

Real World Challenges and Academe

Neelam Raina

In a post pandemic world, we start to rebuild our communities, economies, societies, and we gather lessons learned. One big thing that stands out is our need to be more open to new ideas, approaches, and thoughts - to truly be interdisciplinary. No global challenges that we face can be addressed or resolved without this way of thinking. As researchers and practitioners, we see a clear need to dissolve, resolve, and build bridges between subjects and disciplines and the word 'interdisciplinary' becomes fashionable again.

But what does it mean to be interdisciplinary, intra, and transdisciplinary?

And is it even possible? We need to rethink the way we write and publish, which is a challenge. We need to rethink the way we evaluate and reward interdisciplinary work, the way we study and examine our doctoral work, the way we create departments, schools, and teaching curriculum as well as what we define as innovation in these spaces.

How can we travel the journey of extremely specific expertise towards a PhD and yet be able to broaden out its value and use to communities and the larger world? How do we weave in global challenges and their extensive inter-sectional inequalities? How do we steer clear of replicating knowledge and power hierarchies? How does what we do today impact how we will be able to think and live with the technology that comes at us from all directions? How do we harness our creative energies and our understanding of ethics and principles of equality and equity in everything we do?

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Fig. 1 (left): An A.I.-generated image based on a text prompt of a swamp of presentness. (Image courtesy of Surajit Sarkar)

Fig. 2 (below): Image posted to the social media of the author's colleague, holding a sketch of her grandfather, "Artist Namboodiri," by G. Aravindan.

On Digital Engagement, Sameness, and Our Ability to Discern

Surajit Sarkar

For researchers and students, digital engagement continues everyday, during and off work. A text-prompt A.I. artwork of a swamp of presentness is filled with digital sameness [Fig. 1]. My apprehension emerges from this techno-sensorially enhanced presentness affecting our ability to discern. Everything is equivalent in this mediation, a throwback to the time digital technologies were held by default a democratic tool. Today, as billions record their thoughts in public, the echo chamber of social media is an imperfect mirror to reality, its biases now making the swamp of presentness more difficult to disengage.

Reflecting upon the moment needs knowledge of background, structure and the dynamic between them. It is difficult, more risky when surrounded by the provocations of presentness. In the teaching-learning world of the humanities, a route is sometimes made by holding dear the comfort zone and associated risk averse imaginations. Subverted by the consumerism of objects, trends, and ideas, it becomes near impossible to imagine an autonomous professional, leave alone be one. Between discipline and subject, specialisation and area, it can feel almost dangerous to break the mould. Exercising self-control, also known as self-censorship, becomes a laudable public act.

On the other hand, there are those who are struck with ennui, an overwhelming need to escape the presentness. A couple of hours ago, I saw on the social media of a 30 year old colleague, a post on the passing away

of 97 year old 'Artist Namboodiri,' legendary painter from Kerala. It is a sketch by him of G Aravindan, iconoclast filmmaker, who had died even before my colleague was born. It is a family treasure, taken out to be shared, this time on social media. Her hand holds the crumpled paper down, as she takes the picture, a silent acknowledgement of listening to those who have trudged through the swamp before [Fig. 2].

I am glad that some are looking back from the present and making their own connections to the past. It's a long way home, but it is the only way.

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Left: The teak pillars of U-Pein Bridge along Taungthaman Lake in Myanmar. (Photo courtesy of Zin Mar Latt)

On Place-Based Teaching and Learning

Zin Mar Latt

In the Academic Year 2019-2020, I taught General Anthropology (Anth-1101) to first year students. My colleagues and I, as part of Humanities Across Borders programme and in conversation with Dr Aarti Kawlra, re-looked and re-examined the course outline of General Anthropology in 2018-2019 to make it more connected with the world. Our idea has been to combine the classroom and fieldwork to show how the concepts of general anthropology that the students learn in the class can be connected with the world around them using code words. As extensions of the fieldwork, the students analyse the learnings from the fieldwork with what they learn in the classroom and the theoretical concepts.

With the intention of revising the course of General Anthropology (Anth-1101), I adopted the HAB approach to explore everyday practices, poems, corpuses, and oral histories using U-Pein Bridge situated on Taungthaman Inn as a site of meaning and knowledge.

In the middle of February 2020, the students visited U-Pein Bridge, situated near Taungthaman village by taxi. Their objective was to find out whatever they could - stories, experiences, lores, etc., related with the word concept of their choice.

When I asked the students to list terms connected with intangible and tangible heritage in anthropology, they identified: belief, norms, oral history, relationships, values, practice, symbols, etc.

During the discussion time in the class, a student, Aye Phyu Cynn Thant, described the way they connected code/concept words with the community thus:

When we arrived at the U-Pein Bridge, our group noticed a range of things that

we identified under tangible culture. They are U Pein Bridge, different kinds of crops like sunflowers, beans, corn, boats, and stalls of shops, dirty water, fortune tellers, teak poles used to build U Pein Bridge and visitors.

Conversely, we also learned what intangible culture is after we interviewed the informants. Some of the significant intangible cultures that we observed were visible through the voices of the community members, the bells hanging on the ropes outside the huts,¹ beliefs, worship and behaviour of the informants.

Two additional concepts were added - historical space and livelihood. Given the departure from traditional way of teaching, this experiential exploration of anthropological terms, helped the students to practically connect with what they had learned in the classroom. When I used to teach these concepts, the students had not internalised them. But this time, there was a difference and it was evident in the notes that they collected from the community living near the U-Pein bridge.

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Notes

- 1 In Upper Myanmar, as part of the novitiation ceremony, the parents of children who will change novicehood rent bullock carts with decorated cows with hanging bells to pick novices up to go around the village and then to pay respect to the pagoda and finally to worship the guardian spirit (Nat).

The Challenge of Sustaining Partnerships within the HAB West African Platform

Mohomodou Houssouba

At the launch of HAB in 2017, four West African institutions constituted the West African platform: Institute of African Studies (Ghana), National Institute of Social Sciences (Burkina Faso), Institute of Humanities (Mali) and the Laboratory of Analysis of Societies and Powers / Africa - Diasporas - UGB LASPAD (Senegal). The block enjoyed territorial continuity within an integrated regional community (ECOWAS). HAB was a unique opportunity to create or boost cooperation among the four institutes and eventually extend the network to others. All expressed an interest in holding periodic meetings in the different countries. These would be occasions to stage events that bring the results of research and exchange closer to the larger campus. Departing from academic-style presentations was a shared desire, so experiential workshops, exhibitions, and

interactive podiums were considered more adequate formats. Road trips would offer the opportunity to bring students, teachers, and their research into contact with populations along the way.

In this regard, my own bus trip from Bamako to Ouagadougou to meet colleagues at the partner institution in Burkina Faso (September 2017) was both a self-test and part of the study the Ghanaian team was conducting along borderlands. Bus travel was the closest to living the "grassroots" regional or pan-African experience they explored in the neighborhood, at the borders between Burkina Faso, Togo, and Benin. During the overland journey, I was able to talk with people from all over the region, in French, Bambara, and Songhay; a Malian student returning to his campus in Ouagadougou, a Senegalese tailor rejoining his shop after a stay with his family near the border with