

Lessons on Teaching and Learning from a Walking Workshop in Nepal

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Abstract:

Tourism Education Futures Initiative (TEFI) organized an alternative venue and approach to the traditional academic conference: a 12-day workshop in Nepal that included seven days of trekking in the Himalayas. The workshop focused on the link between sustainable tourism and social entrepreneurship; and the development of a summer school course for international and Nepalese students, with a field study component in Nepal. This article discusses three additional outcomes of the trek: lessons learned that could strengthen the postsecondary teaching/learning experience. These include embracing a broader understanding of our undergraduates and their capabilities, particularly in light of changing demographics; considering more fully the impact of the accelerated, multi-tasking pace that increasingly characterizes the postsecondary environment; and reflecting on the role of spirituality in education.

Key Words:

Tourism Education Futures Initiative (TEFI); Nepal walking workshop; changing profile of undergraduates; slow scholarship; spirituality in education.

Introduction

“Small steps are better”. That’s the advice Rachael gave me as I followed close behind, trying to mimic her ease at navigating the rocky downward incline. We were, by then, three days into our trek; about a 60 minute helicopter ride from Kathmandu (in case the need arose for an emergency evacuation); and, for most of us, light years away from the routine of our regular lives back in the UK, Denmark, the US, and Canada.

Our group consisted of four university professors; an NGO staff member (Rachael, who was also an experienced trekker); a PhD student; a Nepalese social entrepreneur; a photographer; two guides; and three porters. The latter immediately pulled ahead of the group. They were laden down with our 10-kilogram backpacks and duffle bags, but unencumbered by our heavy-footedness, our laboured breathing as we climbed up, and then down, the mountain paths, and our frequent stops. We stopped to catch our breath, to take pictures, and to talk with the villagers we encountered along the mountain paths: children on their daily two-hour walk to or from school; herdsman, ushering long, single-file lines of donkeys with heartbreakingly heavy loads strapped to their backs; men and women with baskets of produce or construction materials strapped to their backs; and tea lodge owners and toddlers who greeted us from their low doorways with the traditional “Namaste”, palms placed together at their hearts.

Mostly, though, we stopped to marvel at, and make sense of, what we encountered: lessons about the power of patience, persistence, and humility; about the distance one can cover by taking small steps; and, most of all, about the surprising, sometimes hidden, possibilities that surround us.

And that’s what this article is about: to describe lessons learned on a 12-day academic conference or “walking workshop” in Nepal and to consider how these lessons could be applied in our classrooms.

The walking workshop took place in May 2016, its joint sponsorship itself a lesson in cooperation and coordination: Tourism Education Futures Initiative (TEFI) and its working group Tourism Innovation Partnership for Social Entrepreneurship (TIPSE)¹ developed the workshop’s “academic” themes; Adventure Alternative, a social enterprise tour operation, partnered with its charitable foundation, Moving Mountains, to handle the logistics of trekking routes, food and lodging.

This year’s academic themes were initially three-fold: to develop plans for a summer school for university students on the link between social entrepreneurship and sustainable tourism; to contribute to curriculum design for a proposed Himalayan Tourism Institute; and to discuss a five-year business plan for TIPSE. Rather than meeting in the usual academic conference venue (i.e., an air-conditioned, five-star hotel), the plan was to trek from mountain village to village, discussing how our three goals might be achieved, talking with the local people who would be affected by the

¹ Tourism Education Futures Initiative (TEFI), together with its working group Tourism Innovation Partnership for Social Entrepreneurship (TIPSE), is an international network of tourism educators that “seeks to inspire, inform and support tourism educators and students to passionately and courageously transform the world for the better” (<http://tourismeducationfutures.org/>)

outcomes, and visiting sites that linked successful social enterprises with sustainable tourism.

We realized right away that planning a Himalayan Tourism Institute, a joint development between the workshop participants and our counterparts from Kathmandu University and a mountain-village high school, was a long-term, ambitious task. Perhaps it was best approached through incremental efforts. The starting point could be a summer school tourism course that targeted both international and Nepalese students, with a field study component in Nepal. Consequently, the Himalayan Tourism Institute was put on the back burner, and our focus directed toward a single summer school course.

That decision encapsulated and foreshadowed all the lessons to come: as educators, we needed to be *patient* in achieving our long-term goal; foster the *humility* to take the incremental, relatively *small step* of developing just one course, while retaining our *persistence* in working toward a Himalayan Tourism Institute. As for the *surprising, sometimes hidden, possibilities that surround us*, well, that lesson wasn't yet apparent, at least not to me.

It would show up in good time, though – and repeatedly – starting on Day 1 of the trek.

Days 1-4

In my earlier list of the trek's participants, I inadvertently left out one person: Pem Diki Sherpa, the mother of one of our Nepalese guides. She wasn't with us the entire time, only until Day 4 of the trek, when we reached Bumburi, her village. Left to her own, this 70-year old woman in her long skirt and trainers would have reached the village much earlier. But out of courtesy she slowed down to match our pace. If this was frustrating for her, she never once showed it. Instead her parting words to us, "Live happily for as long as you live", felt like a blessing. We remembered and repeated it as we continued on the trek without her.

I just referred to her son as "one of our guides". Ang Chhongba Sherpa chose our routes and handled technical details, such as obtaining bookings and permissions. But he was also our guide in another way: he showed us what could be accomplished if we set our minds and our hearts to it. As a member of Moving Mountains, he was intimately familiar with those sorts of accomplishments: a health clinic in Bumburi; recently installed pipes providing clean water to an entire community; a hydro power station; and renovated local schools and monasteries, the latter also serving as village meeting places. He had played a central role in envisioning and then establishing all these sites and facilities that we visited on the trek. When asked how he accomplished so much, Ang Chhongba replied, "Small steps".



The lesson: Everyone is more.

People can be more, sometimes far more, than our initial views of them. If that statement applies to the 70-year woman and to the mountain guide whom I met during a Himalayan trek, could it also apply to the students I encounter every semester in the classroom?

It's a question worth pondering because understanding our students, so that we can provide the best possible learning environment for them (and for us), is about to become more challenging. Our demographics are changing. The familiar group of 18-21 year olds who constitute over 50% of our fulltime undergraduate enrolment is declining, projected to contract by about 10% over the next decade (Charbonneau, 2011; Foote, 2014). To offset this decline, postsecondary institutions are being urged to target less familiar groups: students from low-income households; "first generation learners" (i.e., those whose parents do not have a post-secondary education); and Indigenous Peoples (Berger, 2009). Efforts to attract international students will inevitably intensify. Right now, most of the international cohort in Canadian universities is from China. Other countries likely to be targeted include those with a large population of university-aged students: Mexico, Turkey, Vietnam, Malaysia and the Philippines (Foote, 2014).

As these newcomers become increasingly visible presences in our classrooms and our campuses, limiting stereotypes about their backgrounds, values and capabilities may surface. That's to be expected. Affixing a "label" to someone or, in this case to an entire group of students, can be a reassuring practice. It can help us deal with the uncertainty that accompanies not knowing who these students are.

Consider, however, the possibility that we do know these students – or, rather, we know the single most important fact about them: they have capabilities, depth and insights that are not obvious at first glance. Each one contains more potential than we

2 Photo credit: Fee Chandler, Sparkling Communications Ltd

realize. If my trekking story doesn't help you consider that possibility and its implications, then, try reading (or re-reading) Parker Palmer's work. Here's a sample of what he has to say about students and possibility (2016):

Young people...are often unaware of the gifts they have to offer us...gifts of energy, vision, and hope that hard experience and the erosions of time may have stolen from me, often without my knowing it. They challenge my cynicism and even save me from despair when they see a possibility I'd probably dismiss, but come at it from a new angle that might just work. "Once more into the breach," I think, "and I'll go with them."

A 70-year old woman who outpaces trek mates decades younger.

A Sherpa who helps raise the quality of life – and life expectancy – for entire villages.

A student who...

Being open to our students' hidden possibilities can help us complete that line. It can also help us create a more gratifying teaching/learning environment for everyone – an outcome that might take us one small step closer to the blessing, "Live happily for as long as you live".

Days 5 -6

We're doing the opposite of what custom and competition have long taught us to do: we're moving slowly. We need to, though, for two reasons. First, the ascent is steep, leading to a summit of about 2800 metres. Altitude sickness becomes a concern at about 2400 metres, so a slow pace helps us acclimatize to the thinner oxygen levels and avoid becoming ill. Second, the ascent is steep. Even at a slow pace, I'm short of breath and sounding like Darth Vader. I wouldn't be able to make it all the way if I had to move faster.

As it is, I need to play mind tricks to keep close behind our secondary guide, Ang Gelgun, who's setting this wise pace. I decide to channel the spirit of the donkeys we've repeatedly encountered on the mountain trails: patient and unhurried, but always progressing up the path. I direct my attention to those qualities, ignoring for the time being the signs of abuse or neglect – skeletal frames; raw sores – that mark many of them.

One of my fellow trekkers is Nepalese. With an insider's knowledge, Uttam explains that some of the donkeys are "rented out", like delivery trucks, whereas some are herded by their owners. The latter are the lucky ones. Unlike the "rental donkeys", these ones are unlikely to be pushed past their endurance and burdened with overly heavy loads, their wellbeing sacrificed in order to get somewhere faster.

I focus on channelling the lucky ones.

**The lesson: Slow down.**

In 1914, Bertrand Russell famously (and repeatedly) declined a position at Harvard. He believed the administration's insistence on "quick results" and "efficiency" ran counter to producing work of high academic quality:

I miss in the professors the atmosphere of meditation and absent-mindedness which one associates with thought – they all seem more alert and business-like and punctual than one expects very good people to be. And they are all overworked... (cited in Feinberg & Kasrils, 1973, p. 41).

The result, he concluded, was a "soul destroying atmosphere".

Russell's remarks still resonate – and far beyond Harvard. Insightful, impactful scholarly work, no matter where its institutional origin, requires sustained, even meditative, reflection. It takes time to get to the top of the mountain.

Time, however, is in short supply for many faculty. Increasingly, most of us are hired, assessed and promoted based on "market-oriented management techniques" with their "pervasive focus on efficiency and competition" (Muller, 2014, para 3). "Output" within a given time period becomes the measurement of scholarly worth: the number of articles published, courses taught, proposals accepted, funding dollars received, citations noted – and perhaps even Tweets posted about all these accomplishments. An article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (Furtak, 2016) describes an organizational strategy to record and monitor all this academic activity: it involves identifying eleven different categories of ongoing work, highlighting each on a chart that, pre-tenure, should be placed in a highly visible location which can be looked at every day. Post-tenure, the

writer concedes, the chart can be moved to a less visible but still frequently visited location.³

Of course, some may thrive on this accelerated, multi-tasking pace (Vostal, 2015). But the likelihood is the opposite. As measured by the well-known Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, most university faculty indicate a preference for introversion (54%) and intuitiveness (64%), a combination that suggests most of us work best when we work slowly and reflectively, focusing on one task at a time (Scherdin, 2002).

When we don't have that option, we may end up finding ourselves in "a soul destroying atmosphere", and this doesn't bode well for ourselves – or for our students (Hartman & Darab, 2012). In a public missive that serves as an implicit, albeit belated, acknowledgement of Russell's criticism, Harvard agreed. In 2001 Harry Lewis, the Dean of Harvard College, wrote a letter to the incoming students, his message summarized in the letter's title, "Slow down". The central question, Lewis later explained, was "whether it really makes sense to do everything simultaneously [or] whether [it] wouldn't be better to slow down and do a small number of things more deeply" (as cited by Graff, 2001).

The question, of course, is rhetorical. Each of us innately knows the answer. Each of us also knows that following the advice to "slow down" presents significant challenges, given the nature of postsecondary institutions right now. Remembering the story about trekking in the Himalayas and the patient progress of donkeys won't make those challenges disappear. It may, though, be a small step toward helping us address them, and, in doing so, help each of us uncover possibilities that lie within, if only we'd take the time to look.

Day 7

Going slowly doesn't mean we never break pace. Today, our last day of trekking, we're fairly flying along terrain that we've christened "Nepalese flat": a broad, sustained swathe of uncharacteristically level terrain. Close to six hours later, just as we're approaching the airport village of Phaplu, I get the first sensation of a blister forming on my left foot. Later, after a cold shower in the tea lodge where we'll spend the night, I tend to it. And then I contemplate my hiking boots. They're good boots, purchased only three months earlier specifically for this trip. However, they're also, I've come to realize, a poor fit for me. The prospect of cramming my feet back into them isn't enticing. And because they're hiking boots, they're heavy and sturdily constructed. The prospect of cramming them into my pack and lugging the extra weight about isn't a welcome thought, either.

And so I leave them behind, placed on the communal boot rack in the lodge hallway – to be discovered, I hope, by someone who can use them.

³ However, "post tenure", with its promise of a more moderate pace, may never actually arrive for those with contractually limited appointments, an increasingly large cohort. In the States, this cohort is estimated to constitute somewhere between 50% to 70% of post-secondary teaching faculty (AAUP, no date). Numbers are more difficult to find in Canada, but one Ontario university is cited as having 52% of its undergraduates taught by contract faculty (Basen, 2014).

**Lesson: What's left behind?**

Of all that needs to be left behind when we teach, narrow-mindedness and its accompanying egoism top the list: clinging to a particular viewpoint or approach, perhaps even deifying it, while demonizing (or refusing to acknowledge) any opposition. In education, narrow-mindedness/egoism results in what Freire famously described as “pedagogy of the oppressed”, whereby

...knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing. Projecting an absolute ignorance onto others, a characteristic of the ideology of oppression, negates education and knowledge as processes of inquiry. The teacher presents himself to his students as their necessary opposite; by considering their ignorance absolute, he justifies his own existence (Freire, 1993, para 6).

I initially considered my anecdote about the hiking boots as an analogy, compatible with Freire's thinking. The point behind it went something like this: “I left my boots behind because, like certain ideas or ways of thinking, they didn't ‘fit’. Hanging on to them would cause discomfort and impede my progress. The fact that I left them behind doesn't mean, however, that I'm discarding or dismissing them as useless. Someone else could find them a perfect fit and be able to move further along their journey as a result.”

It's a strained, somewhat grandiose, comparison between boots that fit some people but not others and perspectives that fit some people but not others.

I let it remain, though, because its failure serves a purpose: it reminds me to leave behind my egoism, my belief that because I am the instructor, I am the smartest person in the classroom. It reminds me to heed Freire's caution about becoming the kind of teacher who creates, rather than closes, the gulf between teacher and learner. It reminds me to be humble.

And I let it remain for another reason. Few people, I suspect, trek the Himalayas without becoming aware of something they can't quite articulate. At some point, everything becomes imbued with gravitas. The villages we stay in, the people we meet,

the food we eat, the bridges we cross, and yes, even the hiking boots we wear, take on a heightened sense of meaning, an *otherworldliness*, that compels a person to pay attention – and to quietly wonder about the lessons they contain within.

I've been avoiding the word "spirituality" here because many academics view anything outside the realm of the rational and the secular as an affront to academic objectivity and credibility. Perhaps that notion should be reconsidered. Perhaps exploring the potential of spirituality to focus attention and prompt "wonder" can help strengthen our teaching/learning experiences.

Certainly, our Indigenous Peoples would agree. Their traditional belief that the spiritual and the secular are linked may represent the first steps toward this exploration as Canadian universities begin the process of "Indigenizing the academy", making postsecondary education and faculty positions more available to members of the Indigenous community.

Exploring this potential might also bring us one step closer to understanding what the Nepalese tea lodge owners (and maybe even the toddlers) mean when they greet strangers with "Namaste": "I honour the divinity within you". With that understanding, all the lessons of the walking workshop in Nepal would then surely be available to every teacher and every learner, no matter where in the world they find themselves.



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