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Action Research in International Educational Settings: Bridging the Gap at the American University of Bulgaria

by *Mari Firkatian and Sandy Feinstein*

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As articulated by Yolanda Wadsworth, our use of the word "research" would be a misnomer (Wadsworth, 1998). After all, this article does not even involve what might pass for qualitative research, nor is it intended to serve as an example of research. Rather, it describes an incipient phase of research: observation and description. We are sharing our hypothesis, though our fieldwork is not systematic; we are offering a retrospective, partly impressionistic glance at an experience in an attempt to prepare for future comparative research as well as the developing of pedagogies based on experience. While not adhering to a scientific methodology that would qualify as *bona fide* research, we have "come to understand the practical and ethical implications" of what Wadsworth goes on to enumerate: "the effects of raising some questions and not others; the effects of involving some people in the process [or even apparently only one] and not others; the effects of observing some phenomena and not others; the effects of making this sense of it and not alternative senses, and the effects of deciding to take this action [or no action] as a result of it rather than any other action and so on." These distinctions are important to us, for they partly resolve the issues of contradiction in research raised by Pam Swepson (1998).

Recognizing the necessity for knowing the subjects as well as the objects for even the most preliminary research, we begin with who we are and where we were. These facts inform what we experienced and what we describe. Working and writing together, collaboration itself, is, in our understanding, at the heart of action theory. The permutations of this article demonstrate the action of the theory itself.

We had an opportunity to teach at the American University of Bulgaria (AUBG) between 1992 and 1994. Mari Firkatian and Sandy Feinstein were faculty members at a newly-formed institution of higher education in an environment where both teaching and living day-to-day provided unique challenges. The university was only one-year old when we began our tenure there. It is located in the southwestern part of Bulgaria in one of the least developed parts of the country—a legacy of the communist government's unwillingness to sink capital and development monies into a region that was considered militant and possibly separatist. This is known as the Macedonian question—a regional problem too complex to address here but to state that it is one agenda item that still plagues successive Bulgarian governments.

Mari's area of specialty is East European and Balkan history; she was also born in Bulgaria, and Bulgarian is her first language. We taught three classes each semester with 2030 students per

class. For two years, Mari offered courses on Balkan History (1815 to the present), East European History in the 19th and 20th centuries, Russian and Soviet Foreign Policy, and Western Civilization Surveys. All of these courses considered, to some extent, the geo-political area of the Balkans, which includes Bulgaria. For one year, Sandy was a visiting Associate Professor, teaching writing and literature without any apparent connection to the region: the most popular course she taught was Arthurian Literature, a course she taught regularly at a small college in Kansas.

For two years Mari taught at AUBG, the political landscape of the country changed in unpredictable ways: from Soviet style Communism to Democracy, and the reconstituted communism of the "Socialist Party," the former Communists with a new name. The war in Yugoslavia was raging, and the potential for peace in the Balkans in the foreseeable future was dim. Class discussions often began with news coverage of a particular incident. The university had a special hook up to CNN, facilitating American coverage of regional interest. Local newspapers (e.g., *Pirinsko Delo*, *Standart*) as well as American magazines (e.g., *Time*, *Newsweek*) provided a range of points of view. Students avidly followed and understood issues particular to the region; they had a comparatively broad view of historical events and their effect on the region, deeper than students Mari had encountered to that point in her teaching career. Discussions on the "liberation" of the East European states by the Soviet Union and subsequent 1940's triumph of the Communist Party in those countries, elicited student stories of the velvet revolution or that of their parents' memories. All of these components helped shape the classroom experience into a unique and highly charged learning environment.

The physical realities of southwestern Bulgaria informed our understanding and approach as well. This region is ruggedly beautiful, surrounded by mountain ranges that isolate it from the rest of the country as well as from Greece and Macedonia, its neighbors to the south and west. It is an undeveloped region, known more for its wine production than factories; wine production is second only to tobacco farming. The municipal infrastructure in Blagoevgrad, where AUBG is located, is crumbling: rutted roads make transportation slow and difficult; rationed water and electricity frustrate development and daily life; scarce housing limits growth. Students and faculty alike suffered the consequences of these privations when it came to residential living. Students made due with makeshift, overcrowded facilities; faculty often overpaid for substandard housing they were responsible for arranging.

The challenges were numerous. Students enrolled from all over the former Soviet bloc, but the vast majority was Bulgarian. Their faith in the opportunities their education at AUBG would provide seemed to override their suspicion of something as strange as a liberal arts education. They seemed to be able to grasp the potential of this type of education more easily than the accessibility of their professors. Professors, in their experience, were inaccessible. Language was not a barrier since our students all spoke excellent English, and since some were well traveled, we were not perceived as Martians, dropped from the sky because of our clothing or manners (at least not by our students but perhaps by some of the locals). Respect for teachers was taught early in this culture. Educators were revered and honored but understood as representing the ruling culture. At every level of life, individuals banded together in a mentality of "us," the people, versus "them," the establishment. This social reality contributed to the divide between faculty and students. We offered these students a different model.

One consequence of the distance between teachers and students was that it enabled certain behaviors anathema to Western instructors but seemingly endemic in Bulgarian education: that is, cheating. Breaking down the divisions between "classes"-faculty and students-might, some of us felt, inculcate certain values of Western education, namely, integrity.

To this purpose, we practiced outreach on several levels. There were the faculty-staff and student basketball, softball, and baseball games; there were also swimming and track events, as well as hiking and skiing. Mari, for one, volunteered to coach the women's softball team. We also organized a swim competition involving faculty and students. The members of the faculty-staff relay team ranged in age from 16 (a professor's daughter) to 65. Sports at the university level was in itself unique: soviet bloc era colleges did not have varsity teams or anything like the sports facilities, which are an accepted feature of university campuses in North America. Seeing their professors participate in organized sports was instructive to the students. Professors seemed more approachable when they were in that new "classless" environment.

In addition to these efforts, Mari led field trips in Bulgaria: Veliko Turnovo (i.e., a former Bulgarian capital), Pleven (i.e., site of the most important battle for the liberation of Bulgaria by the Russians from the Ottomans) a Thracian gravesite, and a Neolithic dig. With her students she also visited Greece and Turkey: Philippi, Istanbul, Troy, and Edirne. Students, most of whom rarely traveled to these countries, especially Turkey, often described being deeply affected by the experience. They began to shed some preconceived negative notions about their neighbors. These included feelings of antipathy and hatred based on history, specifically 500 hundred years of Ottoman Turkish occupation of the Balkans. The hostility, used as a pretext for ethnic cleansing in Yugoslavia, is a legacy of Muslim domination of the Christian Balkans from the 14th century through the end of World War I. Our students learned from these opportunities to see first-hand these nearby historic places and meet their neighbors. This contact with the "other" was an educational experience introduced by "foreign" professors.

Just as students confronted well-known and widely-held assumptions about education and regional history, so, too, did teachers confront their own ignorance about student assumptions about learning. Two of Sandy's most vivid recollections and learning experiences involved sports and cheating. That their American teachers cared about either took students by surprise, and that the two were related was, perhaps, incomprehensible. In her year at AUBG, Sandy had little problem with students availing themselves of her office hours since they were required to meet her to discuss their writing. After the first session, the requirement became superfluous. Students wanted to do well, and these conferences were understood to effect that outcome. Unfortunately, for some, conferencing with their English teacher did not guarantee the desired outcome. The roles during these conferences were clearly that of student and teacher, with the inevitable power relationship that combination implies.

Sandy soon learned the ramifications of this kind of perceived relationship. During a quiz, two students exchanged words in Bulgarian she could not understand. She felt compelled to act. She learned that not only were quiz answers being exchanged but that students, as they later admitted, were translating texts from their own language into English and offering the result as their original work. This kind of plagiarism was impossible to detect, but not impossible to address.

One action involved trying to dissolve the convenient "us" (authority/power) and "them" (subordinate/powerless) construction that facilitated cheating where few students saw anything "wrong" in their actions. Cheating was taken for granted; it was one defense against arbitrary authority, another legacy of the communist system of rewards and punishments. At least this is what a number of students explained to her.

Talking to students was a start. Distributing American faculty recommendation forms for MBA programs was another. Being visible and active outside the context of the education building, former Communist Party regional headquarters, became yet another means of challenging certain ingrained assumptions about education. Students saw Sandy, a 40-year old English professor, jog, swim, play tennis and softball, anomalous in and of itself. In an article for the student paper, Iordanka Ivantcheva described her impression of Dr. Feinstein as follows: "Sandra Feinstein (Sandy) looked like a teenage girl, rather than a college professor." Playing sports with the students forced her out of the hierarchical academic context and into their context-being just "a teenage girl." Cheating could no longer be justified as a counter to a system because a racket wielding, seemingly youthful, female professor did not fit the accustomed model. Cheating, in fact, had to be seen as perpetrated against an individual, a new idea for many.

It has been nine years since we taught in Bulgaria; Sandy returned for graduation in 1996. Otherwise, contact has been through e-mail. It is this contact that reminds us of all the other kinds of contact we had in Bulgaria that made possible a different view of education, of learning, of teaching. Students learned cheating has consequences beyond the classroom, beyond the work place, that it will cost them the respect and love upon which they thrived and continue to seek. As Bobby Philips, who has taught Political Science at the university since its inception, explained in a recent e-mail (22 April 2002), "I think that the attitude to it has changed. [I]t's more widely understood that this is a 'no-no' and why this is the case." His perception is somewhat different from the one described by Mari and Sandy presently teaching in the United States: he is there now, experiencing the past in the present. While noting that student-faculty activities continue-he mentions "trekking" as one such activity-he also remarks a faculty demoralized and thus increasingly detached from the university as a result of an unsympathetic administration; therefore, he ascribes the change in student behavior with regard to cheating as due to understanding of "intellectual property rights and all." These and other issues are worth further investigation.

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