ASIANetwork Exchange
A Journal for Asian Studies in the Liberal Arts

Putting Theory into Practice

ARTICLE

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ABSTRACT

This essay introduces the Special Issue devoted to the impact that the Luce Foundatin's LIASE initiative has had on liberal-arts campuses across the United States.

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KEYWORDS:
Luce Foundation; LIASE Program; Environmental Studies; cross-cultural exchange

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:
Miller, Char. 2021. "Putting Theory into Practice." *ASIANetwork Exchange* 27(2), pp. 3–5. DOI: *https://doi.org/10.16995/ane.365*

One of the guiding principles of the Luce Initiative for Asian Studies and the Environment (LIASE) has been to integrate theoretical and pedagogical analyses of the complex interconnections between Asian and environmental studies—and then put these analyses into practice. Some of these practical applications—and the insights that have emerged from them—form the basis of this, the third special issue of *ASIANetwork Exchange* devoted to LIASE's impact on liberal arts campuses across the country.

What is immediately obvious about the six essays published here is the variety of subjects, approaches, and foci. These vary in part by the disciplinary field or fields of their authors, partly due to their host-country collaborators' expertise, and by the wide-angled perspectives of their many students. One thing seems clear: each project had a heuristic impact on students, faculty, their peers, and their colleagues.

That is one of the conclusions to be drawn from the transpacific collaboration between Kathleen Purvis-Roberts of the Keck Science Department in Claremont and Dr. Norasikin Ahmad Ludin, at the Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. The two chemists taught a shared class in environmental chemistry, which had a strong focus on renewable energy policies, particularly solar power. The students from the two institutions conducted online discussions and research. So engaged were they, and so compelling were their questions, that halfway through the semester Professors Purvis-Roberts and Ludin revised their expectations. "The analysis that the students were doing was sophisticated and would be of considerable interest to the wider academic community, so we started brainstorming ways that the students could work together to turn their project papers into peer-reviewed work." As a result, the Claremont students traveled to Malaysia to present their work with their Malaysian collaborators. It was a turning point for many of them: "After hearing from academics and policymakers at the conference in Kuala Lumpur and presenting on the ability of new technology to help further sustainability efforts," one wrote, "I am much more aware of environmental issues in Malaysia and how the US can collaborate with other countries to promote sustainable development."

This heightened sense of awareness emerged as well in the transdisciplinary film festival that Tami Blumenfield developed at Furman University. Recognizing that the science faculty who were joining the university's LIASE efforts did not have a lot of experience with Asian environmental issues, she developed an on-campus series of documentaries and fiction films as a supplemental part of a summer faculty workshop. As it turned out, it brought multiple benefits. Drawing on the expertise of language faculty, Chinese filmmakers, and others across the United States, she and her students were able to identify and screen several important documentaries. Even as the community watched and learned from these cultural resources, the faculty saw an opportunity to use the same films in their classes, to integrate them into their pedagogy, and to teach as they had been taught. Added to this pedagogy was the implementation of several clever assignments that used journaling as a tool for reflection, which led to other opportunities to engage with the films and their arguments across various social-media platforms. A film festival is not just a film festival.

That one academic approach can morph into something with greater reach was also the experience at Eckerd College. Involved faculty had initially developed an ambitious program that contained five different field sites, but as the teachers' commitments shifted and the locations of study evolved, faculty, students, and their host-country collaborators began to refocus their energies on fewer sites with a more intense, location-specific set of goals. Surely that process was similar to many of the other LIASE initiatives and is itself a reflection of the regenerative possibilities of cross-cultural engagement—engagements that were essential, historian Andrew Chittick notes, for the program's resilience and sustainability. At small schools like Eckerd, with a small Asian studies faculty, it proved essential to develop core studies classes at home and field work abroad that dovetailed with and appealed to the science faculty's research interests and expertise. Doing so at Eckerd, for example, helped the LIASE organizers there to better distribute the workload with their colleagues in the sciences and, perhaps even more crucially, attract STEM students to the program that otherwise might not have been.

Nurturing a diversity of student and faculty interest was also integral to Oberlin College's "transdisciplinary engagements" in Indonesia. After all, as geologist Karla Hubbard and ethnomusicologist Jennifer Fraser assert, transdisciplinarity offers a "holistic approach requiring integrated knowledge from distinct disciplines, whereas 'interdisciplinarity' requires the transfer of knowledge from one discipline to another." It was this distinction that captured faculty and student attention and shaped the incorporation of a wider set of scientific and cultural framings of two disasters in Indonesia—the 2004 tsunami that devastated Banda Aceh and recent volcanic eruptions in central Java. Their field trip to the affected regions and the remarkable set of host-country experts that the team had the chance to learn from and converse with helped shape their recognition of how important cultural dimensions were in the individual communities' responses to the tsunami and the volcano. As one student put it: "[I]f I were to be a geologist who worked on mitigation, there are so many cultural aspects that I would need to be aware of and take into account to do the job right. Learning about Islam gave me more of an idea about how people think and frame disaster and how they show resilience."

Learning to be resilient might be one way to describe the experience of students and faculty at Bryn Mawr, Haverford, Swarthmore—a consortium called Tri-Co, for short—who developed a series of integrated and overlapping single- and cross-campus classes and events, in addition to field work in Asia. Testing their collaborative abilities might be another outcome of their varied programs across departments and campuses. That five members of the faculty and administrations joined to write this article is also telling about how excitingly complex a consortial initiative can be (a reality that the five colleges in Claremont would happily confirm). Just as complicated, but deftly detailed, are the Tri-Co results: a constellation of curricular innovations, a set of cross-cultural engagements with colleagues in China and elsewhere, the stewarding of trustee commitments to underwrite additional opportunities, and related and self-conscious efforts to explore how to sustain the energies that the LIASE funding unleashed.

It is entirely apt, then, that the first word in the title of the last article is "scaffolding." Like the Tri-Co consortium and the other institutions represented in this special issue of *ANE* (and its predecessors), Centre College faculty have recognized that global environmental issues, when set within the context of Asia, offer a rich opportunity to engage the interdisciplinary interests of faculty and students. Structuring those engagements on campus, expanding them through the Summer Language Institute and the Asia and the Environment Lab, and finding expression through January-term classes overseas, summer research, and internships has led to a series of high-impact practices. As Brett Werner and his co-authors describe these interlocking programs, they also detail their reflections about how to assess their students' reactions to their deep academic and affective immersion. One exercise asked students to "just sit quietly and watch a tree," and elicited this powerful sense of connectivity:

> The tree was small enough where my fingertips touched when I held the tree in my hands. It was alive, breathing, processing, feeling, and I was right there with it. A part of me died that day, and I say that in the best way possible. The old me died. The "me" that didn't understand how people could be passionate about plants. The "me" that thought if I just don't think about factory farming, I can still eat meat, right? The "me" that thought climate change was a distant, nebulous problem.

A growing self-awareness—precisely what the Luce Foundation through the LIASE program hoped to nurture.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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Published: 22 April 2021