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ESSAYS

## 'How the Hell Did You Wind Up in Australia?' or You Teach What You Know

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### Abstract

On Thanksgiving in 2024, while sharing a meal with fellow expats in Brisbane, I reflect on my unexpected journey to Australia and my role in the International Studies program at UTS. This personal narrative explores how my own experiences of cultural adaptation—navigating new customs, language quirks, and everyday challenges—mirror those of the students I taught. This reflection celebrates 30 years of International Studies at UTS, expressing gratitude for a career that intertwines my cultural roots with a global academic community, and underscores the importance of empathy and shared experiences in fostering intercultural understanding.

### Keywords

**UTS; BAIS; Cultural Adaptation; Translational Academia; Canada Studies; Quebec**

It's late November in 2024. Thanksgiving rolls around for another year. In sub-tropical Brisbane, I'm engaged in conversation over a plate of turkey and dairy-laden 'vegetable' side dishes. In a situation that is comfortingly familiar for those of us who are part of the global academy, I'm sitting with a dozen other transnational orphans, mostly drawn from the local hockey league (no need to add the modifier 'ice' for this crowd), in the home of someone I know through shared grad school connections. I'm not a familiar face from the rink, but my accent and ability to make a green bean casserole without a recipe identify me as a fellow North American expat. It's an odd coincidence to be sure. And then I say 'about' and I get the looks that suggest that I'm celebrating Thanksgiving 6 weeks too late. If it hasn't happened

already, somebody trying to put together the pieces of a biography will inevitably ask: ‘How the hell did you wind up in Australia?’ Funny story ...

Almost 15 years ago to the day, I found out I was successful in landing a continuing (i.e. tenure track to my still American academic frame of reference) job teaching French and Canadian Studies in Sydney. Two Trump presidencies later, I’m musing that I have even more to be thankful for than I expected at the time. That said, gainful academic employment in my field, my sub-field even, in a city that had a lot going for it, especially when compared to the list of colleges in towns I had to look up to situate was already quite appealing in 2009. Looking back, I had never heard of UTS before putting together an application and didn’t have the faintest idea why a university with ‘Technology’ in the name in the heart of Sydney would need a Québécois with experience teaching French and running study abroad programs. But when 70% of the jobs in your field get cancelled due to a global recession, you don’t ask too many questions. You quickly say yes to the job offer, figure out how to pack your life up (at least temporarily), do as much research as you can, but ultimately talk yourself up that you’ll figure it out when you get there.

Many of the people who became my colleagues in the International Studies program at UTS have similar stories. The move to Australia—whether motivated by relationships, study, employment or some combination thereof—was the jumping off point for an adventure for which we were only partly prepared. We (mostly) spoke the language and thought we had a sense of what to expect. Of course we didn’t. Not fully. That is perhaps the core truth of the teaching (and learning) in International Studies. But we didn’t let that stop us from truly enjoying the teaching in a program that is still a delightful anomaly insofar as it allows students the time and space to learn culture through deep and sustained immersion. A colleague characterised it as ‘deep hanging out,’ a description I still love, but one that doesn’t quite acknowledge the differences between enjoying a place at and for leisure, and the engagement that comes from having to set up a household, and work or study in a different context.

Reflecting on my first days in Sydney to take up my new job, the parallels to what our students experienced are striking. Like them, I had to find my way to the university on that first day to let somebody in authority know that I’d arrived. My arrival was, humbly, far more consequential for me than it was for them. I had to get set up with a local phone, a bank account, ID, figure where to live and make some new friends so that these months (and years) in my new home wouldn’t consist of work and streaming TV with time-zone dodging calls back to Canada and the USA. For every time I thought I knew what to expect, confident that I spoke the language and had done my research by reading the history and watching popular TV shows (the back catalogue of *Master Chef* in my case), something would catch me off guard. The shock that one paid rent by the week rather than by the month, for instance, quickly moderated my search parameters.

My own realisation that I was imperceptibly acclimating to my new environment with its norms, customs and idioms allowed me to empathise with the students I would send to Canada and guide them, without spoiling the character building joy of discovery, around what to expect. Just as I’d learned the hard way, despite all the warnings, how vicious the Australian sun can be, my ‘lessons’ on flat-footed walking around a carpeted classroom in preparation for the icy sidewalks of Montreal were no match for the humbling experience of black ice and bruised backsides. We learned by doing and recognised both the exhilaration and the discomfort of that process.

The exchange of knowledge, perspectives and empathy toward the newcomer that occurred daily when teaching in International Studies wasn’t limited to cultural norms and survival tips. It became a semester-long gag for one my first intro French classes to make me unwittingly butcher the pronunciation of ‘Wagga Wagga’ at least once a session. I’d retaliate by forcing in new vocabulary words that contained at least three vowels in a row and a silent consonant or two. The experience of hearing each other massacre pronunciation

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was the sardonic reminder that communication, even laughably attempted, could be successful and the basis of community even if it wasn't perfect.

Our exchanges in English took place fluently, but at occasional cross purposes as I struggled to understand words that seemed to have been stripped of their 'R' sounds or that had been truncated and/or combined. Spoken Australian English was at times as confounding to me as Québécois French was to my students, especially those who were preparing to stay in Montpellier rather than Chicoutimi. I challenged their ethno-cultural assumptions about 'real' French as my own familiarity with the local lingo increased. I gave as good as I got and scored some points.

Intercultural understanding and capability have always been core tenets of the curriculum in International Studies. The teaching staff have not only subscribed to it as educators and researchers, but as people who live it every day. Teaching in the program was a continual process of sense-making that had me ceaselessly question why things unfolded as they did. Speaking for myself, I acknowledge and, on this anniversary, give thanks for a start to my career that allowed me to stay tethered to my home, my culture, my intellectual passions and my language all the while making a new life for myself.