

I Didn't Know You Could Sweat From Your Legs!*

Alison Holmea[†]

[†]Independent Higher Education Consultant

(Paste abstract here. Use paragraph style Abstract[†]; or, for lists, "Abstract List".)

Keywords: (Insert keywords here, separated by comma.)

I have spent most of the last 32 years working in higher education in the UK and New Zealand. Last February I landed in Papua New Guinea (PNG) as a volunteer on a two year placement as a "Tertiary Education Adviser" at a national tertiary vocational institution (NTVI). The original job description mentioned a national qualifications framework, working with the community and so on. In order to earn my credibility, or more importantly for me it has turned out, to experience first-hand teaching in the college, I was also expected to teach 6 hours a week. However one of the first requirements as a volunteer is that you firm up your job description when you get to the place of work, to ensure that the role is what the organisation wants and is designed in a way to ensure capacity building of the organisation's staff. So for my first semester I have concentrated on the teaching, with a little bit of professional development, strategic advisory work and planning thrown in.

The NTVI is funded by the Tertiary Vocational Education and Training Division of the Office of Higher Education -- so similar to a TAFE in Australia or an FE college in the UK. It has approximately 700 students who study for either a Diploma in Business Studies (with Management or Accounting majors) or Hospitality and Tourism, or a National Certificate in Business Studies. The diploma has four stages, each a semester long, assessment is a mix of continuous assessment and a final exam. Many of the policies are centrally imposed, curriculum is centrally written and assessment strategy devised at "Head Office". This leads to

*URL: <http://ojs.aishe.org/index.php/aishe-j/article/view/132>

a number of issues as Head Office is woefully understaffed, so the syllabus has not been updated since about 2000. We have now got the go-ahead to do some modernisation ourselves and submit to Head Office. So that is an opportunity for me to get involved with some good professional development next semester.

To come back to the teaching – the campus is set in a lovely residential area, about 10 minutes downhill walk to the centre of town, and it has the most beautiful view out over the sea. The classrooms are in two storey blocks each containing four classrooms. Each class has a base room and the students are timetabled constantly in there for the entire week – no free periods whatsoever. There are three two hour blocks per day. Facilities in a classroom are basic (see photos). Rooms with no windows (most places actually don't have windows but louvres which allow the breeze (should there be any) to come through). There are no ceiling fans and certainly no air con (average temperature is about 30 degrees all year). But the electricity comes and goes randomly. Teaching under the tin roof when it is tropically raining tests the voice projection. I panicked to start with because my classroom was laid out with desks and chairs for 36 but there were 65 on the class list! But the students, having swept and cleaned the classroom, rearranged themselves randomly around the corners of desks, no one has their back to the teacher (although many have a side!) and you can navigate a way round the class to look at everyone's work. The whiteboards don't clean, you wipe off as much of the previous work as you can and just write on top of what remains with whiteboard markers that don't function well in this humid climate. Then in quiet moments you can watch the geckos and ants walk around the walls and ceiling! The title comment is a quote from a colleague teaching in such a room.

The students demonstrate their resourcefulness in organising themselves within the resources available. They don't seem at all bothered by the state of the room or their desks and chairs many of which are rickety and falling apart. Assembly is the open air – and cancelled if it happens to be raining- the person conducting the assembly stands on the half landing of the stairs on the way up to the staff preparation room and addresses the students standing in rows in front of them. Provided assembly is first thing, both boys and girls can stand in the shade – if

it is later in the day then the boys are left to stand in the sun or take shelter under the trees. They sing the national anthem and recite the PNG pledge enthusiastically every assembly, this part led by the president of the students' union.

PNG gained its independence in 1975, and since then has been working hard to get its systems functioning properly. It is a very culturally diverse country – there are about 800 different languages. Most people start talking “Tok Ples” (vernacular); then move on to “Tok Pisin” (Pidgin) and finally English as their third language (or fourth or fifth depending on the origin of their parents and where they live). English is the language of instruction in schools starting from Grade 3 with a “Bridging to English” programme that leads them by Grade 6 to be taught exclusively in English. As from January next year, English will be the language of instruction from Grade 1. All classes at NTVI are conducted in English. The lecturers' competence in English varies greatly but I think the students struggle less with the Nationals' English than with mine.

The age range of students is quite dramatic – for so long education was not accessible to many, so some students started school very late in life. Hence many first year students have just completed their Grade 12 and come to college in their mid-twenties. Eligibility is by achievement and not related to age. Also, tertiary places are in short supply, in the universities, polytechnics, vocational colleges and vocational training establishments, so those students who have made it thus far are an elite. Allocation of Government funded students to colleges is a mystery I have still to solve. The majority of students want to go on to further study at a university, demonstrating the aspirations and importance of education to them.

So I was set to teach Business Communication (6 hours per week with my one class) – lots of English grammar, study skills, effective communication and business letter writing. I have struggled all semester with very shy students, who don't want to say too much in English, and

certainly not to speak too loudly, so my challenge has been to first hear the students, then work out what they are saying before being able to work out how the answer fits the question. One of the downsides of being old enough to have lots of experience is that the hearing is not as acute as it used to be! I have had many lengthy discussions with my housemate (another volunteer working in a primary teacher training college and teaching the same English grammar syllabus) and we have come to the conclusion that while the students struggle to read English, their writing and speaking are at a higher level. This means that active learning that depends on textual information is very slow; and they find it hard to read instructions on a page and complete an exercise without lots of modelling first. The NTVI library is well stocked with modern dictionaries, but has only a few text books (mostly donated) and many paperback novels, but most students do not have a culture of reading for pleasure. Instead they “tell stories” endlessly as they shelter from the hot sun or teeming rain or wait for something to happen. I also have to keep reminding myself there are only 700 students, not 26,000, so the library facilities are likely to be quite different from what I am used to.

About one third of the students live on campus in dormitories (boarders) where they have electricity and running water. But many students live in “villages” where their homes are made of bush materials and there is no electricity or running water and the internal furnishings and fixtures in their homes are sparse. I must remind myself regularly that my life experience and that of my students scarcely touch let alone overlap. The opportunity to “use your imagination” in an assignment before Easter was greeted with dismay. And the imagination displayed in the assignment was woefully lacking. But is it laziness? Or the “PNG way”? A much heard comment “Oh we Papua New Guineans, we are very lazy, or very slow/late/corrupt etc. Familiarity with corruption means in some students minds that copying work is quite an acceptable practice. I have been invigilating this week and my actions generated a complaint that “Mrs Holmes watched us all the time”. Is that not what invigilation is all about? Or is it something different? PNG “Land of the Unexpected”.

I am currently studying a postgrad development studies paper and am endlessly fascinated by the challenges presented by the concepts of development that I read about as they play out in PNG. Why should we be “developing” these people, downplaying their amazing culture and traditions in favour of a western capitalist model that isn’t exactly working flawlessly around the world? How much of my “western” views of teaching, learning, plagiarism, professionalism and so on should I be trying to encourage? As I said, I often hear the phrase “we Papua New Guineans, we are.....” and I can’t decide if it is a defence or a lament. Without a doubt I need to explore my own values, before I consider imposing them. My intention therefore is to help my colleagues in any way I can to get more job satisfaction, to give them ideas to consider and to tell them a bit about learning and teaching in other contexts so they can make up their own minds about what to do.

1. References