

Humanities across Borders: Asia and Africa in the World

IN 2016, IAS announced its new programme 'Humanities across Borders: Asia and Africa in the World'. Now that the programme's framework is fully in place and activities have started, we would like to provide you with an update about the developments at various levels of activities on research and education, on programmatic events and tangible outcomes, and at the level of the collaborative network. The programme runs from 2017-2020 and is co-funded by The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and the twenty-two partner institutes in Asia, Africa, Europe and the USA.

Titia van der Maas, Programme Coordinator



Bhotiya Tribal Heritage Museum, Munsiri, India; explored as a 'repository of narratives' in the HaB project 'Identity and Mobility along a Trans-Himalayan Trade Route'. Photo courtesy of Surajit Sarkar.

Objectives and method

The objective of the Humanities across Borders (HaB) Programme is to mobilise the development of a global consortium of universities, and their local partners in Asia and Africa, interested in fostering humanities-grounded education. Its epistemological vision is that of an expanded humanities along the Asia-Africa axis of knowledge and collaboration. To this end, the programme

initiates methodological, pedagogical and curricular interventions to surpass narrow disciplinary, institutional, ideological and individualistic agendas in the production of knowledge.

The programme facilitates border-crossing meetings, workshops and other collaborative pedagogical formats, organised by its partners together with their local civil society agents and actors with the objective to shape

Revisiting 'the Workshop Idea' in Mandalay

Aarti Kawlra, Academic Director

THE WORKSHOP *Re-imagining the civic role of the University*, held on 25-26 July 2017 at Mandalay University (Myanmar), was the first attempt at exploring 'the workshop idea' as a space of learning in the context of the Humanities across Borders programme. The account below shares insights into its theoretical background and *in-situ* practical workings.

In an experiment on teaching methods in the social sciences in the mid 1950's, Schenkman wrote in the *Journal of Higher Education*, "... we must get away from the idea that there are experts and non-experts".¹ He was making a case for 'the workshop idea' over 'pure lectures' during a summer session of Dutch universities held in the city of Leiden in 1952. The workshop brought together participants from 16 countries in Asia, Africa and North America to share opinions and experiences on a common platform with regard to the boundaries-crossing topic 'Eastern and Western World'. Sound familiar?

Using 'the workshop' as a site for interrogating and unpacking hardened concepts and pedagogies in the social sciences and humanities is not new. What is special is that curricular experiments took place in Leiden more than sixty years ago in a spirit of collaborative exchange across borders. In this piece, I will share how we, at IAS, have been exploring the idea of the workshop as a space of learning and doing in an open atmosphere, fostering several levels of interaction in an atmosphere of mutual sharing and understanding.

Initiated under the IAS programme *Rethinking Asian Studies* (2013-2016; funded by The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation), and now ongoing as *Humanities across Borders: Asia and Africa in the World* (2017-2020), our methodological and pedagogical explorations draw upon the university's self-appointed role as a "mid-wife ... of the next generation ..."² to re-imagine its boundaries as being dynamic and porous to wider societal exchange. The global terrain of higher education is uneven. Countries of the South have for long looked towards scholarship and research trends emerging from the West. Prevailing curricula are far removed from local and national realities; and pedagogies within the classroom, seminar and field site, however sensitively designed as spaces of learning, nevertheless spiral down to subtly reproduce pervasive hierarchies and deeply entrenched gender biases in the actual face-to-face encounter. In what ways can we bring the everyday context of our socio-cultural and political lives to the forefront even as we inculcate disciplinary (or trans-disciplinary) thinking in educational practice?

Deploying the workshop idea in Myanmar

The workshop titled *Re-imagining the civic role of the University* held on 25-26 July at Mandalay University, was our first attempt at exploring the workshop idea in the context of the Humanities across Borders programme at IAS. Françoise Vergès, advisor to the HaB programme, and I had already worked together within IAS' existing collaborative pedagogical formats of the Summer School and the *in situ*, interactive multi-stakeholder Roundtable. We were able to not only draw upon IAS' model of the Roundtable but also

upon Françoise's experiments with L'Atelier at the Fondation Maison des Sciences de l' Homme (FMSH) in Paris and my own curricular and co-curricular explorations with young adults at The School of the Krishnamurti Foundation of India in Chennai.

Deploying the workshop idea in Mandalay to a Burmese audience could not have been possible without the anchoring vision of Tharaphi Than of Northern Illinois University and the openness of Thidar Htwe Win of Mandalay University. They grounded us in the realities of present day Myanmar, so that we were all the while conscious of the subtle hierarchies defined by nationality, language, gender, discipline and institution in the course of the two days.

Myanmar universities are now in the throes of re-calibrating their mandate in society to define the public role of members of its faculty. Charged for mechanically reproducing rigid, militarised curricula promoting national values and state development goals disconnected from local realities, universities in Myanmar are experiencing large-scale educational reform. According to Tharaphi, "Universities in Myanmar have undergone a depoliticizing process for more than two generations. Politics has been taken out of textbooks, classroom discussions, lectures and political activities banned on campuses. Physical symbols of students' activism such as union buildings have long been demolished as well. In this context it is an understatement to say that our goal to help re-imagine the civic role of universities in Myanmar is daunting". But we had the wholehearted support of the pro-rector and rector of Mandalay University who co-hosted the event on their campus as part of the new national educational policy in the post-socialist militaristic era, following the election of the National League for Democracy. Indeed, according to anthropologist and workshop participant Gustaaf Houtman, Mandalay University opened its doors to him only last year in 2016, even though he has been working in Burma for the past 40 years.

Aim

The workshop was an occasion for mobilising local initiatives as part of our shared goal of catalysing university-society linkages. We wanted curricula to be infused by ideas and values that are not just impacted by state-driven national policies or by prescriptive 'training' models conducted by visiting faculty from foreign universities. It was the first time that Mandalay University hosted an event at which a diversity of civic agents could sit together with academics to discuss matters of curricula and pedagogies around common concerns pertaining to gender inequality, freedom of expression, land-use and educational reforms in Myanmar. Writers, poets, cartoonists, artists, gender and feminist organizations such as Rainfall, Gender Equality Network (GEN), Myanmar Women's Affair Federation (MWWAF), the YWCA, YMCA minority leaders, human rights defenders (including members of Pen, the largest freedom of expression group of poets and writers in Myanmar), a retired doctor practicing traditional medicine, and

private schools located in conflict areas, not only invigorated the discussions but also helped further problematise our workshop process. The workshop gave space to a diverse range of opinions in an atmosphere of open exchange of ideas at an unlikely venue, i.e., the University.

Setting the stage

Spatial arrangement was a matter of special attention for us if the workshop was to nurture free interaction. We chose the horseshoe setup (chairs only, no desks) to accommodate an expanding number of participants and to consciously shift from the frontal proscenium stage setting more conducive for one-way lectures. A long conversation table in the centre was used as a prop to display a number of familiar household objects and food including bananas and traditional snacks to prompt interactive discussions and to allow the participants to move freely along the aisles created on either side. We were particular about avoiding plastic water bottles, the ubiquitous conference artefact. In this way the workshop also became an occasion to use earthen water pots and rice-based homemade snacks and seasonal fruits that are commonly available but often relegated to the background on account of it being an 'international' workshop.

The workshop process unfolded along a semi-structured agenda. Tharaphi became the chief interpreter, although there were some participants who later helped in maintaining a bi-lingual atmosphere at the workshop. Educators who attended the workshop came, not only from the different departments at Mandalay University and Yadanabon University (outside Mandalay), but also from the remote northern hill provinces. Out of the 120 participants who attended the workshop, 100 were women. The teaching profession is dominated by women, not because space has been carved out for them but because a teacher's work day can stretch to incorporate other part-time occupations.

In addition to low incomes, academics in Myanmar face the burden of standardised curricula and the challenge of introducing change in a milieu where English is the official language of instruction but rarely the language of expression for both students and teachers. Whether or not to include micro, ethnic histories; how to bridge the deep schism between rural and semi-rural communities that reside beyond the boundary walls of their universities? In what ways can curricular interventions be initiated in the first place? We therefore took the time to introduce ourselves to the group using the biographical narrative to present the many ways in which our personal realities and choices had informed and intersected our academic paths. It was important to share our own moments of trial and uncertainty and to provide some very concrete examples of how we had sought to question our pedagogical practices both inside and outside the classroom and to stress the point that it was more than just an issue of out-dated curricula.

a curricular matrix and framework for humanistic education across borders. These activities are carried out in the framework of fourteen projects, focusing on such themes as food, embodied practices, voices of dissent, language, memory and migration, in all their dynamic articulations in the world.

Developing the programme's framework

The lead partner institutes as well as the regional Principal Investigators (PI) were identified in 2016. After that, the programme's framework was set up in close collaboration with the PI's. Between November 2016 and January 2017, four meetings were organised (in Leiden, Amsterdam, Delhi and Yangon) for the PI's to meet their regional colleagues and the HaB Project Team in person, to discuss the blueprint of the grant proposal and to explore working in a cross-border and collaborative setting. These workshop-like meetings helped transform tentative plans on research and education into concrete, workable projects.

Kick-off meeting in Chiang Mai

An intensive four-day assembly was held in Chiang Mai, Thailand, organised in close cooperation with and co-funded by Chiang Mai University (CMU). It gathered seventeen Principal Investigators from all involved regions, the programme's advisors Carol Gluck and Françoise Vergès, and the full HaB Project Team.

This meeting was a quintessential step in the eventual cross-border exchange and collaboration between the various individuals and their projects. During this meeting, the PI's presented the first version of their project plans. From the discussions, important common methodological requirements were phrased and comparative themes were identified. An important part of this meeting was a day visit to the CMU 'sites of social engagement', an important requirement for all programmatic research and educational projects. One of the outcomes of this meeting was the insight that in some cases the regional platform structure was not conducive to the programme's objectives. As a result, some of the PI's decided to move forward in a closer collaboration with project teams in other regions, depending on their thematic focus.

'Connected Universities' roundtable

A further meeting was organised in order to get the various institutes actively engaged in the programme. It took place during the tenth International Convention of Asia Scholars (ICAS 10) from 20-23 July in Chiang Mai, Thailand, offering a first opportunity for university officials to meet and develop a shared vision on the Humanities across Borders consortium. The roundtable discussion, entitled 'Connected Universities, Engaged Curricula', was attended by 22 official representatives

of partner universities and 14 research team members. The meeting included break-away sessions on the themes of ranking, internationalisation, social engagement and internal dynamics, and a final plenary discussion resulted in several recommendations. A follow-up gathering to define how the partners in the consortium could concretely contribute to their shared agenda is envisioned for 2018.

The Humanities across Borders Blog

From the onset of the programme, the HaB Project Team and the Principal Investigators have deliberated about ways to facilitate the communication between partners about the developments of their respective projects. In order to share relevant documents and outputs, various means were tested. As a result of this process the HaB team developed an online blog with the support of a newly appointed content manager, who is currently assembling all the information about the people, the projects and the consortium. This blog will include the communication between the PI's as well as an overview of the relevant activities. Initially, this blog will be developed in a closed environment; it will become public when it is fully operational.

www.ias.asia/research/humanities-across-borders-asia-africa-world

Deconstructing meaning

Using a combination of group work and presentations, the first day was an attempt to unlock, unpack and unload received blanket terms and macro concepts and to "make the unfamiliar, familiar and the familiar, unfamiliar".³ The aim was to animate existing tools of social discourse with new meanings by re-situating them in different contexts. Five sub-groups took up five separate words in Burmese to discuss and analyse among themselves and to later share with the rest of the group. Tharaphi had already begun thinking of the many different contexts and meanings of the term 'civic' in everyday and classroom contexts in Myanmar. "I realised the Burmese word we have derived from Pali and all civic duties are considered to have been codified in one of the suttas namely Sigalovada Sutta. Without going down the route of binary between secularism and religion, I thought of just posing questions to workshop participants on how relevant those civic duties were in modern day Myanmar". We weren't able to really take up this question of civic duties in depth but it was a good starting point for interrogation given that "they are etched into the mind of practically every Burmese ..." and often frame and prescribe the day to day relationship between teachers and students in present day Myanmar.

The ordinary banana was the subject of Françoise's example of a familiar point of entry to slowly unravel layers of racism, sex and capitalism in the classroom using unlikely sources of information such as advertisements, films and sports events. My presentation on the 'Stain of Indigo' likewise sought to demonstrate indigo as an entry point and to rethink its popular usage as dye, plant and textile. Reading an original text recounting the day by day unfolding of Gandhi's protest against plantation slavery in Champaran, India in 1917, shifts attention from the dominant heritage and sustainable fashion discourse of indigo towards its entanglement within global techno-capitalism and the anti-colonial struggle for freedom.

Alternative pedagogies

The next day was reserved for some presentations and discussions on alternative pedagogies from local partners and invitees. The 'photo voice' project of the Anthropology department of Mandalay University and Cornell University discussed how to use the photograph as a story telling device in fieldwork among women farmers in Upper Myanmar. The presentation of street photographs from the portfolio of famous photographer Nyein Chan Seine Lann elicited a variety of conflicting opinions particularly from the feminist group Rainfall. The discussion that ensued, we later agreed, was the highlight, indeed, a moment of critical self-reflection for all of us at the workshop.

The feedback (mostly in Burmese) we received was mostly encouraging although some did comment that we had not been able to complete all that we had set out to do or said we would do. This was in fact quite true. I share some of these comments for the benefit of those not present, but also as a way to keep the conversation ongoing.

Feedback #1

Lessons I learnt:

- While doing research, it is more important to observe what is happening rather than on focusing upon the result or the answer.
- Remember to compare from a global rather than a national perspective alone.
- To think of a problem in as many different ways as possible.
- To take an object near (and familiar) to oneself in order to think and teach or learn from the different perspectives it throws up.

Suggestions

Students and teachers are worried about what to do after university life. That is why it would be better to have courses like 'after university life' or do you have any other suggestion?

- There is still a gap of knowledge to fill about gender among teachers (female).

- It would be better if you provide seminars based on gender and leadership.
- Would it be possible to make all the data public to all citizens?

Feedback #2

The workshop [...] changed the way we look at research, from a banal object to a big issue. It persuaded my mind to research about weaving.

Feedback #3

After this workshop I have decided that I will always let my students discuss and think beforehand and then, teach a theory relating to that.

Feedback #4

After seeing the presentations, it is very observable that daily objects have the power to develop a major research. In the future, I will let the students analyse and think over small things that can go to wider and different paths.

Feedback #5

Although we hold dear the banana as it is part of our tradition, we saw that in other parts of the world they have used the banana as a joke or a racist weapon. A single word and object can hold a lot of hidden concepts and meaning.

References

- 1 Schenkman, A. 1955. 'The Workshop Idea Exported', *The Journal of Higher Education* 26(6):305-341; doi:10.2307/1977512
- 2 Uberoi, J. P. S. 1985. 'The Sciences and the Arts in the University', *Economic and Political Weekly* 20(42): 1781-1782.
- 3 Wagoner, B. 2008. 'Commentary: Making the familiar unfamiliar', *Culture & Psychology* 14(4): 467-474.

Below:
Mandalay
workshop
participants.

