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ESSAYS

The Past is Another Country

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Abstract

This reflective piece explores the formative years of the Institute for International Studies (IIS) at the University of Technology Sydney, considering its approach to global education and immersive learning. Through a critical reflection on the cultural and social context of early 2000s Australia, I recall the collaborative and experimental pedagogies that shaped both students and faculty. By embracing cultural difference, contextualisation, and student-centred inquiry, IIS cultivated a unique educational environment that encouraged exploration beyond conventional academic borders, ultimately laying the foundation for reimagining International Studies in a transformative way.

Keywords

International Education; Multidisciplinary; Immersive Learning; Cultural Difference; International Studies; Reflective Pedagogy

‘The past,’ as L. P. Hartley opened his novel *The Go-Between* in 1953, ‘is another country.’ Thinking back to my arrival in Olympic Sydney in 2000, when I joined the Institute for International Studies (IIS) at the University of Technology Sydney (UTS), I’m struck less by the foreignness I experienced as a migrant—considerable as this was, despite the privileges of travelling as a ‘cosmopolitan’ academic—than by the displacement involved now, as I try to recall and re-conjure the intellectual, pedagogical, social dispositions, of the time. John Howard’s Australia, replete with its own stray aliens ([Allatson et al. 2002](#)), seems, in retrospect, as divisive a mindset, as nonchalantly partial and jubilatory, as cunningly segmented, as the culturally shrunken West fortresses we inhabit in 2024. Stopping boats and tarring dissent and dissenters, from memory, loomed large then as now. Same songs perhaps, but I’ve nonetheless a sense the tunes of this past can best be recollected if they are queered rather than assimilated: after all this was a time before social media (completely) gobbled our soul, pre-‘gaslighting’ and

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the declared wars on ‘woke,’ in and of an era when pandemics were seen, politically and epidemiologically, as containable, when lids made sense, and trump was a mere card game.

‘[T]hey do things differently there,’ Hartley goes on to caution. And, indeed, the first contours of the past country of IIS that I recall are the emphases we placed on contextualising the kinds of social and cultural upheavals I evoke above, and on sensing and tracing such difference across and along geographical borders. The Institute’s early years, for me, were marked not only by the (now no less) urgent interest in embedding precision and nuance as we charted cultural and social differences, othernesses, departures and emergences, but in how we did so. Multidisciplinarity was key to this, our sense of ‘the research project’ an ever-morphing academic Moebius strip capable of upending the hidden, going against grains, seeking less worn paths, and characterised by ludic forays among multiplicities of linguistic and cultural articulations. This attention to variance, this interest in unsettling, had as its constant in the darkness the faintly luminous traces of multifactorial cultural difference and contested social change.

Global education at IIS, our innovative approach to intensive, sustained, invested field learning was perhaps foremost a pedagogy conceived less as a formalism than as a student-centred inquiry into the heart (or, like an octopus or the Doctor, for the encounters that In-Country Study engineered were multi-universal, hearts), of otherness: and so too a practical and supported student experience of research into the human, tropes of othering and prejudice, but also of hosting and care. In retrospect, perhaps less so into the more-than-human, our collective intelligence still blithely naturalised, our faith in continuities unaffected by the geopolitical quakes to come, our sense of ecocide and the complicity in this of all-encompassing extractive capital less acute. Training undergraduates to take to fields was also a training in self-reflection (for us as much as our students), and the intensive briefing programmes we put in place incorporated both practicalities and the contingent, preparation, in the jargon of that day, both for the known unknown and, at its most thrilling, for kinds of unexpected unknowing and happenstance, what happens per chance abroad.

More so than on any campus encountered since, these were frame workings of immersive and continuous learning in which we experimented, as much as established; and the collective discussions that scaffolded, refined, refused, sometimes dared, their attendant learning objectives in ways that not only accommodated but invited their subjective corollaries, took place on aluminium furniture scattered over the market city’s paved triangular patio and below in regular, irregular cafés. The past was collaborative—a term I would prefer to the stuffier ‘collegiate’ as there were no airs, no graces, to the pooling together of intuition and method, the prisms of experimentation permeating planning and execution, with informality becoming, and dialogue informing, the form of programme. We learned to listen, adapt, play, encounter, and to move on. Later, having moved along myself, first to work in Nottingham, then the Netherlands, and finally to less urgent occupations, as years decade and curricula came and went (if never ‘delivered’), research projected, as with many of us who had come and gone, I would find thoughts fitting back to IIS days, our own immersion in the past country of a bricolaged pedagogy fit again, purloined for new purpose. In my own case, the Culture Labs I later helped develop (Dibazar and Pratt 2020) were a BA in International Studies in nanocosm (all that the structures would allow): a four week immersion in a capital of European culture, structured as preparation (packing), orientation (walking around and talking), inquiry (by any means, from staging postcard exchanges with refugees in Malta to mapping, cartooning, intervening, tracing Paphos’s sedimented presents, collaging in Plovdiv, casting and tasting, reimagining the cities we set to encounter) and, in the fourth week, what gets authorised as dissemination, valorisation, but makes sense as sharing, sparking further learning, tropes I’d later recognise with glee when I started reading the radical pedagogical writing of Tim Ingold.

Contesting Euro Visions, our collective project at IIS, configured worlds, ours and students’ alike. More than place-holder, our collaborative research project named, in anticipation, the rifts that later would rip an island asunder in shame, reinstated the darkest heart across the continent as pseudo-valid, mainstream alternative, if also flaring possible antidotes. Our approach eschewed, deliberately and deliberately,

research focus and funding priorities, its parameters moulded in margins, doubt and hope, an unknowing and an undoing too. Later on, moving on, syllabuses and enquiries would build on the deontologies we then up-earthed, our own talks and texts intertwined with In-Country itineraries, constituting our own cultural landscape tours and learning journals. Doing European Studies in and from Australia was half the battle, and all of the critical advantage, a world apart from convention. For contention and contesting are again forms of context and contextualisation, reorientations that speak from positions of silence be they near or afar. The world of IIS shaped scholarship and learning as it found them, so not-Europe encountered provincial and metropolitan China at the round table, beside Latino USA and other imagined communities; learned from fieldwork on fisheries and inquiry into linguistic anomaly, social heritage, and cultural innovation. These were workshops formatted to foreground the formative, calling response, inaugurating research as exchange that broadened and deepened, evoked context as a jolt of juxtaposition. And, in doing things differently there—be that there Guadalajara, Guandong, or Ultimo—there and then were constellations that jostled, jostled and arranged anew, sometimes astonishingly, often in honest configurations however evanescent, always suggesting, hoping, essaying, learning as dreamtime and as a hesitant mapping of the dim and the faint while nights drew in.

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