

Transcribing India, 2011

"How was India?" my students asked as soon as I walked into my classroom, jetlagged after a day of flying back from Delhi. I had not planned to devote class time to discussing my recent trip to India, where a group of Montgomery College faculty and administrators met with various officials to explore the possibility of supporting each other's educational goals.

However, my students' question indicated a genuine interest in learning about a part of the world they only remotely imagine. While they themselves come from many different countries, most are from Latin America, some from Africa. Asia, a faraway place they do not expect to ever see for themselves, is full of associations in their minds that they wanted to check against my recent experience. As the responsive and versatile teacher I aspire to be, I altered my lesson plan for the day, setting grammar aside and creating space and time for thinking about and discussing India.

I found that beginning to describe my experience in India was challenging indeed. As so often happens when we try to turn ideas into language that promotes learning, I found that I needed to be silent for a bit, to gather my thoughts. To secure this time gap, I asked my students to write down a couple of concrete, specific questions they have about India. Here is what they delivered:

- *Is it true that India has very many people and is very crowded?*
- *What does it look like?*
- *What are people our age like? Do they work or go to school or both?*
- *How is daily life there? How do people live?*
- *What do people believe in their religion?*
- *What do they do for entertainment, fun?*

In other words, they wanted a visual snapshot as an image to help them concretize the place, but they also wanted to understand the details of Indian life as something that is possibly very different from ours. They were right to focus on quality of life issues, since that tells us more about a people than any empirical data.

My students' most pressing question was why I went to India and what I did there. To create a structure for this very dynamic questioning, I thought I would make that the frame for our discussion. This is what I shared: I went to India with some colleagues to learn about their educational systems and to share information on how we educate in the United States. We also wanted to share as much information as possible about the US community college system as a possible model that might help India develop its growing workforce. It may be that India will choose to adopt some of our methods, especially the community college model, which does not exist anywhere else in the world.

Our discussion after this point, quite naturally, turned to why a community college model of education might be desirable. The discussion that followed generated more questions than answers, a true mark of critical thinking at work:

- *What makes a community college unique and beneficial?*

- *How is it different from a four-year institution?*
- *Why would a developing country be interested in it?*
- *What might it do for them?*
- *What has it done for us?*

Our discussion of who we are surfaced as a necessary precursor to understanding India, and it became clear that by thinking about India we could better think about ourselves. Thanks to my recent visit, I was able to share some information that enhanced my students' understanding of higher education and the ways that it intersects with all areas of life, both American and Indian.

Community colleges, we decided, meet the needs of students who are new to higher education and whose families cannot help them navigate. It is a supportive environment in which students are prepared for the future, whether additional schooling or gaining employment that will allow them to support their families and make use of their talents and abilities. Community colleges make sure that any lingering academic weaknesses are eliminated so that students can enter higher education as a level playing field. They are affordable and in addition to providing academics, they provide a community that supports students' efforts to get ahead. My students wanted to know: *Does India's educational system provide such help? Do the students there need it?*

Details about India became necessary at this point, so we did some quick online (www.cia.gov):

- India has a population of over a billion people although it is about a third of the size of the US. It is the seventh largest nation in the world
 - Only 61% of Indians over age 15 can read and write; the percentage of literate women is just under 48%
 - It is one of the youngest nations in the world, with a median age of 26
 - India spends just over 3% of GDP on education (almost half of what US spends)
 - The main industry in India is agriculture
 - India's economy is among the fastest growing in the world
 - India has the second largest labor force in the world
 - The majority of Indians live in rural areas
 - The per capita income of Indians is \$3,400
 - 25% of the population lives below the poverty line.

Discussion ensued among the class about how these statistics differ from the United States and how they help us view India in a clearer light. The differences between our two countries became very clear as we talked about the needs of Indian college-age students. However, the picture became even more complicated once we take into account some other facts:

- The country gained its independence from Britain in 1947. So, we can think of it as a new country. What does it mean to be colonized? What is the impact of colonization on a nation that needs to emerge stronger than ever?
 - The state of the country's natural environment is a grave concern. Air and water pollution, as well as deforestation are devastating the landscape and have to be addressed quickly because it affects daily life and causes illness.

- Even as the Indian economy is growing quickly, there are some grave problems it has to work on resolving, such as limited work and education opportunities for its population and inadequate access to higher education. However, assets such as internet and cell phone access can help bridge many restrictions imposed by rural living. Students who can't get to a campus might be able to take online courses.
- Forced and underpaid labor is also a big problem in India, especially for the poor and uneducated, including children. Human trafficking is too common. It is also very hard for people to transition from one socioeconomic class to another because they lack skills and education. How can these children and adults be helped?
- India's current need, in the mist of quick growth and rapid change, is how best to harness the workforce it has to help it through such challenges. My students offered that community colleges would serve that need very well, since they work with students who come in at different levels of ability. I had to agree.

The discussion we had over two hours on this day was animated and thoughtful. It reinforced to my students the need for education (their own and in general) as a source of empowerment. In terms of the course content, it emphasized the need for reliable research and showed how outside source information can help enrich our thinking about a complex subject. These are learning goals for the course, and I don't think I could have delivered them in a more relevant way on this day. I was reminded that the benefits of teaching skills in an authentic, organic context are many and that they make deep learning possible.

We also learned on this day that there may not be any quick solutions to problems as varied as in India and that tapping the potential in that country's people will need to be a concerted effort over time. It became clear to all of us that this discussion could continue in several courses (Economics, History, Natural Sciences) and over an entire semester or more.

The remarkable thing about this day's deeply probing discussion is that it took place in EN002, a developmental writing course. Our students are capable of excellent work, I noted with a smile.... Wouldn't it be great to have conversations like this one in an Indian classroom, but about the United States?

From a life-long learner and teacher,

Rita Kranidis
English Department
Takoma Park/Silver Spring Campus