

A FULBRIGHT EXPERIENCE WITH FACULTY DEVELOPMENT IN THAILAND UNIVERSITIES

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ABSTRACT

Based on the experience of creating programs to facilitate faculty development in Thailand universities as a Senior Fulbright Scholar (2006-2007), the author shares her insights from these efforts to reform higher education. She worked with Burapha University as the administration developed the first teaching and learning center in Thailand. This is a revised version of a paper that appeared in *International Journal of Education in Asia-Pacific*, 1(1), 12-09.

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INTRODUCTION

My experience working on faculty development in Thailand occurred as a William J Fulbright Senior Scholar based at Burapha University, a large public university located 85 kilometers southeast of Thailand's capital, Bangkok. In response to Thailand's national educational reform initiative to modernize practices, I was invited to provide workshops for faculty learning as the first step in their plan to establish a "teaching and learning center" at Burapha. It was to become the first of its kind in Thailand—a place to act as a conduit for resources and programs for faculty learning. Over nearly a five-month period, I also conducted programs for faculty at six other universities, engaging more than 500 teachers and administrators throughout Thailand. Faculty participation at these sessions varied greatly in terms of the composition of the audience, e.g., from an all-graduate school faculty to a single nursing department, to only teachers of English. These also varied in length of time from full day stand-alone workshops to a series of three hour bi-weekly sessions over a three-month period. I adapted these to the needs expressed by the inviting faculty and administration.

I have spent my career in higher education working mainly with graduate students in my field of teacher education. I specialized in instructional theory, notably small groupwork. In my last assignment, I worked as an instructional dean at a community college where faculty learning was the centerpiece of its promotion and tenure structure. My history of preparing teachers for the classroom gave me the experience to design and conduct workshops in interactive pedagogies for these faculty across disciplines. As the co-president of the International Association for the Study of Cooperation in Education,

I was one among a small cadre of international consultants and educators who were committed to bringing expertise to regions of the world where the student-centered learning philosophy was emerging. A Fulbright was a natural step for me to focus specifically on the international arena and to learn from Thailand.

FACTORS SUPPORTING FACULTY DEVELOPMENT AND STUDENT-CENTERED LEARNING

Since 1999 the Thailand National Education Act stressed the importance of unity in educational policies and diversity in implementation. They were preparing with new learning tools to enter robustly into the free trade markets. They had been slowly experiencing a shift to more inclusive practices, e.g., increased student enrollments, as well as a need to teach in English in more areas of their higher education system as they reached out to serve a more diverse—and international—student population. The growing knowledge base regarding learning and teaching was also creating the impetus for supporting faculty development, a relatively new idea for Thailand's higher education system. These factors were influencing faculty to expand their instructional repertoire to pedagogies beyond the common, rote methods of learning. Faculty and administrators recognized that there are complex challenges and problems to solve in a society that required an educated cadre who can think creatively, work collaboratively and produce new knowledge for a globalized world.

Student-centered learning (SCL) represents a major shift in the way teachers think about and engage in teaching, assessment and even research. The pedagogies associated with SCL fit loosely under the umbrella of active learning: e.g., collaborative/cooperative learning and problem-based learning, and are sometimes called, student-focused learning, or learner-centered learning. They require time for faculty to learn, adjust their curricula and develop new assessment practices. The goals of this effort include greater student achievement and satisfaction, higher academic standards and increased student retention. This shift in orientation to more engaging and complex student learning contexts requires a faculty committed to an ongoing process of their own learning. Structured and planned efforts include all-university as well as discipline-specific activities and processes. Because many higher education institutions have often been slow to change, it is not surprising that faculty development, as these activities are often called, remains a challenging endeavor, even under the best of conditions. Establishing a new teaching and learning center would be a big step in creating and maintaining faculty development efforts as Burapha University planned to do to serve its campus and the greater region.

The teachers I met through my work throughout Thailand were exceptionally hardworking by any standard. Based on my observations, the university structure in Thailand was, not surprisingly, more hierarchical than those I have known in the West. Thai faculty would confide that they felt obligated to accept assignments given by the administration regardless of whether they had sufficient time or support. This, coupled with scholarly requirements and continuous quality control and governance demands, created overworked faculty. These added up to a lack of time, resources, experience and shared language for collaboration, classroom experimentation and reflective practice. Despite these conditions, the faculty I worked with regarded teaching as a call to service and a special way to invest in Thailand's future. And what Thai teachers lacked in pedagogical knowledge and understanding, they compensated with strong commitments to one another, their students and their academic fields.

CULTURAL CHALLENGES AND STUDENT-CENTERED LEARNING

When I asked teachers to describe their most difficult teaching situations and students, they often mentioned problems with class attendance, the lack of student-to-student respect, and the failure of students to do their own work. While these aren't unique to Thai classrooms, there are cultural values that influence how Thais interpret "student-centered learning." The Fulbright orientation and periodic briefings helped me enormously to understand how certain Thai values contribute to these problems—and needed to be understood and addressed with sensitivity to this cultural context. For example, in Thai society authority and age are represented through a traditional hierarchy of relationships, and thus there is the deeply held view of the teacher as the unquestioned authority and dispenser of knowledge. This is not unique to Thailand. But for the Thais this follows from their cultural habit called, "kren-gi-jai" students must be careful to never confront anyone senior or higher in authority so as not to make them look bad. Along with this is a desire to avoid shame and save face for oneself, one's friends, and those in positions of power and authority. This value may translate in a classroom and a school to a preponderance of rote learning experiences because students can be respectful towards the teacher yet persistently quiet and actively resistant to even basic question and answer strategies.

Learning in groups can be less effective initially out of the fear of being "muunsai," another deep cultural value. If a student stands out too much as a leader or performer they could risk not "belonging" to the group, meaning that they could be regarded as "being boastful/showing off," causing others to get the feeling of "muunsai." How to involve students in focused discussion and paired activities that do not involve friendship patterns (and often less than satisfactory learning outcomes according to some faculty) seemed formidable to many teachers. These barriers can be overcome with persistence and incremental application of collaborative strategies that focus on

creating new, normative course agreements. Much of the student resistance is not simply “muunsai” but rather students not knowing how to respond to questions because they are not accustomed to doing so. Some teachers expressed conflict between the values of fostering mutual respect and active engagement among students with their need to exercise authority, sanctions and rules.

Through collaborative/cooperative learning strategies I introduced ways to structure student-centered teaching and learning. This encouraged teachers to address the challenges, e.g., getting students to talk and work together on meaningful questions and tasks. Some teachers admitted that they were often overly permissive, erroneously thinking that SCL meant allowing students unbridled choice in what they learn and how they learn it. They raised questions about how a desirable learning environment could foster students to become “culturally” comfortable while gradually developing the capability of expressing viewpoints. Teachers were eager to work together to help each other understand—just as they hoped their own students would. Newer teachers were not always as adept at connecting key course content to the main ideas—the curricular building blocks. Working in collegial teams, often representing the diversity in the workshop, gave these teachers both confidence and practical experience. These simple strategies provided faculty a living model of how to engage students, particularly those who have different English abilities or shyer personalities.

LEARNING IN AND COMMUNICATING IN ENGLISH

It is easy to over-estimate the proficiency of a teacher to learn new content in English, a second or even third, language for many of the Thai teachers. My Vice-President at Burapha University assured me that all the faculty attending the first round of workshops were proficient in English. Within a matter of minutes, however, it was obvious to both of us that having conversational English levels was not sufficient for learning new content, particularly teaching strategies, in a workshop format. I was already prepared for teachers to work collaboratively—to pair-up frequently to summarize and raise questions together. I simply needed to provide more time for them to do that. I learned to assess, prior to the program, the level of English proficiency among the faculty with the administrators I worked with at each university. If there was any concern about that proficiency among their faculty, I requested translators, something I needed only a few times.

My Fulbright work increased my sensitivity to the need to continue supporting teachers and young academics whose first language was other than English, particularly in their professional writing and conference presenting skills. In our professional organization committed to serving international members we instituted processes, such as mini workshops, that helped presenters develop effective, interactive, presentations at the international con-

ferences. We also provided hands-on guidance and editing for the successful writing of proposals for conferences and papers for professional journals. I remain committed to furthering local research and writing on how student-centered learning takes shape in different environments and cultures.

INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT FOR FACULTY LEARNING

It takes the average teacher three to five years to adapt and apply a new instructional pedagogy as complex as say, collaborative learning, with ease. Added to this is the reality that perhaps 5-10% of faculty can make instructional changes from workshops alone. Faculty development programs need to include theory, demonstrations, time for practice and then feedback about how the adaptation is occurring in the local context. So, it follows that there needs to be support for faculty development activities other than, or along with, workshops.

In the brief time I had with most teachers and administrators, I encouraged them to start by developing a common language around teaching for student-centered learning. This may best happen at the department level where course outcomes are understood, and program goals become coherent. We explored how teacher-to-teacher dialogue and support could provide a beginning point for faculty to gather data and feedback through collaboration among colleagues. Effective programs may include coaching by peers with opportunities for instructors to review and reflect on how they are adjusting the innovation to their situations. But very few Thai teachers had ever been in another instructor's classroom. I recommended starting small by encouraging simple invitations among the workshop participants to visit another teacher's classroom to begin that dialogue. Even this can be difficult to orchestrate given the vicissitudes of instructor schedules and dispositions. Many of the faculty wanted to improve their teaching but were stymied about how best to proceed given so many competing needs. Suggesting opportunities for that kind of exchange became one of my goals with the faculties at the various universities. Particularly in systems with deeply compelling traditional role relationships, the formal approval and regard of the administration is especially critical to any success but many faculty were unsure how to obtain that approval.

LONG-TERM IMPACT OF FACULTY DEVELOPMENT FOR STUDENT-CENTERED LEARNING

The goal of faculty development programs should be to develop local leadership capable of modeling, leading and supporting innovation, and while many administrators tacitly agreed none gave any hints as to their next steps in the process of institutionalizing these reforms perhaps because these ideas were new to them as well. For example, would the university faculty development programs distinguish activities for faculty pre-tenure and post-tenure? What activities would Burapha University's Teaching and Learning Center

wish to support regarding teaching, scholarship and service? And for faculty, how do they find out “what counts?” It simply wasn’t possible for me to see whether these goals had been addressed, in the short time I had with the Thais.

The long-term impact of my Fulbright work in Thailand on faculty development and the promotion of student-centered learning is yet to be felt and precisely measured. Change is slow especially in a Thai higher education system that is forced to operate under unstable governments that frequently change course. However, there are beacons of hope with the establishment of teaching and learning centers in some of Thailand’s best institutions (e.g., Chulalongkorn, Songkla and Chaing Mai) and an increasing number of professional articles appearing on student-centered learning outcomes in the country (e.g., Wattanakasiwich et al, 2021).

REFLECTIONS ON MY WORK WITH THAI FACULTY

Nothing gives me more satisfaction than working with teachers who want to improve their teaching for their students’ learning. It was an honor to be part of a new experiment for Thailand in faculty development; one that could enable the faculty and administrative “dreamers” of this modernizing country to carry on. Despite the cultural differences between us, it was re-assuring to see how open the faculty were about their challenges as well as their successes. I witnessed their confidence in themselves grow as they tried out new teaching strategies. From the stories that have drifted back to me from colleagues still working in Thailand, it is clear that “student-centered learning” is now part of the lexicon of teaching.

We do well when we cultivate a sense of empowerment and playful wonder among the audience we are serving, and when we communicate respect for their lived experiences. We shouldn’t take ourselves too seriously in these endeavors. As the outsider, I had much to learn from those who were working diligently on behalf of their communities and universities and whose ready regard for my expertise was humbling. The teachers’ commitments to one another, their work ethic and their support for their students energized me. In the end, we are all colleagues, and the only measure of our success is that local faculty can work more effectively and with even greater satisfaction with their students.

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NOTES

1. Brody, C. M. ‘Faculty Development in Thai Universities: A Fulbright Scholar’s Lessons’. *International Journal of Education in Asia-Pacific*, 1(1), 12-09.

2. P. Wattanakasiwich et al., 'Investigating Challenges of Student Centered Learning in Thai Higher Education during the COVID-19 Pandemic,' 2021 *IEEE Frontiers in Education Conference (FIE)*, 2021, pp. 1-7, doi: 10.1109/FIE49875.2021.9637298.



Thai teachers at Burapha University receive an award for completion of a three-month program in faculty development from Dr. Rana Pongreungphant, Vice President, presiding with Fulbright Scholar Celeste Brody.

BIOGRAPHY

Celeste Brody, Ph.D. is formerly the instructional dean at Central Oregon Community College, Bend OR and prior to this held appointments in the field of teacher education at San Jose State University in CA and Lewis & Clark College in Portland, OR. She can be contacted at brody886@gmail.com. She wishes to thank Dr. Ian Smith, associate professor, University of Sydney Australia, and Ms. Porntip Kanjananiyot, former Executive Director, TUSEF, whose insights regarding academic life in Thailand and Thai reform standards, have been most helpful.
