This statement has come into standard American English with the meaning, not that we are not in the American Midwestern state of Kansas, but that nothing is what it seems to be, and that nothing can be assumed. When businessmen, faculty, NGOs, and others go to non-Western nations to work or to teach, this is the first thing they need to remember: it isn’t Kansas. This seems obvious, but it often is not. Dress, language, architecture, food, and similar items are different, and we expect them to be. Ideas, however, are also very different, and this is not quite so immediately apparent.

I am currently working on a Master’s Degree in History at Midwestern State University in Wichita Falls, Texas; I expect to be finished in May of 2002. I already have a Master’s Degree in English and many years of experience working in the computer industry (I am 48 years old; I began my college career late because I was raising my three children). Besides being a History graduate student, I also do faculty and staff computer training for my university, teach as adjunct faculty in the university English department, and write book reviews, mostly in the areas of history and politics, for our local newspaper.

During the academic year Fall 1999 – Spring 2000, I taught English, Literature, and Computer Science at the American University in Baku, Azerbaijan. I experienced many difficulties there while trying to teach Western style university classes in a nation without Western paradigms. During my second semester in Azerbaijan, I also served as the university Registrar. Because of this, I had increased opportunities to observe the actions and behaviors of the non-Western members of the university Administrative staff. It was in the classroom, however, where I was trying to implement an open exchange of ideas between my students and myself, that the greatest conflicts became apparent.

I had already had experience in teaching ESL (English as a Second or Foreign Language) students before I went to Azerbaijan, but the language problems encountered when everyone in the class is a non-native speaker are, of course, much greater. However, this problem was manageable. It was the problems of the clashes of *ideas* that were the greatest difficulty.

In a new book just released in 2001 by Modern Library and Random House in their *Chronicles* series, Richard Pipes, US President Ronald Reagan’s National Security Council adviser on Soviet and Eastern European affairs and an emeritus historian at Harvard, writes about the enormous consequences (particularly in human costs) of attempting to put an ideal or program such as Communism into practice. Pipes calls Lenin’s attempt to establish a Communist state in Russia “a grandiose experiment in public education, on the Helvétius¹ model, for the purpose of creating an entirely new type of human being...”² This new being would become *homo sovieticus* – council man [this term was coined by the Russian émigré writer Alexander Zinoviev; he said that *homo sovieticus* was a “creature infinitely flexible and resourceful, ever ready to shift his moral position to suit his circumstances”³].

¹ Claude-Adrien Helvétius was the Eighteenth Century French thinker who argued that proper instruction and laws would not only enable but also compel human beings to attain complete virtue.

² Richard Pipes, *Communism: A History* (New York: Modern Library, 2001), pp. 7-8.

³ Alexander Zinoviev, *Homo Sovieticus* (Boston: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1982), inside back dust jacket flap. On page 11 of the same book, Zinoviev also says: “[W]hat I’m saying here doesn’t express my convictions ... I

According to Harvard historian Richard Pipes, it is not possible for a Communist or totalitarian state to produce any other type of “creature.” Pipes says that under Communism:

A fantastic uniformity descended on Soviet culture. ‘Socialist realism’ became the official aesthetic doctrine in 1932; it required writers and artists to treat the present ‘as though it did not exist and the future as if it had already arrived.’ In consequence, what was printed, staged, filmed, or broadcast in no way corresponded to reality: it was a surreality. People adjusted to it by splitting ... their minds and personalities, creating a schizophrenic condition, on one level of which they knew the truth but oppressed it, sharing it only with their closest family and friends, while on another they pretended to believe every word of official propaganda. This created a strain that made life in the Soviet Union exceedingly difficult to bear.

It also left a psychic legacy that outlasted Communism. Lying became a means of survival, and from lying to cheating was but a small step. Social ethics, which make possible a civil society, were shattered, and a regime that wanted everyone to sacrifice his private advantage to the common good ended up with a situation where everyone looked out only for himself because he could count on no one else.⁴

While I was teaching at the university in Azerbaijan, it was quite difficult for me to deal with the problem of cheating. Azerbaijan is a post-Soviet nation, and the students there have much more of a sense of “group identity” than American students typically have. Perhaps because of this, my students in Azerbaijan were not able easily to understand that sharing information in a test situation is unethical; for them, if one person has access to information, everyone has access. I was able to stop the students from asking for answers from each other in a test situation well before I was able to stop them from giving answers when asked; again, they could not understand that the information did not belong equally to all students in the room. Even by the end of my second semester at the university in Azerbaijan with the same students, they were still having enough difficulty with this issue that I was forced to fail two students for the spring 2000 semester, for cheating on their final examinations. Their parents applied pressure in an attempt to get me to change the grades, saying that having to pay for the class again would be a financial hardship great enough that it should excuse or at least set aside the cheating, but I did not change the grades, because the students *must* learn to take responsibility for their own actions and behaviors. The ultimate cost of not doing so is far greater than the cost of two students’ classes.

Attempted plagiarism was also much more rampant at the university in Azerbaijan than I typically find it to be in the United States. When I assigned research papers, several students tried to steal papers from the Internet. One girl even stole a paper written in Russian, ran it through a translating program, and handed in the almost unintelligible result, completely unedited. It was easy for me to tell what she had done. I had been studying Russian, and the translated English words were still in the grammatical patterns of Russian sentences. Every student caught plagiarizing received a grade of “F” (failure) on the research paper, which was a significant proportion of the semester grade. Furthermore, I required all students not

haven’t got any convictions... Convictions are something Western man has, not Soviet man. Instead of having convictions the latter has a ‘stereotype of behaviour.’ This doesn’t presuppose any convictions, and so it’s compatible with every sort of conviction.”

⁴ Richard Pipes, *Communism: A History* (New York: Modern Library, 2001), p. 70.

receiving a grade of “C” (average) or better on the paper to write and turn in a second research paper to me before the end of the semester; again, I was trying to force the students to be accountable for their actions.

One of the students who received a grade of “F” (failure) on his research paper stood up in the classroom (during class, and in front of a room full of other students) after I had told him the result of my evaluation of his paper, and said that he was going to bring a gun to school and start shooting people, beginning with me, if I did not change the grade to an “A” (indicating excellent work). In his mind, my making this change was all that would be required for his paper to *become* excellent: I would only have to change the designation to make it “true.” In my mind, his threat, close on the heels of several news reports of school massacres committed by students, such as the ones at Columbine High School and in Jonesboro, Arkansas, had to be taken seriously. I reported the student’s behavior to the university administration, and his mother was called to the school.

I do *not* think the student’s mother or anyone else would have been informed, except that my husband James wrote a letter about the incident to the school administration, reminding them that they were responsible for the safety of students, faculty, and staff, and distributed copies of the letter to some of the faculty, which meant that many people knew about the incident. This indicates, I suppose, that the unrestricted distribution of information tends to make things happen.

A gentleman from the Ministry of Education of Azerbaijan came to the school and talked to my young student, which seemed to frighten him a good deal. No arrest or any other consequence occurred, however; the student was NOT expelled from school, no charges were filed against him, and he remained in TWO of my classes for the remainder of the semester. The student tried to pass off his threat to me as having been “a joke,” but when he stood up in the classroom that day, he was not laughing.

While living and working in Baku, Azerbaijan, I also taught extension classes in Advanced English to the community at large. The students in the classes were an interesting mix: women studying international law (even though they said they had no chance of getting jobs in that field in Azerbaijan), the children of diplomats, and people hoping to gain jobs with Western businesses. (The extension students were particularly interested in gaining computer skills, because there was a great need for these skills in the Azeri job market; I had already noticed that the Computer Science department of the university had a higher than usual dropout rate, because as soon as students began to get some computer skills, they were tempted to quit school and find jobs). In the night extension classroom setting, I learned that a serious problem my Advanced English students had was that they seemed to have no conception of taking *personal initiative* in order to solve a problem (Richard Pipes points this out as being one of the inevitable consequences of living under a totalitarian government).

My night extension class students complained that in Azerbaijan, the public school buildings are always dirty. Apparently, only one or two janitorial people are expected to maintain the buildings, which are mostly both large and old. I suggested that the parents of students attending the schools might get together and volunteer to clean the buildings, because, once clean, two people (the janitorial staff) might be able to keep the buildings dirt free and hygienic, *if* they could begin their task with already clean buildings. I also suggested that the schools might have “Cleanest School” competitions, letting the students themselves clean the buildings and keep them clean, awarding periodic prizes donated by local businesses or citizens to the student winners. My suggestions were greeted with shock; the idea that the people might do something about their problem *themselves* was not something that had occurred to them.

During the Communist era, the people got accustomed to someone else taking care of things for them, and they still expect it to happen. More than cheating, more than plagiarism,

more than the ESL barrier, it is the lack of self-motivation, self-confidence, and independence that is the post-Soviet (or any post-totalitarian government system) students' (and all citizens') greatest barrier to progress.

Richard Pipes says:

In Russia, which experienced Communism the longest, one of the effects is that the population has been robbed of self-reliance. Since under the Soviet regime all orders pertaining to nonpersonal affairs had to emanate from above and initiative was treated as a crime, the nation has lost the ability to make decisions, whether in big or small matters...; people wait for orders. ... This is not the least of the harm that Communism has inflicted on Russia and all countries that, like it, have been subjected to prolonged Communist dressage. It has also killed in them the work ethic and a sense of public responsibility.⁵

Many times, in Azerbaijan, people told my husband and I that they “just wished that America would come in and take over and tell them what to do.” Our evaluation of this was that many Azerbaijanis are so accustomed to being controlled that they often seem not to know how to act for themselves.

Other conflicts in ideas became apparent to us while we were in Azerbaijan. One example of these conflicts concerns the cultural bias for or against punctuality. In the American academic or business world, being on time, or slightly early, is a sign of professionalism; conversely, *not* being on time is considered unprofessional. My husband and I quickly discovered that this conception of time is not universal.

Once when I was conducting job interviews with applicants who had advanced degrees in the sciences, for a position as data center manager, one applicant was about a day and a half late for his interview. He offered neither an explanation, nor an apology.

I cured my students of being late to class by forbidding them to interrupt the lecture I had already begun in order to greet one another, and by refusing to allow those students who were late to take the quizzes we often had at the beginning of class. Therefore, a late student could expect to receive a grade of zero if a quiz was given, and to lose the privilege of being able to exchange greetings with friends.

The Azeris also seem to have no notion of personal space or privacy, which seems very strange to an American. I had to keep my office door in Azerbaijan locked even during office hours to keep students from just opening the door and walking into my office without knocking or asking permission to enter. While none of these is a terrible problem, each one is just one more indication of what amounts to differences in “socialization through culture” – which are precisely the differences we *don't* think about when we are leaving “Kansas” and going into a new environment.

Progress in countries such as this one *is* possible, however. Many of my students in Azerbaijan made great strides in acquiring critical thinking skills and personal independence. One business student from our university, a member of the first graduating class in spring 2000, Faik Bayramov, received an Edmund Muskie scholarship award last spring, being chosen over many other applicants (his selection is due both to the excellent teaching skills of business professor Andrew Canterbury, teaching now in Africa, and to *Faik's willingness to take initiative himself*, both while he was a student, and subsequently, *on his own*).

Russian author Vladimir Nabokov, who spent a good deal of his life living and working in the West, says in his book *Strong Opinions* that *he* was able to acquire and

⁵ Richard Pipes, *Communism: A History* (New York: Modern Library, 2001), p. 159.

maintain “distance” from the kind of “control” exerted in and by the Soviet world and world view, “by means of such absolutely final indictments of Russian and German totalitarianism as [his] novels *Invitation to a Beheading* and *Bend Sinister*”⁶; in other words, by examining totalitarianism and by pronouncing judgment on it, Nabokov says that he defined himself, and maintained that definition of himself. (*Invitation to a Beheading*, the first of Nabokov’s novels originally appearing in Russian to be printed in English, is a study in terrorism; *Bend Sinister* appeared in 1947 and seems to be about the rise of a one-party government in an apparently European country, but “Nabokov denies firmly that the book contains a message or has social significance or even that it is ... ‘serious literature.’”⁷ (This is unlikely in view of his calling it an “indictment” of totalitarianism; he is pointing out, I think, that many things are not what they seem). The post-Soviet/post-totalitarian environment continues to present specific problems not common in a Western system, and faculty, businesspersons, and all types of administrators must be aware of problems particular to this environment, when trying to bring Western ideas and Western education to such non-Western nations. Only by doing so can such ventures have any hope of success.

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⁶ Vladimir Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* (New York: Vintage International, 1973), p. 156.