

Memories of UMUC

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Author's note: I worked for UMUC from 2000-2009. I started as a faculty member teaching Psychology and Statistics in Japan and South Korea (2000-2002). I then served as an administrator in various iterations (Distance Education Director, Area Director, Service Program Director) in Japan (2002-2006) and Germany (2006-2009). It was my first job out of graduate school, and I could not have been more lucky. Thanks in particular to Joe Arden and Rosemary Hoffmann, who said yes to a persistent graduate student looking to travel the world.

I serve now as a Foreign Service Officer, posted to Almaty, Kazakhstan. In many ways, working for UMUC was like being a diplomat: traveling to far-flung places, sharing one's culture and knowledge, taking in local customs and traditions, and hopefully making a positive contribution to the world. Ultimately education is about increasing student awareness of the past, understanding the mechanisms of the present, and preparing for the challenges of the future. It is noble work, and all very relevant to diplomacy as well. Though I was part of the UMUC family less than a decade, it's played an outsized role in my life.

Faculty Orientation Follies

In Japan in the early 2000's, no fall faculty orientation was complete without an evening at Ninnikuya, aka the garlic restaurant, in downtown Tokyo. Each year Joe Arden would lead an unsuspecting group of newbies downtown to discover, in fact, one could put garlic in absolutely everything. But the harshness of jetlagged, garlic breath was somehow assuaged by rich conversations, storytelling, and Joe's impeccable ability to make everyone feel welcome. Faculty would leave these dinners ready to take on the world. Or at least ready to take on PSYC 100 in Kunsan...

Alas one year we couldn't go. As there was no single large restaurant option near Yokota Air Base, Joe opted to divide us into three groups, asking me to lead a group of new faculty to one of my local favorites, Minar. This restaurant offered reasonably authentic North Indian cuisine, with the usual array of Mughal paintings and Bollywood music for ambiance. As with many places in Japan though, particularly near Yokota, the space was small and poorly ventilated. This meant the entire restaurant would heat up as they cooked our scrumptious dishes. The smell and smoke were arguably more potent than the garlic restaurant.

Anyway, I did my best Joe impression, be-bopping from table to table, regaling the staff with stories of adventure and promises of glory. As we started to wrap up, I noted "John", one of the new faculty members, wasn't in his seat. As I recall, the conversation went something like:

- Where's John?
- Oh, he left. Said it was too hot.
- Did he say where he was going?
- No.
- Does he speak Japanese?
- No.
- Did he have a phone, or info for the BOQ?
- I don't think so.

I was certainly supportive of UMUC faculty adventures, but preferably not on my watch. I mulled how my conversation with Joe would go:

- So how was the dinner?
- Not bad Joe. I only lost one faculty member...

Thankfully, John turned up safe, eventually, at the BOQ. And more thankfully, Ninnikuya was available again the following year, so I could turn my focus back to those delectable garlic prawn.

True Student Diversity

I can't emphasize enough the heterogeneity in UMUC classes. When we teach stateside, at any given school there's not much variance among students. That is, the between- group difference (say, between Harvard and a community college) is much more than the within- group difference (between the top and bottom student at any given school). Not the case with UMUC overseas.

My top students had the intellectual ability such that they could have succeeded at any school in the world. Life circumstances had brought them to us, taking classes part-time, overseas.

On the flip side, my least capable students had been wronged by our educational system. Years of neglect and "passing on" left them bereft of many fundamental skills. But honestly, some of my favorite students fell in this category. Their work ethic and willingness to forge ahead in spite of daunting odds, years of people telling them they couldn't/shouldn't, and given they had no true requirement to do so, was laudable.

Having experienced a gilded educational path myself, I really grew to appreciate how lucky I had been, and how much circumstances can dictate outcomes. UMUC classes truly reflected the diversity of the United States. As I mull over the polarization straining our country at the moment, I feel like spending time in a UMUC class overseas would provide useful insight for many Americans. I'm certainly better for it.

Aside from the intellectual diversity, our classes had experiential and cultural diversity. I loved that most classes would have both an overconfident 20 year old and an underconfident 40 year old.

I remember one "Model UN" Psych 100 class in Seoul. As it was summer, many college-age diplomat children came to stay with their parents, and as our Status of Forces Agreement at the time allowed third-country nationals

to take classes, I ended up with a 20 person class comprising 15 countries. Just an amazing experience.

I remember giving a commencement address at Far Eastern National University in Vladivostok, with whom Maryland had a joint degree program. Although the dual-degree students spoke English, the remainder of the graduates, and most of the parents and audience, did not. This meant the polite laughter following my corny jokes was delayed ten seconds as the interpreter struggled to keep up (and make sense?) of my speech. Very unnerving. But the students were hugely appreciative of the opportunity, and I marveled as I found myself at the literal end of the earth, proudly carrying the flag for UMUC.

I also remember my 9/11 class. We had 5 members of the class who weren't "base-affiliated" (active duty or family member). Given security measures, they were then barred from accessing the base, and hence, the classroom, for the remainder of the term. Absent a better option (and honestly, given I was young and happy to be flexible), I held separate classes for them at a bar in Itaewon. I'm sure we were breaking some rules, and we got plenty of odd stares in the bar, but it remains one of my fondest memories of teaching.

Lessons from Distance Education for a Post-COVID World

As the world scrambles to create robust, academically-sound online coursework in 2020, I'm reminded just how much of a pioneer we were. When I started (2000), faculty were required to take an extensive training course, followed by an entire term shadowing a class, before we could teach our own distance education (DE) class. At the time, WebTycho, UMUC's proprietary platform, was really at the cutting edge. I didn't appreciate how well-equipped and pedagogically sound UMUC DE was.

One key element we realized then, and that the world is only realizing now, is that what ultimately matters is the outcome, not the process. Like most people, I prefer teaching and interacting face-to-face. That has only become clearer in the time of quarantine. But in the early 2000's, as military operations tempo increased, expecting soldiers to be in one place physically for eight weeks at a time became less and less realistic. DE gave these soldiers an opportunity to continue their education independent of location, asynchronously. In my mind, it's the natural extension of UMUC's philosophy of bringing education to the military, wherever, whenever. Just as we ensured that coursework at remote locations met the same academic standards as those in Yokota, Heidelberg, or College Park, likewise we tried to ensure that a student completing Psych 100 online emerged with the commensurate skills of one doing the same face-to-face.

One hidden benefit of DE was the surprising emergence of introverts and off-cycle students. Most face-to-face classes ran in the evenings, meaning many students had worked a full day before sitting down to two+ hours of class. Expecting cogent discussion was often too much. I found online, some students who due to time or personality would never say a word in face-to-face classes, emerged as thoughtful, interesting, and engaged online. The relative anonymity and asynchronous nature of DE meant they could think about their answers and write them at their preferred time. We can't always modify learning environments to meet student preferences, but DE was one significant way in which we did so.

This is not to say that DE is perfect- far from it. Most notably, the predatory infiltration of for-profit universities placed undue strain on UMUC's DE program, eroding academic standards. I'm years removed from the field now but have to imagine it remains a challenge. But DE can be an effective medium, and if our post-COVID world requires more distance learning, I hope we can take lessons from some of the good work we did back in the 2000's.