



COMMENT

Received 5 May 2015 | Accepted 5 Aug 2015 | Published 22 Sep 2015

DOI: 10.1057/palcomms.2015.26

OPEN

“Teach like you do in America”—personal reflections from teaching across borders in Tanzania and Germany

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ABSTRACT This article is a personal commentary about experiences teaching across national and disciplinary borders in the United States, Tanzania and Germany. Highlighted are national differences in learning, teaching, testing and writing. The article concludes that the ferment in such “provincial” universities where the author taught is likely to drive developments in how disciplines continue to develop in the world’s rapidly expanding university systems.

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Introduction

Elite universities like New York University (NYU) and Yale University are establishing branch campuses on the campuses of Singapore National University (SNU), East China Normal University (ECNU) and Abu Dhabi. This is an attempt to establish “global” campuses. The result is that there will be five elite branches of NYU and Yale where all can come, pay and get an “American quality education”, which *The Economist* (2015: 13) asserts is the “gold standard for the world”. The implication is that if Yale, NYU, SNU, Abu Dhabi and ECNU lead, globalized higher education comes to be seen as natural, easy and Ivy League-style *American*.

The Economist's views are intriguing, but its assumptions about globalization trouble me, because left out is a critical element that defines every university: the cultural habits of heart and mind in which education is always embedded. Underneath what is in the classroom are the cultural values and assumptions of previous adult generations who established the university in the first place. Because of this the university classroom is always embedded in *national* systems of finance, curriculum and accreditation (see Waters, 2012: 1–7). Such cultural *habitus* includes national cultures, accreditation regimes and the disciplinary cultures that frame the world views of faculty, students and even journalists at *The Economist*. And it is in such nationalized universities that over 100,000,000 students study today (see Masen, 2012; see also OECD, 2012; UNESCO, 2014). And it is in such institutions, with all their provincialisms, that organizational cultures focused by specific curricular needs, funding streams, student expectations, tenure criteria, teaching styles and research traditions drive higher education policies, and effectively inhibit both internationalization and inter-disciplinary research (see, for example, Jacob, 2015: 1).

Central to my uneasiness is that after 20 years of trying to teach internationally, I find that despite policies supporting internationalization and inter-disciplinary efforts it is in fact exceedingly difficult to teach across borders, a result of deeply embedded *national* disciplinary habits. Fans of globalization try to pretend this does not exist, and that sociology, chemistry, literature, business and engineering are taught the same way everywhere in the world, which is why I was told in Tanzania and Germany that I should just teach sociology “like you do in America—it’s all the same”. But in fact when I did teach like I do in the United States, I inevitably bumped into local academic cultures that see the university differently. This happened repeatedly in Tanzania and Germany where I taught for 1 and 2 years, respectively, and even during a brief but cold week in December 2010 when I taught in a Chinese “social science” classroom in Linyi, Shandong Province, where the students wore parkas in poorly heated classrooms. This article is about my experiences encountering national and disciplinary boundaries as a participant-observer, often in a haphazard fashion.

There is in fact variation underlying proper student–faculty relations, grading norms, classroom protocol and the nature of student assignments. I know this because student delegations showed up in my office and told me that my teaching habits (that is, Americanisms) were too casual, and the appropriateness of my America-based version of sociology was questionable.

Indeed, the very presence of such student leadership is perhaps where things start—there is simply no equivalent in the professor-centric higher education classroom of the United States. In Tanzania and Germany students have formal and informal “rights” *vis-à-vis* professors, and expectations about my role as a lecturer, classroom protocol and especially how grades are assigned. Imagine my chagrin when, accustomed to my American-style autonomy, a Tanzanian student delegation arrived 3 weeks into my class. The first complaints were about my California accent, the speed of my speech and procedures for making written materials

available. This soon expanded to the material I highlighted in my “Race and Ethnicity” class, and even an informal insistence that they carry my books and briefcase for me!

And in Germany, where I taught in 2007–2008 and 2012–2013 in the discipline “Cultural Studies” (which is where “Sociology” is found in the particular German universities where I taught), it was complaints about what student work could be graded during the semester (none), and concerns that I let class discussion become too informal. There the students asked for Marx, despite whispers from German professors in 2007 that teaching Marx was still too raw given the recent history of East Germany’s doctrinaire Marxist education system.

Even in China, students whispered something to me about my choice of topics in an Introductory Sociology course. I was told that fertility, mortality and survey research were good subjects, but that they did not need to hear about social theory (especially Marx) from me. “We’ve heard that before”, they said.

Making sense of comparative culture, teaching and learning across borders

So how does my informal university-based “participant-observation” help me make sense of globalization and that “American gold standard” that *The Economist* wrote so confidently about? Participant observation is of course anecdotal by its very nature; its validity as a methodology lies in its capacity to describe underlying trends in ways that breathe life into the homogenizing effects of ranking surveys, such as those relied on by *The Economist*. Are generalizations based on such a small *n* possible? No way—not by themselves. But anecdote in the context of broader historical, social and statistical context breathes life into the quantitative ranking systems, such as those used by *The Economist* (for good examples of such ethnographic/memoir writing about international undergraduate teaching, see Hollinger, 1965/1993; Nathan, 2005; Mitchell, 2013. For a classic social scientific example of this type of writing, see Geertz, 1973).

Participant observation teases out differences in how humans give a phenomenon *meaning*. So in telling the following story, I highlight the differences that I felt as a American professor teaching in Germany and Tanzania, while comparing this to generalizations about globalization, and particularly the assumptions of globalization that are embedded in the request to “Teach like you do in America!”.

Making sense of student strikes, German *Bildung* and career-focused Americans

Tanzania and the University of Dar Es Salaam (UDSM): student strike! The first time I was told to “teach like you do in America” was in 2003–2004 in Tanzania where I was a Fulbright Scholar in the Sociology Department at the UDSM (see Waters, 2007). UDSM is a large sprawling African university, spread across “The Hill” near the Indian Ocean coast. UDSM prides itself for schooling presidents from Tanzania, Uganda, Congo and South Sudan and its many graduates who played critical roles in first the decolonization of Africa and now the political leadership of many countries.

When I was at UDSM, the university suffered from the common shortcomings of African higher education, including old facilities, limited computer capacity, a dated library collection, inadequate faculty staffing, low salaries and the occasional strike by students. And despite UDSM’s record of creating much of Eastern Africa’s elite, it made little dent in the ranking systems highlighted by *The Economist*. After all, creating a future for an area of the world that is growing rapidly is not a metric in such ranking systems.

The pedigree of UDSM in 2003 was inherited from both the British colonial rulers and more importantly the rapidly

expanding Tanzania of the 1990s and 2000s when ambitious students were swept into the university far faster than faculty were hired. In this context I was told to “teach like you do in America!”. But I was told it would also be nice if I included the revolutionary Frantz Fanon (1965) who wrote *Wretched of the Earth* on the reading list for my Race and Ethnicity class (I was also asked to include Marx, who some of the better-read Tanzanian graduate students insisted was not an atheist!). Fanon fortunately gave me an African example that was far better than “teaching like I did in America”, which would have meant illustrations rooted in studies of American minority groups, and would have lacked resonance for my East African students.

Tanzania, certainly, has ethnic divisions, based in religion, merchant minorities and, most salient of all, “tribal” identification. But tribal identification was tricky for a foreigner to navigate in 2003, because during the pre-1961 days of British colonialism, such identities were a basis for political, legal and professional discrimination. And so tribal identification was “banned” in independent Tanzania at independence, although of course such identities persisted, and do persist. But how to talk about this in a 90+ student race and ethnicity class? Indeed, when I first raised the issues of tribes, I received another visit from assertive students pointing out that tribes were a subject inappropriate in Tanzania, as the categories no longer existed and “we are all Tanzanian”. It was nevertheless pointed out that I was free to use East Africa’s merchant minorities (Arabs and Indians) as examples. This was particularly the case, I learned, if I reinforced the stereotypes of a student body steeped in family lore about how the greedy Arab and Indian merchant minorities took advantage of black Africans. And they still insisted on carrying my briefcase and books!

But for me, the most difficult task in the Tanzanian system was managing the large classes in a hot humid climate using blackboards with dusty chalk. There were no computers in the classroom, nor could I distribute course materials by email. Everything was done with a blackboard and piece of chalk, the dust turning to chalk-mud on my skin and clothing in Dar Es Salaam’s muggy climate. Projecting an Excel spread sheet, much less requiring students to access computers, was out of the question. The culturally appropriate *t*-test (how many spoonfuls of sugar do males and females like in their tea?) I did on a dusty blackboard, and students copied, copied and copied with pen and paper.

My classes were in large lecture halls—remnants of an impressive 1970s-era building boom—which included an architectural masterpiece, Nkrumah Hall, which is featured on the back of Tanzania’s 500 shilling note. I gave just two tests, and far fewer assignments than I do in the United States, where demands for student work in the form of homework sets and quizzes are considered to be pedagogic best practice. Following UDSM regulations these tests comprised 40% of the overall grade, with a final exam worth 60% (in comparison, in California my final assignment is worth 25% or less). All assignments were written in long-hand and needed to be hand-graded—no machine grading. I read every mid-term exam in my 400+ student social statistics class.

Student academic culture at UDSM was different as well—students were from diverse areas of Tanzania, and supported financially by extensive family networks and a government loan system for the majority of students who did not have enough money to attend. Students were older than my American students, and certainly had less money—no cars in the student parking lot! The rich Tanzanian student *might* have a scooter. Tanzanian students also had their own study rhythms, with a strong emphasis on collaboration, which some of my expatriate colleagues defined as cheating. But collaboration also meant that in the muggy evening when the weather cooled off just a little bit, students gathered under the electric street lamps, where one

student read out loud one of the few textbooks available, while the others listened. The culture of the university—and the future of Africa—emerges from such gatherings, more so than from my “American-style” teaching.

Student finance is what led to a student strike—a phenomenon unheard of in the United States in recent decades. The students receiving the “monthly” loan payments used them to purchase food, and pay for on-campus accommodation. Payments were frequently late—which meant that students might start eating less food later in the month. How did I know this? The unspoken cultural cue was that the males started wearing neckties in the sweltering heat as meals became fewer—the ties, it was said, distracted attention from sallow cheekbones.

One morning in May 2004 I went to class as usual. But very few students showed up because a student strike to object to policies regarding repayment of student loans was scheduled that morning. At 9:01 a.m., we heard the sound of the rushing strike coming, and my students politely asked to accompany me to my office—they told me staying risked a beating from the striking students (for a description of a similar strike at UDSM, see Ernest, 2011). A strike meant no classes, period, and striking students cleared the classrooms by waving tree branches. The university administration responded by summarily closing the university that afternoon, an order that was enforced by police on campus, with help from the army. Marching strikers were blocked from going into town on that hot day by tear gas-wielding troops from the army’s “Field Force”. A whiff of tear gas later, I simply settled down ... to mark stacks of papers. The shut-down lasted about 2 weeks, as I slowly made my way through the stacks of sweat-stained papers on our dining room table.

The final surprise in UDSM culture came as I prepared and administered my finals in late June. The course that I remember most clearly is that social statistics class. Four hundred plus students showed up to take the final, a grading task I was dreading. And then, surprisingly, the finals (scripts) were whisked away from me—by one of my Tanzanian colleagues who did the first pass, which was then reviewed by an independent outside reviewer from South Africa. Unlike in the United States, professors do not have the final word on grades in Tanzania. Rather, grades there are a product of a consensus. In this way Tanzanian faculty hold themselves to internationally validated academic norms, in ways that professors in the United States do not.

German universities and my discovery of *Bildung*. My next international stop was the private Zeppelin University in Southern Germany in 2007–2008. The teaching conditions were very different from Tanzania. The students included both BA and MA students, and class sizes were 4–10 students. Some of the students owned BMWs (my family had bicycles!). They were in a “Cultural Sciences and Cultural Management” programme, a business-focused spin-off of the inter-disciplinary “Culture Studies” movement spreading across Europe and Asia in recent decades.

My new colleagues insisted that sociology “belonged in culture studies”, and asserted that I should “teach like I do in the USA” because Zeppelin wanted a curriculum that was international and crossed borders! But as in Tanzania, the limits to “teaching like you do in America” were brought to me by students seeking a German educational experience. Not only in Tanzania was it impossible to “teach like you do in America”, I could not do it in Germany either! My German students at Zeppelin University, and later at Leuphana University in Northern Germany (2012–2013), were among the most intellectually engaged and straightforward to teach in my career. But they were clearly not Americans.

In Germany when I was again told to “teach like you do in America” I was ready, or so I thought, with the very American

“Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education”, which is widely referenced in evaluations of American undergraduate teaching, and is embedded in my own habits of undergraduate instruction. These principles assume that the professor models the role of a workplace supervisor who monitors productivity, defined as “student learning”. This means the professor gives prompt feedback, encourages active learning and ensures that students spend “time on task” (see Chickering and Gamson, 1987).

But Chickering and Gamson (1987) did not work well in Germany, even if I insisted that what I delivered was indeed the “gold standard” in the United States. In Germany, my students quickly told me, the small quizzes and writing assignments used to monitor “active learning” were busy work, and “high schoolish”. They expected to be responsible for their own “self-cultivation”, a quality known by the untranslatable German word *Bildung* (see Bruford, 1975; Bohlin, 2013; Weber, 1921/2015: 123–126).

Bildung, I discovered in my 2 years in Germany, is an organizing cultural principle for German higher education that trumps both careerism and disciplinary silos. It is generally translated as “education”, but in fact it means more—dictionary definitions often refer to “self-cultivation”, “philosophy”, “personal and cultural maturation” and even “existentialism”. *Bildung* is the cry of the land of poets and thinkers against the demands of credentialism, professionalism, careerism and the financial temptations dangled to graduating students. It is why, even at Zeppelin University with its putatively “international” emphasis on business education, there was still a grand piano across the hall from my office, and classical music filling the air at odd times—music is important for *Bildung*, even for Business majors.

My German students also expected to read deeply in seminars, and “dig into the text”, which may only be a few pages long, a pedagogic approach common in the land of “poets and thinkers”. The seminars were also student dominated, which as an American professor I found difficult to get used to; German seminar style is different from the “lecture-discussion” typically used in the United States, where students are expected to read widely but shallowly, ask limited questions in class and then are checked for “learning” with frequent multiple-choice exams (see, for example, Pinker, 2014).

Memories of the eighteenth-century philosopher and Prussian Minister of Education Wilhelm von Humboldt and philosopher Immanuel Kant are deep in the German academic *habitus* even today—and both philosophers regarded *Bildung* as “the product” of a university education, not the “workforce preparation” highlighted in American universities, including my own Chico State. Dedication to *Bildung* trumped my American concerns with correlating learning outcomes, curriculum articulation, student time-on-task and so on. I was told that such problems were not my problem, but the student’s. The job of the faculty in Germany is to provide context—it is up to the student to learn—a condition that turns the request to “teach like you do in America” on its head, Chickering and Gamson (1987) be damned!

The American “lecture discussion”, class is also dominated by we, the learned faculty, not undergraduate students—this happens even though relationships between students and professors are far more formal in Germany than in the United States, at least by English-speaking classroom standards. After all, there is a German emphasis on using formal pronouns (*Sie*), and addressing faculty with title and last name that even bled into my English language seminars. At the same time though, German students drink beer with their professors after class, something taboo in the putatively egalitarian United States. Final papers, examinations and grades in Germany are also

supervised by a university-based “Testing Office”. While not as intrusive as Tanzania’s system of external review, I was still held accountable for my grading standards, and required to submit both student work and grades to the Testing Office. The assumption is that grading decisions may be appealed by students.

What does this mean? Most importantly to me, it means the quality of writing from my German students is outstanding, the result of a rigorous secondary school system designed with *Bildung* in mind, and in the university system where *Bildung* flourishes, including at the unranked universities where I taught. German undergraduates routinely write coherent papers across 8,000 English words, a task undertaken by students in the United States mainly in graduate school (and in their native English). German students do this writing during long “breaks” between semesters (February and March, and mid-July to mid-October), when they are library-bound, and some claim they court depression in the interest of *Bildung*. These papers are typically due 2–3 months after the last seminar, and are 100% of the course grade. For the German undergraduate, the semester “breaks” are the most lonely and angst-ridden time of the year. Meanwhile, their American counterparts are in summer jobs, or at the beach. Most but not all eventually finish their papers; months after my seminar ended, I received apologetic emails explaining why they could not finish the paper, and would not be able to get credit for my class.

How effective is this ascetic approach to *Bildung*? Well, judging from the academic publications of my successful German graduate and undergraduate students their writing reflects the highest international standards, even if they were not imbibing the American gold standard curriculum (my students’ English publications include Veldhoen, 2008; Hoser, 2012; Drengwitz et al., 2014).

And back home again. Having said all these wonderful things about the universities of Tanzania and Germany, it is fair to note that my American students at Chico State have unique qualities too. Chico State students juggle schedules between work, school and relationships like no other. They stay on task during the semester, a focus facilitated by the frequent quizzes that my German students so dismissively sniff at.

Chico State students also efficiently bring closure to their coursework in ways that my German students do not. This is facilitated by the “finals week” at the end of each semester, which means that if you “teach like you do in America”, you are done on the day of the final, or you fail the class. American students do deadlines really well as a result, and have less of the existential angst embedded in *Bildung*. Nor is there a belief that school is about activism and provoking social change like there was in Tanzania—it is about credentials and job prep.

Finally, Chico State students do have a general optimism about the world—a quality that perhaps distinguishes the American student—and a quality that was remarked upon also by Mitchell (2013) in his observations about Arab students he taught in Qatar where he described the academic culture as one of “Colliding and Converging Worlds”.

Back to the future?

What can Tanzanian and German universities teach universities in the United States? I think that the American Ivy League, gold standard or not, needs a deeper appreciation of the human condition, which is found in the vibrant but cash-strapped UDSM, the intensely inter-disciplinary approach of German Cultural Sciences and *Bildung*. I am not particularly a fan of violently shutting down universities *a la* the student strike

at UDSM, but I do sometimes wish that the careerism of American students would be tempered by at least a little bit of the social awareness that my sometimes underfed UDSM students had.

And this is perhaps the bigger story, because despite the triumphalism of the Ivy League highlighted by ranking systems, the power of university education is still in the unranked universities I taught at in California, Tanzania and Germany. It is in such institutions that the bulk of the world's 100,000,000+ students are creating and recreating the culture of academia.

And it is in China, India, Africa, the European Union and Latin America, which (unlike the United States) are rapidly expanding the number of students to perhaps 250,000,000 by 2025, that higher education will shift (see, for example, Masen, 2012; UNESCO, 2014). It is from these *hundreds of millions* that the governments, companies and bureaucracies of the future will be staffed. Thus, Tanzania and East Africa will reflect the cultural values of UDSM rooted in post-colonial Africa and study groups huddled around streetlights. And Germany will continue to reflect Enlightenment values of *Bildung* that persist there so strongly. Each will benefit from collaboration with American and other traditions, but the reverse is also true. There is much for American universities to learn—I just hope that the highly mobile professors from NYU and Yale, in their well-heated and well-cooled global classrooms in New York, Connecticut, China and the Middle East, will also be aware of the humid classrooms of UDSM, and the cold ones in China. Perhaps if they are attentive, they will even encounter active well-organized students both eager to challenge university policy and carry professors' briefcases! Such students are much more fun to teach than the investment banker wannabes cultivated by the Ivy League.

So what does this mean for both international and inter-disciplinary work? I know that the elites, whether in the United States, Singapore, China or Abu Dhabi, will continue to dominate the status rankings—after all, they write the rules of the ranking system. But pulling in other directions are the tens of thousands of universities around the world, such as those I taught at in California, Germany and Tanzania.

Kuhn (1962/1994) described how shifts in scientific paradigms emerge. In the case of universities this would apply to new disciplinary trends, and the extension of paradigms across borders. Such revolutions often begin at the edges beyond “normal science”, before their utility becomes apparent. And based on what I have seen in Germany and Tanzania I wonder where true scientific progress will emerge from? Will it come from the normal “Top 50” globalized campuses like those of Yale and NYU, which are exceedingly establishment the reify old institutional barriers; inhibiting the trans-disciplinary and trans-national collaboration? Or will it bubble up from the culturally embedded ferment of the tens of thousands of universities where teaching and learning occur for those 249,500,000 students of those 250,000,000 students who are embedded in the values of specific national traditions? Judging from the different ways Tanzanians and Germans defined their university systems as well as their disciplines, I suspect the latter. Indeed, this is perhaps why sociology is being recast as “Culture Studies” by the non-elite universities I taught at. For that matter, the version of sociology I taught in Tanzania could not be the same as I teach in California—after all, I could not leave out Fanon, and crossing boundaries challenged me to think about God, religion and Marx' sociology.

And what about the future of disciplines themselves? My limited experience as a travelling sociologist is that disciplines are products of national cultures, as much as trans-national cultures. Sociology is not the same in California, Germany and

Tanzania, and I cannot be wedded to home-grown orthodoxies, even if they reflect the assumed “gold standard” of American higher education *a la* Chickering and Gamson (1987). Indeed, when I am, things do not work. I suspect that this is the case in other disciplines as well, even Chemistry, Literature, Business and Engineering. In Tanzania, concerns were with local social problems—my American examples did not work. And in Germany, the home of sociology's founders Karl Marx and Max Weber, I was flung into an emerging new field, “Cultural Studies”, which includes a dash of Business at Zeppelin University. And while I certainly could see that sociology was part of the new movement, I was challenged to think about my own teaching in new ways, ways that might be called inter-disciplinary, or trans-disciplinary. Such issues are simply part of the game when you teach across international borders. To teach across borders is by its very nature an inter-disciplinary game.

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Acknowledgements

The authors thanks Julie Garza-Withors and Volker Kirchberg for their comments on this paper.

Additional information

Competing interests: The author declares no competing financial interests.

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How to cite this article: Waters T (2015) “Teach like you do in America”—personal reflections from teaching across borders in Tanzania and Germany. *Palgrave Communications*. 1:15026 doi: 10.1057/palcomms.2015.26.



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