

Between: Capital, Culture, and the Transformation of Hong Kong's Universities

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Abstract: The public universities in Hong Kong have now begun a momentous educational reform that creates four- instead of three-year degrees and adds a strong General Education component to the curriculum. In this essay, I examine the trajectory of this reform from the point of view of an “insider-outsider” Fulbright Scholar in General Education who, based at the University of Hong Kong and the Hong Kong America Center (but working with colleagues across the system), consulted on the formation of interdisciplinary courses, interactive teaching, and administrative infrastructure for the launch of the reform. I examine the change in light of the flow of global capital, the development of the “whole person” familiar to us from the discourse of the Liberal Arts, and of the demands of multinationals based in Hong Kong for a differently trained globalized workforce. The Hong Kong experiment is, I argue, an illuminating site to examine in order for us to better understand the emergence of the global university.

Keywords Hong Kong; Education; Reform; Fulbright; Global University; Capital

...Hermes or these angels pass through folded time, making millions of connections. Between has always struck me as a preposition of prime importance.

~Michel Serres

We all find ourselves, at all times and in all spaces, *between* all times and all spaces. Every form is transitory and betweenness is, from this perspective, an ontological condition. In this particular historical period of globalization, however, we also exist in new social assemblages that exhibit specifically (post)modern forms of betweenness. Ontology is history. The *between* marks and undoes every point within the regime of contemporary globalization. There is nothing stable, nothing but betweening, although events—including those events called “human” or “object”—occur at a different pace with different configurations of materials, energies, intensities, and significations. As Michel Serres has noted, the “between” occurs under the sign of Hermes and “makes millions of connections” (64). This networking of densities is the fundamental social condition for the emergence of global universities.

Hong Kong is a city-between. A dense node within the urban network of the globalizing system of capital and cultural transformation, it has decided to radically reconfigure its universities, moving in the fall of 2012 from a three-year degree to a four-year degree that includes a significant commitment to interdisciplinary, interactive, and problem-based General Education (GE) courses and programs. As a “Special Administrative Region” of the People’s Republic of China, Hong Kong stands at the intersection of multiple cultural, economic, political, and educational vectors of force and is conducting an extraordinary experiment in transforming an entire ecology of public educational institutions at one time. In the fall of 2012, the “3+3+4 Reform” officially began when the universities admitted a “double-cohort” of students from the secondary schools, one of which would follow the

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traditional three-year degree track and the other the new four-year track. Although this was the inauguration of the reform, all of the schools have been actively preparing for this shift since the city's government mandated it in 2005.

Hong Kong students score extremely well on the PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) test, which ranks students in international comparisons, proving themselves to be among the top three participants in math and science, and the top four in reading. 98% of those who begin a university education in Hong Kong complete it. Several of the public universities are in the top 50 in the world in the international rankings, and others land in the top 200. These numbers are to be envied, and establish the fact that education in Hong Kong is already working very effectively along certain trajectories of learning. Why, given such a success story, change anything?

The key reason has to do with the city's need to educate students toward greater intellectual flexibility, initiative-taking, and independent problem-solving, all of which are organized around the capacity for social and technical innovation. The government and local multinational employers have determined that, in order to improve the student experience and better prepare students for the workforce in the digital knowledge economy that is central to Hong Kong's status as a global financial center, all the publicly funded universities would institute a four-year curriculum that includes a component of GE courses. The reforms are intended not only to "broaden" student engagement, but also to inculcate a more interactive style of learning and teaching into the traditional professorial- and memory-centered university culture.

As Professor Arthur K. C. Li, then Secretary for Education and Manpower, noted in a speech on November 3, 2005:

I am pleased that after years of preparation and discussion, Hong Kong has at last reached a consensus on the roadmap of the reform. Introducing the new academic structure is a mammoth task. It requires substantial manpower, land and financial resources, but we believe this is an essential investment for our future...At the university level, we should be looking for a new and coherent curriculum, not simply adding one year to the current three-year programme...For the betterment of Hong Kong, may I therefore appeal to you to help us make this vision come true. (Hong Kong Government Website)

The curricular transformation is a decisive move away from the pedagogical and examination habits of both British colonial culture as well as Confucian-Communist culture, and toward the emerging networked entrepreneurial capitalist culture for which Hong Kong is an essential hub, both for mainland China and the rest of the world.

Still in the long historical aftermath of the handover from the British to the Chinese in 1997, Hong Kong continues to very actively negotiate its identity within the "one country, two systems" experiment of governance. The educational reform is very much a part of this experiment of a city between "East and West." Without entering deeply into the intricate conversation around Hong Kong's identity, let me simply cite Leo Ou-Fan Lee's *City Between Worlds*, which strikes me as a highly accurate description of a city notable for its famous architects, world-class airport built on a reclaimed and engineered island, shopping malls that arise out of the MTR rapid transit system, soaring housing costs, and stark contrasts between the wealthy and the poor.

As Lee notes of his own writing method, which moves "in the shadow" of the urban theorists Ackbar Abbas and Rem Koolhaas, he finds himself "plowing away just to pick up some piece of empirical debris or the occasional relic—a few small cultural substances from

Hong Kong's streets and from the material world of its everyday people" (5). To construct a collage of a city-between he must become an historian of the debris that appears in everyday culture. His is a task of preserving a space for memory that attempts to forestall the oblivion of the present. The Hong Kong government, however, he observes:

employing a logic of excessive modernization, always wants to demolish old buildings and neighborhoods and build new projects, or do more reclamation or carve out new pieces of land to build new 'centers,' or embark on mega-projects such as the West Kowloon Cultural District... The embedded cultural traditions of a building, a neighborhood, or a place are ignored or considered unworthy of preservation or even renovation. (241)

Place, in this scenario, tends toward the placeless, or, more specifically, toward the almost interchangeable designs of the hypermodern spaces of franchises, airports, hotels, and global universities. But the "almost" is essential, for in this space-of-betweenness the almost keeps cultural differences actively in sight. Hong Kong and Seattle are both sites of globalizing universities, but the politics, language, history, and physical locales of each site keep difference from being completely absorbed into the repetitious norms and signifiers of globalization.

Lee's work of memory, like Hong Kong itself, runs headlong into the enormous force of finance capitalism, especially in the form of real estate *speculation* (a term that would, if we were to do it justice, take us very far afield through the history of political economy, idealist philosophy, and the effects of mirrors on perception and culture that would, as if by magic, lead us right back to land prices in Hong Kong). It is between such forces that the installation of the curricular reform is occurring in the city's universities. Which possibilities will be taken up, followed through on? Which will vanish like the smoke of so many other incomplete educational reforms that we are all so familiar with?

It is in this context that the Fulbright Commission, the Hong Kong America Center, the philanthropist Po Chung, and the eight public universities of the city developed an original form of participation for visiting Fulbright Scholars who, based in different universities, would work across the city as "Team Fulbright" to support the transition to the four-year degree, especially around creating effective GE courses. Each year for four years (2008-2012), a different cohort of Fulbright Scholars arrived in Hong Kong to assist as "insider-outsiders" with the articulation of administrative structures, the design and review of courses, and with faculty development workshops that would be useful for the implementation of the new curriculum. The organizational structure of a "Team Fulbright," however, is itself quite innovative in the world of higher education, and responds, like the curricular transformation itself, to the needs of the new networked culture of collaboration, interactive learning, and the need to build capacities for the demands of a rapidly changing transnational finance capitalism, as well as the many forms of imagined alternatives to this force.

The university, as William Sullivan and Matthew Rosin remind us, is a "cultural institution. Like all institutions, universities are distributed cognitive systems—that is, networks or webs of interaction through which humans think, deliberate, and act...The university establishes particular foci of shared attention and references that enable individuals to imagine their lives in coordination with others..." (113). As the functions of capital, politics, media, and technology change, so, too, do the concepts constellated around "scholar," "teacher," "learner," and "university." All of these concepts become distributed differently across the terrain of meaning as the intellectual landscape of the city changes, and it is into this new terrain that collaboration, via multiple and simultaneous acts of networking, becomes a

focal set of activities in which we are all practicing in order to become more adept at surviving, and hopefully prospering, within and along the edge of the vortices of globalizing modernity.

CONFIGURING GENERAL EDUCATION IN HONG KONG

The expansion of GE courses and administrative structures requires a rethinking of such terms as “discipline,” “specialization,” “rigor,” “inquiry,” and, most basically, “learning and teaching.” The curricular change of 2012 will not, in other words, be simply an “add-on” or a “plug-in” which would allow the local university to remain somehow unchanged in its essence, but, instead, will shift in important ways the very meaning of the university experience for everyone involved. Although the language of “broadening” student experience is relatively useful, it is all too often pitted against the more highly-valued terms of “depth,” “specialization,” “research,” and “expertise,” which are associated with the traditional function of majors in research intensive universities, and serve as embedded ideals of technocapitalist productivity. (See Jean-François Lyotard’s classic, and prescient, account in *The Postmodern Condition*.) There is as yet no term that has come to the fore to replace the staid quality of “General Education,” or the semantic confusions of “Liberal Education,” but we are now at a point at which we can begin to inductively build toward that shift in the rhetoric of a comprehensive experience that reconfigures traditional disciplinary learning.

As we transfigure the meaning of GE, we need to develop a vocabulary to articulate, intensify, and shift various “points of contact,” whether in the domain of ideas, classroom practice, media capabilities (including writing and data visualization), off-campus learning sites in the city itself, or in the larger world. We need to build connections across areas of study and educate those who, in addition to field expertise, can serve to synthesize, translate, and further contribute to the results of specialized research. It will also be necessary to change the incentive and reward structures for faculty members, which is one of the most deeply embedded intransigencies to be overcome in the new global university. In general, if faculty are only rewarded for long lists of traditional publications, this will reinforce the traditional nature of student learning and create resistance to curricular and pedagogical innovation. Universities must, if the experiment is to succeed, create pathways that reward sophisticated research, sophisticated teaching, and sophisticated relationship building between the formal space of the university and a variety of corporate, non-profit, and community partners.

In addition to faculty reward structure, there are a number of other innovative changes in the GE structure that will need to be considered in the Hong Kong context. For example, there have traditionally been very few formalized First Year Experiences, but now that GE moves through all four years of the undergraduate experience, the skills needed for a successful transition into the university from high school, to become prepared for more advanced work in the majors, and to participate as citizens in the networked society, will all have to be addressed as soon as students enter the university. First Year Experiences could well offer one of the best opportunities for making connections between courses, between curricular and co-curricular experiences, and for developing a reflective narrative about the coherence of an undergraduate education.

A second area of re-imagining the GE experience that many of the universities are engaged with includes interdisciplinary courses, often team-taught, that are to be organized around areas of inquiry and central social problems instead of around a disciplinary formation of knowledge. These courses will *not*, in other words, be “Introductions to X.” Since the late 19th century, and with an intensification as the sciences and capitalism converge

throughout the 20th century, universities have become accustomed to organizing themselves around “disciplines” and “majors.” GE, therefore, will inevitably encounter resistance from some sectors of departmental culture, which will at times take the form of a faculty, student, and administrative hesitation about the value of interdisciplinary courses that cross boundaries between, for example, philosophy and business, nutrition and history, economics and art, or ecology and literature.

To counter such habitual caution and defense of “turf,” GE practitioners must articulate a sound understanding of interdisciplinary teaching and learning. They must move toward forms of interactivity and student-centered engagement; take account of “big questions” that matter; and encourage student projects, including but moving beyond the traditional research paper. And, perhaps most importantly, such instructors must consistently articulate the particular form of *rigor* of the GE experience, which includes both imaginative and analytic expectations and practices.

Such teaching in GE, whether individual or team-taught, must keep in mind that none of us can be an “expert” in multiple disciplines (and perhaps not even in our own disciplines), but that we can, indeed must, be able to invent strategies of *inflecting toward* other disciplines. This will naturally occur as students develop their projects; through visiting teachers from other disciplines and by understanding how concepts and methods of learning, teaching, and research act in a transdisciplinary manner. Nonetheless, it must also be often and explicitly noted by instructors, since students are not yet acculturated to the habits of the university discourse and it is very difficult to articulate the unfamiliar discipline of the trans- and inter-disciplines. They, as well as their parents and secondary school Liberal Studies instructors, will need to be educated not only into the content of the courses, but into the form as well. Finally, as I have already noted, these characteristics of renaming values, developing interactive student-centered pedagogies, and articulating interdisciplinary practices must all find a place in long-term opportunities for faculty development and reward.

STRENGTHENING THE CURRICULAR TRANSITION

Each of the Hong Kong public universities has done an enormous amount of the highest quality work on structuring their curricular reform. In a very short period of time each, in its own style, has begun the transformative work of reinventing an entire conception of undergraduate education. This is a generational shift, which, as with similar efforts around the world, will be more or less successful in different sites and at different moments of development. Recognizing these inevitable variations, I offer the following rather commonplace recommendations in a spirit of admiring collegiality. Some of the central tasks for all of the universities in Hong Kong will be to:

- I. Continue to cultivate the use of active pedagogies with a range of disciplinary and cross-disciplinary faculty.
- II. Develop multiple learning sites and student-centered projects as forms of experiential and community-based education, and focus significant attention on the faculties of Business, Law, and Engineering, which tend, in my experience both in the US and in Hong Kong, not to be sufficiently engaged with GE at a significant level. This is a real opportunity to improve the student experience.
- III. Support the development of academic services such as Writing Centers, Quantitative Skills Centers, and Media Labs, and offer an ongoing commitment to English Language instruction throughout the four years at all of the universities, since this a fundamental skill that enables Hong Kong graduates to move throughout the global

economy. Continue to systematically offer training to teachers in the Liberal Studies Curriculum in the Secondary Schools and the Community Colleges.

- IV. Develop student and parent ambassadors, who can be educated about the advantages of GE and the Core Curriculum and spread the word to others in the community. (In short, they need to be clear that GE, when it is well done, is *extremely sophisticated* training for success in the knowledge economy of the global workforce.)
- V. Develop workshops for university administrators about how best to create cross- and interdisciplinary structures for teaching, learning, and assessment.

Hong Kong will no doubt succeed at this educational reform, for there is already a network of cultural conditions in place to provide a platform for such success. Since the political, economic, linguistic, and cultural system is already hybridized, the new curriculum can grow out of this intricate web of perception and practice in the post-colonial and postmodern urbanism of much of Hong Kong (though, as always, the development is not symmetrical and the disparities of wealth, unsustainable housing prices, and politics between Hong Kong and Beijing will all need persistent work). If Hong Kong is able to continue to successfully mediate its Confucian, Western, Capitalist, and Chinese identities, then the city will be able to educate its students in a manner that will provide them with greater skills at home and more options abroad.

Another contributor to the success of the venture is that a great many holders of PhDs from the US, Canada, the UK, and Australia are returning to Hong Kong to take up professorships, deanships, and other administrative posts. This gives the system a deeper familiarity with GE and different forms of teaching, learning, and research. A third advantage is that as one of the major centers of finance capitalism, Hong Kong has become a master of the art of multilinguistic urbanization and will, for the foreseeable future, continue to offer a well-organized, English-accessible place to live and work for locals and for ex-pats. (The air pollution needs to be addressed, but that is for another context.) Finally, and related to all of the above, the city possesses the capabilities, both in terms of economic assets and human ingenuity, to invest for the long run (in distinction to western universities, which are losing a significant part of their assets without any real hope of the public resumption of supportive financing). Such an investment will bolster an already rich cultural ecology of learning, including universities, businesses, arts centers, and the creative industries.

Hong Kong, because of the Basic Law, possesses a high degree of freedom of speech, press, and a limited form of democracy, including the internal governance structures of the universities. The entirety of this social infrastructure, if it remains in place, will enable the success, over time, of the educational reform efforts.

THE SPACE BETWEEN

Hong Kong is, then, at yet another crossroads of its crisscrossed history as it leads the way in a curricular transformation that many around the world are watching with great interest. This is a shift that will align in many ways with the four-year degrees in mainland China, as well as with the traditional degree programs in the U.S. As the university systems of nation-states become more tightly linked, there is a great deal that American universities can learn from the experiment now underway in Hong Kong. Although cultural differences must constantly be attended to and articulated, there are a number of overlapping capacities that will benefit students and faculty from around the world.

We will all have to continue to learn to adapt to the flows of migration, concepts, technologies, and capital; learn to develop “points of contact” between areas of expertise called

“disciplines”; find ways to actively connect the local community of the university and its urban partners to the global networks; and, finally, continue to develop languages of politics and ethics that will enable greater justice to manifest for a larger part of the world’s population, even if that justice appears only in increments as we teach and learn across multiple boundaries.

There are a great many variables at work in Hong Kong, including Beijing’s international and domestic relations with the global economy; military relations between China, the U.S., and other countries in the region; growing populations and increased need for resources; difficult environmental challenges; social networking and other communicative media; the rate of migration; and the interchanges between English, Cantonese, Putonghua, and other languages. And one of the most important variables at work is the extraordinarily rapid urbanization of the Chinese mainland, where “more than a hundred cities have passed the 1 million population mark in the last twenty years and small villages, like Shenzhen, have become huge metropolises with 6 to 10 million people” (Harvey 172). Hong Kong, at the periphery of this system of hyper-urbanization, can play a leading role in the educational imaginary that is constructed within this newly emerging network of cities.

The 2012 Reform gives the city and the universities an opportunity to reimagine the capacities of educated citizens to design a more flexible, adaptive, and just social space. With the emphasis of all the universities on cross-disciplinary and interactive courses based around active student-learning, an increased probability develops for building a capacity to address the pressing needs of the city and its citizens, the region, and, indeed, the shape of higher education around the world.

As David Harvey has argued, regarding the means by which any pervasive social change occurs:

it becomes imperative to envision alliances between a whole range of social forces configured around the different spheres. Those with a deep knowledge of how the relation to nature works need to ally with those deeply familiar with how institutional and administrative arrangements function, how science and technology can be mobilized, how daily life and social relations can most easily be re-organized, how mental conceptions can be changed, and how production and labor processes can be reconfigured. (138)

Painting and physics; economics and education; literature and business; art and urban design; history and technology; dance and new media; law and genomics; philosophy and biology. This is the world of between, in which boundaries shift incessantly.

Michel Serres’s transdiscursive writing embodies this ethic as well as anyone as he has created a “metaphysics of prepositions” (Zembylas 485). Prepositions, perhaps, are the secret to everything. Prepositions are angels; they are the wing-footed messages of Hermes. Prepositions are the signs of creative excess in the domain of declarative propositions. As Serres has so eloquently said: “The goal of instruction is the end of instruction, that is to say, invention. Invention is the only true intellectual act, the only act of intelligences...Only discovery awakens. Only invention proves that one truly thinks what one thinks, whatever that may be” (1997, 92-93). Such inventiveness is the rhetoric of the between that we all must invent, individually and as members of multiple collectives. Such a future is very much worth the immense effort that Hong Kong is now directing toward reconfiguring the very fabric of its universities as it attends to the generative spaces of interstitiality, marked as they are by that most propitious pronoun: *between*.

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