

**Teaching Differences:
Presenting U.S. Literature in Vilnius, Lithuania**

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The Meeting

The initial moments of cross-cultural interaction are often crucial. Misunderstandings, offenses, hurt feelings, and other possible breaches of communication and interaction sometimes emerge when people of different cultural backgrounds meet. The word "shock" might be said to euphemize the experience. I reminded myself, while in this state of "shock," that understanding takes time and that openness between individuals, and cultures, is key. I repeated to myself, on many occasions while teaching overseas, that graciousness, generosity, and forgiveness, would be my best practices, and that patience (not exactly a specialty of mine), would be more than a virtue, it would be a necessity. As I chronicle my experiences of teaching in Lithuania, I would say I was at my best when I held the above in the forefront of my mind. Trust me, when I say I erred in my interactions. I also know I learned from them and grew from them. I don't believe that anything I learned I learned "too late." I sensed that I learned when I became sensitive enough to perceive differences, motivations, and explanations. I believe that the specifics of what I learned are what will shape my general understanding in future meetings across cultures. That I have much more to learn gives testament to the great cultural richness we carry within ourselves, in each of our cultures, sometimes unbeknownst to us.

In writing this essay reflectively, I will try to stay true to the experiences as they unfolded to show my levels of misunderstanding and efforts at understanding. I want to show how my understanding might have been tardy in relation to my practice. Retrospectively, I've gained some wisdom, but I also know we live in the now, and that's where we, as people between and within cultures, move, interact, make mistakes, grow, and learn. So, I offer you my experiences, and my ignorance, and my efforts – often clumsy – to understand.

Remembering the Beginning

As I prepared to go overseas, I vowed that I would look at U.S. literature as both an insider who had taught the material before and as an outsider who was uncovering its underlying foundations. I hoped to imagine the experiences of my students so that I could better relate to them. Still, I sensed that I could not escape my preconceptions about U.S. literature; indeed, I was expected to present those preconceptions through my curriculum. I also realized that I could not escape my

presumptions about the country in which I was going to teach. My preconceptions in both cases were challenged and sometimes altered, but try as I might, certain frames of reference inevitably remained within the realms of my biases and misconceptions.

I had traveled to Lithuania once before, soon after independence was declared in the country in the early 1990s. My family has strong ties to Lithuania. Both of my parents were born there. Their families had immigrated to the United States after World War II. I grew up in a community of exiled Lithuanians, and so the language, while not one I spoke fluently, was not unfamiliar to me. Also, some of the mannerisms and customs were known to me. As a result, I didn't experience some forms of culture shock. I learned to carry toilet paper with me (since it wasn't standard in bathrooms), I learned to temper my amazed response when I encountered small children who spoke Lithuanian fluently, and I learned how to use a combination microwave/convection oven/grill with dial markings in Cyrillic. Oh, and converting cooking measurements might have been a problem if there hadn't been convenient conversion charts online. Yes. I did have a high-speed internet connection. I relied on it heavily.

When I began to teach, I experienced a bit more shock, because while I had some experience with Lithuanian culture generally, I had no experience with Lithuanian academic culture specifically. I quickly realized that my own conceptions of U.S. literature, in the general sense, were accepted, unchallenged, by students and colleagues at Vilnius Pedagogical University. Instructors asked questions about my syllabi and my teaching methods, a few attended my classes, and several of them read copies of the books that I had brought for students. Overall, though, students and colleagues were reluctant to ask questions or to question my choices. After a few weeks I became aware that, more than the specific courses, pedagogies, or curriculum that I was bringing to Lithuania, I myself would be viewed as the measure of what it meant to be from the U.S. Feeling a bit disconcertingly like Walt Whitman, I discovered that for most of the Lithuanians I met and taught, I was and would be "America." I was granted an authority I didn't seek, and with that authority, came an unquestioning acceptance regarding my choices and actions. While questioning authority had been an important (I might even say integral) component of my U.S. education, particularly at the undergraduate level, I would struggle to bring such a pedagogical starting point into existence in Lithuania. But I didn't know that before I got there. Nor did I really understand, initially, that I was looking for – and not finding – such foundational questioning. There was much I didn't know – especially about my own assumptions.

First Steps

When I first began my application for a Fulbright American Studies grant to Lithuania, I pondered what facets of U.S. literature would be important to convey to Lithuanian students. In email consultation with the faculty at Vilnius Pedagogical University, I knew that I would be teaching third year students a survey course,

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fourth year students a more focused course, and Master of Arts students a course on Modernism (which would include British and U.S. poets).

As I considered the survey course, I decided to include poetry and fiction. I thought about what typified contemporary literature in the U.S. Shaped by my education, teaching experience, and the books available to me, I determined that I most wanted to convey a sense of the diversity of voice in contemporary U.S. literature. As I began to choose authors, I also discovered a sub-theme, the experience of immigrants and the experience of marginalized perspectives (in terms of gender, race, and class) came to the fore. These ideological starting points would serve as the foundation for my third year literature survey course. I paired *The Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry, Vol. II, Contemporary Poetry* with John Gardner's *Grendel*, Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, Toni Morrison's *Sula*, Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street*, and Sherman Alexie's *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*.

For the fourth year course, since my own focus is primarily poetry, I thought about what authors would be the best foundation for Lithuanian scholars of U.S. poetry. I decided that Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson, because they are so frequently identified as the first purveyors of a quintessentially U.S. poetic voice, would serve as exceptional starting points for the fourth year students. In addition, the divergent styles of Whitman and Dickinson would give students an opportunity to see a range of expression in nineteenth-century U.S. poetry. I used R.W. Franklin's *The Poems of Emily Dickinson, Reading Edition*, and Michael Moon's Norton Critical Edition of *Leaves of Grass and Other Writings*.

For the Master of Arts course, I decided to adapt a course I've taught frequently at my institution in the U.S. Since I teach modern poetry at the undergraduate and graduate level here in California, I decided to offer this course to graduate students in Lithuania. When I learned that most of my M.A. students in Lithuania would focus on linguistics primarily, I chose to follow the advice of one of my Lithuanian colleagues and incorporated the critical perspective of a British linguist, Mick Short, who employs linguistic methods to interpret literature. I paired *The Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry, Vol. I, Modern Poetry*, with Short's *Exploring the Language of Poems, Plays, and Prose*, and also had students read excerpts from Peter Nichol's *Modernisms*, and Michael North's *The Dialect of Modernism*.

I designed these three syllabi, holding true to the perspectives that I outlined above. The survey course included a diverse range of novels and poetry. The Whitman and Dickinson course would offer up the most compelling poems of each of the poets. And the Master of Arts course was shaped around the linguistic methods of Mick Short and a different modernist poet each week. When I was granted the Fulbright, I looked forward to the opportunity of teaching these courses and discovering just how I would need to adapt the work load, my teaching style, and my sense of my self as a teacher in a Lithuanian classroom.

What didn't occur to me clearly enough was the way that these courses would exist in isolation in the Lithuanian curriculum in a way that courses I've taught in

U.S. departments do not. In the U.S., the philosophies that informed my courses would be expressed in several formats across the literature curriculum. Courses throughout an academic department would address diversity of voice in nineteenth-century literature and in U.S. poetry generally. While I chose to focus on Dickinson and Whitman in Lithuania, in the U.S., such a course would be supplemented by other poetry courses and by other single and multiple author courses. Courses on modernism would be taught through a number of different genres by a number of different faculty members with a number of different approaches. In our department of twenty nine full time faculty members, eleven teach courses in U.S. Literature. In retrospect, I can see that I was designing courses with a diverse, fully staffed, broad-curriculum literature department in mind. I hadn't thought seriously enough about my being the singular purveyor of U.S. literature. I might have blended more diversity into the fourth-year poetry course, and I might have worked to include more literary and cultural perspectives in the modernism course. If I had known more and thought about it more, I would have kept in mind that regardless of the course, regardless of the year of the students, and regardless of the subject matter, each course was likely to be the only course these particular students would have in U.S. literature. Not only did these courses need to be taught differently because the students were second language learners, these courses needed to be designed differently because they might be the only U.S. literature courses the students took. Each course would microcosmically represent U.S. culture. I didn't know that I planned courses, by and large, within the framework of an English department in a U.S. institution fully depending on the idea that other courses would expand upon, counter, support, and otherwise contextualize the courses I designed. Now, regardless of approach, no one course could offer all of U.S. literature (even within a specific timeframe). Still, I think I would bring more thought to the idea that each course would likely be the only U.S. literature course a student would take.

In Action

As always when I teach, I learned a great deal from my students. In each of the courses I taught at Vilnius Pedagogical University I discovered assumptions that I brought into a classroom, and I uncovered some of the assumptions that my Lithuanian students brought to the classroom. Some of our learning was positive, and as is so often the case when different cultures interact, some of our learning was quite difficult. Before I turn to what I learned in each class, I want to address the issue of plagiarism. I had heard a lot about rampant plagiarism from others who had taught overseas, and yet, expecting it and having encountered it, I'm not sure I'm better able to address, explain, or fully consider plagiarism culturally and ideologically. Still, I offer the thoughts I have in the hopes that a continuing dialog will open up avenues for more understanding among cultures on this issue.

I assigned three essays in the third and fourth year courses and asked students, repeatedly, to include their own perspectives and thoughts. Many referenced the class discussion, and many pulled portions of their work off the internet, often

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through cutting and pasting text and weaving what they had cut and pasted into their own prose. In reading their essays, I learned to discern “lifted” passages where the general biographical information about the chosen author flowed without the common mistakes they made in other paragraphs. I bracketed those sections and let them know that they could cite the language of others as long as they gave other writers credit. When I returned the essays, I spoke about plagiarism. The students nodded their heads “yes” when I asked if they knew what plagiarism was and also when I asked if they knew how to cite sources. And yet, many of them had no sense of culpability when they plagiarized. They knew they’d get better marks if their English was more proficient than if it wasn’t, and I wasn’t sure that their Lithuanian instructors (who diligently spent hours reading student essays all the while consulting dictionaries and usage handbooks) had the same facility for noting language shifts that I had.

I thought about plagiarism, and I wondered how my stance on plagiarism was culturally slanted. In the U.S. institutions where I’ve worked, the discussions of plagiarism tend to focus on ownership and property. An individual deserves credit for ideas. The sanctity of an individual’s ideas must be maintained, and a person shouldn’t profit (economically or grade-wise) from the ideas of another. At my current university, the question of plagiarism is presented under the rubric of “Academic Dishonesty.” The deceit – presenting work that’s not your own as your own, taking credit for the ideas of another by not acknowledging the other person – tends to be the foundation for culpability. I have heard little to no discussion of the idea that a student cheating is a student cheating him or herself out of an education. In my classes in Lithuania, I hoped to help the students improve their writing in English. If they were lifting passages off the internet, they weren’t learning to develop and hone their own style of written English. They were skeptical, at first, when I said I wanted to hear what they thought. I focused my comments extensively on the passages in their essays where they expressed themselves without the generalizations and stock prose of web pages. Some students never plagiarized. Other students lengthened the passages that expressed their own ideas, and some eliminated all plagiarized passages. Others simply waited for me to move on as an instructor. I was only there for a semester, and what I suggested wasn’t enough to counter years of support for their writing practices.

I was curious about what students in Lithuania thought about plagiarism, and when I had a chance, I spoke candidly with a few of them, one on one, about the issue. The students admitted plagiarism was rampant. They noted that they risked poor grades by turning in their own error-plagued work and that they earned praise for submitting well-written work. They sensed that their Lithuanian instructors focused on style of presentation more than on content, so the students focused on presenting clear prose. They reasoned, why receive a poor grade when a careful cutting, pasting, and weaving would win you accolades? If the point was to get a good grade, that point was accomplished by selective cutting and pasting. And because Lithuanian instructors suspected plagiarism but had discovered no means

by which to prove their suspicions, there were virtually no punitive measures against plagiarism.

During the semester, I asked two of the students to completely rewrite their essays. The essays were clearly lifted (because yes, there were identifiable levels of skill in how effectively one plagiarized) and there was little presence of any voice but an Internet voice. I did not comment on the work and gave it back to the students asking them to re-submit essays with their own perspectives. Unlike U.S. students who become very defensive at the mention of plagiarism, these students took up the challenge. They seemed surprised that I actually wanted to hear from them. They did resubmit the work, and I sensed that they found pride in it. As one student wrote, "My writing for the essay might not be perfect, but it is mine."

As I continued to consider the plagiarism issue, I wondered about the focus on style rather than content. I conceded entirely that the English language faculty members at Vilnius Pedagogical University were doing good work with their students. The students' written English was far more proficient than I expected. But I wondered about the tendency to privilege style over content. I thought about the bias of my own perspective and the way I privilege what I have been educated to think of as "originality." What I began to conclude was that the focus on presentation (and the subsequent plagiarism that conceded to it) had something to do with power. Most of the faculty that I worked with at the University had been educated under the Soviet system. Lithuania was an occupied country and subject to the laws of the Soviets in all matters. As with members of many marginalized or disempowered groups, if a person sees herself and her culture as disempowered, who is she to have opinions, insights, or knowledge of note? And if you're a student taught by disempowered faculty, who would really care, or notice, or be concerned that you, one of the disempowered and largely erased, used the words of the powerful? Having so little power yourself, what other words would there be for you to use?

When I read the work of faculty members at Vilnius Pedagogical University, they would hand me their work with a proud exclamation of how many outside sources they cited. And the work itself would often be a running list of other thinkers who had published work in the area with an insight, or really more of an aside, added to that list. I am perhaps being unfair. I am speaking from the perspective of someone who writes in the language I have spoken since childhood. I do not have to address the same concerns with presentation that the Lithuanian faculty members have to address when composing in English. I do have an internal censor that's quite strong, and that I've grappled with over the years, the "who are you to say this?" voice, and perhaps the faculty whose work I read at Vilnius Pedagogical University also had such a voice. The way they answered that voice was citation, citation, citation.

Now, some time later, I offer one more layer of reflection: To what extent does my education lead me to privilege the idea of the individual perspective? To take an individual stance, to question authority, to assume that what I say is of worth and of interest to others, are ideas that I unquestioningly bring into a classroom. These are

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also assumptions associated with a primarily empowered perspective. To speak ideas and to assert them publicly is not limited only to those with privilege (there are ways of speaking out from strength, even when disenfranchised), but such assertion, more often than not, is associated with an individual who doesn't have to fear repercussions for speaking his or her mind. If I didn't see the risk of speaking out, it is because I have not been seriously endangered by doing so. To speak out, when not empowered, I think, requires far more forethought, far more risk, and often involves many more consequences. My assumptions about self-assertion, then, were associated with a privilege I didn't fully realize I had.

The Third Year Survey Course

The U.S. literature survey course had 97 students enrolled. All of the third-year students majoring in English took the course because the faculty wanted students to hear lectures by a native speaker of English. While I teach at a large University in the U.S., most of my courses have forty or fewer students. Lecturing for the entire class period was a new experience for me. Lecturing in wintertime in a room that had no heat was also a new experience. The students kept their winter coats on throughout the class. They were packed into the room and were very hesitant to answer any questions I put forth. One student later told me that many students were embarrassed to speak English out loud, and that fear was compounded by being in a room with many other people listening. So, they didn't say much during the lecture. But I found out what they thought about the assigned texts from their essays.

I was glad that students often related to the stories and poems that we read and that I lectured on in class. They related very strongly to Maxine Hong Kingston's *Woman Warrior*. In particular, the first chapter in Kingston's book, "No Name Woman" (Kingston 1-16) reminded many students of a Lithuanian story, *Pascanduole*. In Kingston's chapter, a woman is punished by the village when she gives birth to an illegitimate child. After the village humiliates the woman and her family by ransacking the house, the woman drowns herself and her newborn baby in the family well. The family, in reaction to the woman's having brought shame and dishonor to them, refuses to speak her name. In the Lithuanian story *Pascanduole*, a young village girl drowns herself in a lake after being abandoned by the lover who impregnated her. Students noted the connections between the two stories, and noted also, their perceptions of their society's response to unwed mothers. Some students insisted that Lithuanians never treated unwed mothers as harshly as the woman was treated in Kingston's story. Other students told stories of overt and covert social dismissal of women who had children out of wedlock. The issue of how a society responded to a single parent was brought to the fore, and students were divided on how their society responded. Also, in relation to immigration, many students responded very strongly to Kingston's stories about her aunt's difficulty at assimilating into U.S. culture after arriving from China. While Lithuania is not a country with widespread immigration into its borders, many students noted some experience with immigration and its difficulties. They

related stories about relatives who were unable to assimilate into Russian culture, or who, having grown up in Russia or Siberia, were unable to assimilate back into Lithuanian culture. In each case, they related the experiences of those familiar to them with the experiences of Kingston's aunt. They noted that a sense of self-loss developed when a person had difficulty adjusting to a new situation.

One set of associations that surprised me initially but not in retrospect was the students' interest in, and identification with, the work of Native American writers. I had assigned some stories from Sherman Alexie's book, *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, a collection of short stories set almost entirely on the Spokane/Coeur d'Alene reservation. The students related to the hard living, hard drinking, and harsh poverty in Alexie's stories. One student told me that the "United States was built on the bones of those people [the American Indians]." While the students didn't necessarily express the idea directly, they clearly related to the idea of being oppressed, having their land taken, and having to adapt to a different system of governance. They saw parallels not only between the Soviet occupation of Lithuania and the westward expansion and occupation of Native American lands in the Americas, but also between the aftermaths of such occupations. The desire to find an escape through drugs and alcohol, the poverty, the despair, and the will to continue were all parallels that they drew between the history of their own country and the history of American Indians. People didn't really drink alcohol much in Lithuania, I heard time and again, until the Soviet occupation.

Another work that received particular attention from students was Cathy Song's poem, "Sunworshippers" (Song 1022-1023), which chronicles the speaker's struggles with anorexia nervosa. Many Lithuanian students mentioned friends and relatives who suffered from eating disorders. Some students suggested that the influx of Western European and U.S. advertising contributed to the disorder. As long as anorexics had someone thin and glamorous to point to they were spurred on in their quest to lose weight.

In reading the contemporary novels, poems, and short stories, students often expressed shock that there was poverty, hunger, and difficulty in the U.S. Their general assumption was that the U.S. was a wealthy country where everyone had more than enough to eat and more than enough money to buy whatever they wanted. Students found it difficult to believe that a country with so much wealth could have anyone poor or hungry within it. Many of their families inherited housing that was provided during the Soviet Era. It seemed inconceivable to them that people in the U.S. (I live in California where housing is particularly expensive) were unable to afford houses. They were so accustomed to Hollywood visions of the U.S. (U.S. movies are a staple on many Lithuanian cable channels) that they were puzzled by literary texts that offered perspectives that lacked glitz and glamour. I hoped that the literature expanded their understanding of the literary diversity and also of the social, ethnic, and economic diversity of the U.S.; however, the U.S. popular culture they most frequently had access to in movies and music might have continued to educate them otherwise. I might have been the spokesperson for U.S.

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literature, but U.S. popular culture had a commanding presence of its own in Lithuania.

Whitman and Dickinson

The fourth year course on Whitman and Dickinson enrolled 27 students. The most surprising development in this course was that the students, almost entirely, preferred the work of Dickinson. In the United States, there are usually a few strong Dickinson adherents, but most students prefer Whitman. The obscurity of the Dickinson poems and the ways in which she asserted and then took back or complicated her assertions sometimes troubled the Lithuanian students. Just why does she call marriage an “Eclipse” one of the students asked (Dickinson 102)? Whitman’s “What I shall assume you shall assume” (Whitman 26), apparently, was too brash and expansive. The large personality, the all-encompassing grasp of fellowship was all well and good when fellowship was the intent. U.S. scholars have raised questions about the “manifest destiny” ideology expressed by Whitman, and with Lithuanian students, who had, in their country’s history, felt the effects of large personalities (who granted, were not grasping in fellowship but in power), the desire for expansiveness was met with an awareness of what happens to those who are grasped against their will. More directly, from the perspective of second language learners, they didn’t know how to keep track of Whitman as they read. They preferred the Dickinson poems where the poems’ boundaries, at least as printed on the page, were clear. Again and again they chose to discuss Dickinson’s poems and only grudgingly acquiesced to study Whitman’s.

In this course, due to its smaller size, I was able to engage in more discussion. Students outside of class told me that they weren’t entirely comfortable with class discussion. In their experience, when a teacher asked a question, there was a specific answer. If the answer was incorrect, that was embarrassing enough. In interpretations of literature, they noted, if their interpretation didn’t match that of the instructor, they were often dismissed. So, rather than face humiliation, the students chose to avoid speaking unless they were sure to have the correct answer to a direct question.

Again, I sensed that this hesitance toward discussion had multiple foundations. Students were shy about speaking English and making mistakes. Students often indicated that they assumed there was a “right answer” to an asked question. And, again, I think the issues of authority and individuality come into play. I wanted to hear what they thought, individually, expressing my privileging of the individual and that individual’s assertiveness. The students felt better about answering questions where an answer was clear.

The MA Students

In retrospect, I found the experience with the MA students the most interesting, and in some ways, the most troubling. These students were interested in developing and learning to express their own ideas, though they told me they were not

encouraged to do so. Their MA thesis topics were assigned by the instructors, and they selected their projects on a first come, first served basis. If they happened to see the MA thesis sign-up sheet as it went up, they would have the first pick of topics. If they arrived last, they'd receive whatever project was left. The number of topics was determined by the number of students. There were no extra topics offered. Once the thesis projects were engaged, students were expected to follow the dictates of their directors. They expressed frustration at this set of circumstances, but they had no sense of how to change matters. Many simply chose to enter fields outside of academia.

When I asked faculty about this method of assigning MA thesis topics, the several people I spoke to mentioned that there were only a few faculty members available to direct theses. They also noted that a faculty member couldn't very well direct a thesis in an area outside of his or her specialization. So, topics were determined by the few faculty members who could direct such projects, and the projects focused on areas of knowledge familiar to those faculty. A strong sense of imparting a specific field of knowledge to students during the thesis project informed the way the department approached theses as did limited resources, especially in terms of faculty members already stretched in an understaffed department.

In terms of the literature, the MA students gravitated toward Frost. They were especially fond of his work, though Sandburg and Millay also had their adherents. Since this was modernist poetry in English, I taught several British and Irish authors. The students were especially quiet on the days that I taught the World War I poets Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen. They said they didn't like to read about war. Wars were in the past, they asserted, and should remain there. This response was one I encountered with frequency in Lithuania. Only one person at the university spoke openly about her experiences under communism.

The course went smoothly until the very end. Then, I discovered dynamics that had been in play throughout the entire semester and that I had not perceived. One of the characteristics of teaching in Lithuania was that grades were a matter of public record. After the end of the semester, grades (with the names next to them) were posted outside the department office. Because grades were a matter of public record, students knew where they stood academically in relation to each other. Unbeknownst to me, these sets of relations were firmly established and students felt fairly certain about where they should "finish" in terms of grades. Because the third year class was so large, I didn't get a sense of these groupings and grade hierarchies. Because the MA class was so small (12 students) not only did I suddenly realize the students' expectations regarding grades, but I came under fire from students who felt that they didn't get the grade — and the subsequent class standing — that they were entitled to.

One student, who had revised all of her work repeatedly and extensively, earned the highest mark. Several students came in at the very next grade level. These were the students who questioned my grading of the student who outperformed them. Several students emailed me and said that I had been unfair.

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They said that other faculty would be shocked to hear that the student who earned the highest grade had done so. Several students said that they wouldn't have minded if one or another student had earned the highest grade, but that this particular student had done so, was not acceptable. I answered the students with explanations of how I arrived at the grades. I suggested that the grades of another person were not really their concern, and that they should focus on their own work and their own achievements. I noted to several of the students that they had not chosen to revise their work, and that this particular student had. She worked hardest in the class and her grade reflected her efforts.

When the furor over grades erupted I retrospectively remembered details about the class dynamics. I remembered where people sat in the room. When I faced the class, there was a group of students on the left, a group of students on the right, and a smaller group of students who sat toward the back of the room. The students who sat on the left almost all complained about the grade received by the student who scored highest. Not a single student from the group that sat on the right complained. The student who earned the highest grade, by the way, sat on the right. One of the students who sat in the back of the room wrote me an email saying that she was glad that each student was allowed to prove him or herself in the class. I can see now that the students had grouped themselves according to their understanding of where they should be in the class. Those students who felt that they deserved the best grades sat together. Those that felt that they were not the favored students sat together, and those who didn't relate to either group, for any number of reasons, sat in the back of the room. Unbeknownst to me when calculating their grades, I had disrupted their understanding of their place in the class. Apparently, public disclosure of grades led students to expect particular outcomes and assessments. I experienced culture shock at such direct public disclosure of grades. Here, the very individuality I was asking for earlier, was suddenly countered by my sense of that individual's right to some privacy in relation to their grades.

My Lithuanian Colleagues

Almost all of my colleagues in Lithuania were linguists by training, and with a few exceptions, they had all been educated under the Soviet system. For the most part, they had learned, and then taught, a particular pedagogy. There was a proper way to write an essay, and the better a student approximated that ideal form, the higher the grade. This method, while not necessarily supporting creativity, did develop strong English language skills in the students. The written work was far better than I expected. I teach at an institution in the U.S. in which many of the students (48%) speak English as a second language, and I am familiar with the work of second language learners. The students of English at Vilnius Pedagogical University showed remarkable proficiency in their written English.

While the grammar was proficient, the creativity and insight was somewhat less notable. Students were not necessarily encouraged to be original or creative in thought or presentation. Again, the issue of authority reared its head. The deferral

of authority, or the borrowing of authority from other scholars was one of the skills students were taught. The instructors used the pedagogy that had been their educational framework when teaching their students. Students who were amenable to such a system were successful while those not amenable to the system struggled. The educational system, then, tends to remain in place because those best suited to it succeed and become instructors while those not suited to it don't continue their studies. I will readily admit I have seen similar dynamics in U.S. institutions. Institutional frameworks, across cultures, seem to have a way of maintaining and perpetuating themselves.

One major difficulty with the educational system in Lithuania, particularly where English majors are concerned, is that there is little incentive, either educational or economic, for students to work in academia. With English language skills, they have many more opportunities to work outside of academia – and often choose to do so. As a result, the faculty members are aging, and few young faculty members replace them. At Vilnius Pedagogical University, faculty members were called out of retirement to staff classes because there simply weren't enough teachers.

Other Experiences

While in Lithuania, I frequently encountered the presence of U.S. culture. In addition to hotel and restaurant chains – there was a Holiday Inn in Vilnius and a McDonald's – there were U.S. cultural incursions. I remember sitting in the Parliament Square one day, and hearing a teenager, tuned into an iPod, singing a U.S. pop song at the top of his lungs – with a Lithuanian accent. One weekend, at the end of March, I listened to Frank Sinatra singing over the restaurant speakers. Despite the time of year, no one seemed to mind that he was singing Christmas carols. I didn't watch TV very often, but when I did I experienced dislocation as U.S. movies were dubbed in Russian or Polish with Lithuanian subtitles. Often the dubbing was done in one voice that expressed all of the characters' lines, regardless of gender or context, with the same elevated inflection. I also noticed, early on, my tendency to "overshop" at the grocery stores. People stared and stared at the number of items I purchased. Eventually, trained by having to carry all those groceries home on foot through the snow (and no, it was not uphill in both directions, luckily) I learned the wisdom of buying a few fresh items every few days.

In my teaching, I had hoped to bring students in Lithuania a sense of the diversity of literary voice in the U.S. I also hoped to encourage them to develop and express their own thoughts and ideas, learning to recognize that an emphasis on creativity and original thought was an emphasis I had developed, unawares, in my own education in the U.S. The longer I stayed in Lithuania, the more I realized that the exportation of popular culture would have much to do with the perceptions of the U.S. that Lithuanians developed. As much as I was seen to be "America" in a university setting, "America" in a larger cultural context would exist in terms of U.S. businesses, advertising, and popular culture.

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I would like to note that I was always greeted with warmth, and that the graciousness of the people around me made me realize, quite directly, that fellowship within a department, between everyone – those who agreed with each other and those who disagreed with each other – was an art that I had not seen practiced with such grace in the departments of English I have studied and worked at in the U.S. In the U.S. departments in which I've studied and taught we exhibit great skill in our consideration of ideas, but, in my experience, we tend toward clumsiness in our consideration of each other.

Also, as I write this, I wonder, why does so much of my elaboration of difference sound like condemnation and complaint? I sense how limited my understanding of difference is, and how impoverished my vocabulary and thought is in coming to terms with it. Even when I hope to remain merely descriptive, a negative tone enters. In addition to the sense of graciousness and consideration I experienced in Lithuania, then, I would also add that I have become more attuned to the frames within which I see, describe, and also experience cultural differences. As someone who taught the "diversity" of voice in America, I learned about the limitations of my own perceptions and frames of reference in relation to difference. Perhaps what contributes to the proverbial "ugliness" of Americans traveling abroad is a cultural limit, a lack of flexibility in language and thought, in response to difference. No matter how far we travel, we still have a long way to go.

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