

Chapter 82

Coevolving through Disrupted Discussions on Critical Thinking, Human Rights and Empathy

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ABSTRACT

This chapter considers how teaching and learning cross culturally inevitably disrupts, or interrupts and disturbs teachers' and students' assumptions. Such educational confrontation can produce mind-opening opportunities or mind-numbing fear that can preclude learning. The teacher's challenge is to find a balance between harnessing disruption as an impetus for learning and creating a safe environment for constructive learning exchanges.

Six stories illustrate some of the frustration, confusion, and insight that can arise from mis-interpretation, acontextual teaching, and pedagogical assumptions. The author discusses personal and pedagogical discoveries that emerged during an international social work education program with refugee teachers, health, and community workers from Burma living in exile on the Thailand Burma border (the border). Tensions between East and Western philosophies and methods of teaching called for processes to indigenize the Australian model of social work to the local cultures.

The resulting exchanges of knowledge laid the ground for knowledge and cultural exchanges in interactive, unexpected educational processes.

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BACKGROUND

This chapter explores processes of teaching and learning in an international environment, using a case study of an educational program with people displaced from Burma, living in Thailand. Their lives shattered by violence, war and flight from their country, Burmese refugees in Thailand face continual disruptions to their security, cultures, languages, health and identity and have minimal access to education.

Twenty years ago, Dr. Cynthia Maung established the Mae Tao Clinic (MTC, 2010) to provide free medical services to refugees seeking health care unavailable inside their country of Burma. Responsive to emerging problems, the clinic offers multiple services in the border townships (orphanages, women's shelters, boarding houses) and inside Burma (jungle clinics, outreach backpack medical teams, jungle health and education programs). Dr. Cynthia recruited international assistance to train medics and health workers and, in 2007, sought training to increase workers' awareness of and skills to respond to *social* problems. This formed the basis of a social work education project conducted in 2007 by the author, an Australian social work educator and practitioner. The chapter considers the author's core dilemma of how to deliver a culturally-relevant, sustainable educational program as an outsider.

The understanding of social work education in Australia is very different from social work training on the Thailand Burma border. In Australia and the western world, social work is known as a vocational discipline which derives historically from church, charity and the welfare state's provision of a financial safety net for people unable to provide for themselves, and laws and policies to provide safety. The content and methods of teaching are prescribed and monitored through accreditation by international and national associations (the International Federation of Social Workers and, in Australia, the Australian Association of Social Workers, AASW).

In Thailand, there are 16,000 refugees displaced from Burma in refugee camps along the border (TBBC, 2010) and thousands of others who live as unregistered refugees and migrants. There is no government support and basic health and other care is provided by local and international aid. Education is minimal and vocational training such as health or social work training is provided through initiatives such as Dr Cynthia's request, which brings international people who have the motivation, time and resources to do so. Courses are not accredited, legal frameworks are ambiguous and while Thailand's fledgling democracy has seen some governmental commitment to social welfare through the introduction of child protection legislation and policies, the role of social workers remains unfamiliar to most people.

THE STORIES

Offering a six week course on social work for Burmese refugees in Thailand confronted the assumptions, beliefs and practices of the educator and participants. On many occasions, cross cultural or linguistic confusions rendered everyone unclear about how to proceed. The teacher had to bumble along, looking for clues that did not translate and making it up as she went along. These uncomfortable moments, however, were often resolved in a flash of understanding that deepened cross cultural understandings. The following stories illustrate such disruptive moments, each of which exemplifies Prigogine and Stengers' (1984) concept of a 'bifurcation point', described as a pivotal point of 'stuckness' or 'not knowing', which marks a 'singular moment' of discovery (Gibney, 1987). Being disrupted from your comfort zone can stretch you intellectually and personally, offering insights previously not considered.

The following stories illustrate six points of disruption in cross cultural education. The first describes challenges of interpreting and

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