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Crafting International Education from the Middle

BY JONATHAN L. LARSON, PhD, and KARI B. HENQUINET, PhD

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced international educators to adapt to new conditions, structures, and modes of work. As has already been aptly noted, self-examination, open-mindedness, and innovation are general qualities that might guide us through this moment (Doscher 2020; Hudzik 2020a) and address the unfinished work of integrating the transformational potential of education abroad and global learning into higher education (Custodi et al. 2020; Dietrich 2020; Hudzik 2020b; Kahn 2020; Mireles 2020). Albert Einstein’s famous observation, “We cannot solve our problems with the same level of thinking that created them,” seems appropriate for a situation that also calls loudly for nimble action that envisions and builds new infrastructures to replace those that are crumbling. Yet many international education scholar-practitioners are positioned somewhere in the middle of their institutions and professional communities—as directors, faculty members, or advisers—rather than in positions to redirect resources or provide strategic vision from the top. What conceptual tools might help them lead in their areas of international education? How can those positioned in the middle of their institutions or communities collectively help international educators adapt to a post-pandemic world of training students for an uncertain future? And how have those in the middle already started to craft new vessels for educators to navigate this new world and contribute to emergent forms of international education?

Inspired by recent work in the philosophy of media and anthropology on the concept of “craft” and by the popular paradigm of design thinking, we seek here to provide a point of reflection for scholar-practitioners attempting to orient themselves in a pandemic environment—where mobility is less certain but global learning and working together are more critical than ever. In what follows, we first expand briefly on the place of “craft,” as related to but broader than “design,” for considering the role of learning and action in human adaptation. The history of human use of technologies has entailed understanding a potential tool and then its application to survive and thrive in new environments. Using our experiences navigating spaces somewhere in the middle of our institutions, we then explore how utilizing the educator’s toolbox—e.g., learning objectives,

artifacts, activities, assessments, and spaces—can help international educators shape new environments while also maneuvering through uncertainty.

CRAFTING NEW VESSELS FOR INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION

As the COVID-19 pandemic hit in early 2020, international educators experienced the pressures of this extraordinary turn of events differently, yet all found themselves scrambling for solutions and alternatives in real time. For some, the urgency of the moment was securing the safe return of students to their home countries to complete the semester. Others rushed to support students who were caught between hostile political rhetoric, travel restrictions, and universities dependent on their revenues.

For instructors, advisers, and program coordinators, the task of continuing intercultural and global learning in new modalities became particularly acute.

While we as international educators may still feel overwhelmed by the novelty of adapting to a pandemic, John Durham Peters (a philosopher of media) argues that the ability *to craft* is central to the human condition: “We, the created creators, shape tools that shape us. We live by our crafts and conditions” (Peters 2015, 51). For instance, it is through our ability to craft that we are able to live in environments where we otherwise could not survive. Such technical abilities, including an ability to “craft gaps” (i.e., understanding the tool and then how to use it), are integral to the history of humanity (Boellstorff 2015). Following this line of thinking, one can consider online spaces to be vessels for traversing new territory; these online spaces might be referred to as “crafts.” Online spaces have also been *crafted*: conceived and constructed to take teaching and learning into spaces where they had not been. In particular, international education has historically emphasized physical mobility and cultural immersion for intercultural learning. While such travel experiences and a strong curriculum of intercultural mentorship are a powerful combination (Vande Berg, Paige, and Lou 2012), now more than ever international educators are applying pedagogical best practices to bring out the intercultural potential of online, hybrid, and at-home spaces. Such innovations and experiments are not exclusive to those at the top, but often come from somewhere in the middle, where people collaborate and innovate using the tools and resources available to them.

Our ability to craft has been guiding our next steps toward post-pandemic international education. To ground this philosophical insight in a lexicon already familiar to many international educators, it may help to reference some ideas from a field that would seem already steeped in ideas of *Homo faber*, humans as makers: design thinking.

FROM DESIGN THINKING TO CRAFTING IN INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION

Higher education institutions across the country have been taking a fresh look at general education and internationalization to adapt to rapid technological change, the massive global crisis in public health, tightening borders, and financial distress. IDEAhub, a presidential initiative at Michigan Technological

University, called for the redesign of undergraduate education over the last three years (IDEAhub 2022). IDEAhub draws on a design thinking approach, based in the [Stanford d.school](#), that moves through cycles of brainstorming and ideation, information gathering, prototypes and experiments, and reflection and adjustment to align program designs with stakeholder needs. While this project of “designing” undergraduate education had a directive, the design thinking process lent itself in many ways to processes of crafting and experimenting, processes of emerging and becoming. “Craft” as we are using it here (drawing on Boellstorff and Peters) leaves room for improvisation, human agency, serendipity, broad collaborations, and strategies in groups. Although it was initiated by the university’s president, IDEAhub has been overwhelmingly a bottom-up process, rich in ideas from the middle of the university—faculty members, staff, department chairs, and student leaders.

One working group in IDEAhub, co-led by author Henquinet, focused on global and community engagement. Over the process of several years of working together with others across the Michigan Tech campus, that group discovered a common interest in the ability to navigate uncertain and changing environments, teaching students to adapt, learn, and flourish in future jobs that do not yet exist. If there is too narrow a focus in curricula on skills and doing, captured in the “upon completion of this course, students will be able to...” approach, this will limit the training that students need. As educators crafting for the present and the future, we must be comfortable with working in teams, balancing confidence and humility, and cultivating a spirit of creativity and curiosity about the world. We must navigate and work with complexity, messy problems, and the ambiguity and uncertainty that arise when forging into new social and pedagogical terrain (Henquinet 2016). And we must instill this adaptability and comfort in our students. As Larson (2020) has argued in regard to his education abroad teaching, learning outcomes of this sort may be more akin to a “sensibility.” In general, international educators know this, but, as was discovered at Michigan Tech, what we often miss is the synergy that exists with other educators beyond our academic silos when we work together in teams to craft learning goals and experiences.

New modalities and approaches to international education are not always by design, or intention, with a top-down directive or support. Perhaps the most obvious examples are the myriad ways that faculty, program staff,

and partners abroad crafted new vessels for delivering intercultural and global learning content and experiences when student mobility has been limited due to the pandemic. The authors observed how colleagues at Michigan Tech and the University of Illinois, often working from mid-points in their institutions, created online courses, virtual global internships, international virtual exchanges, and more in a matter of days or weeks, with little time for careful design or lengthy design thinking processes. Note here that “craft” also encompasses adaptation on the fly or in unorchestrated processes that may lead to ways to thrive in new environments. Many outcomes crafted during this period of uncertainty were achievements previously unimagined.

As international education continues to exist in a state of chronic uncertainty about whether students can travel and how to manage risk and planning, many continue to craft new modalities for global learning. As part of a National Science Foundation International Research Experiences for Students team, Henquinet planned to teach an ethnographic field school in El Salvador during the summer of 2020. Everything was postponed and the timeline remained uncertain well into 2021. Seeing the precarious situation of the pandemic in spring 2021, the team quickly used tools at their disposal—spaces, artifacts, and activities—to refashion some of the elements that were constitutive of the planned field school and offer something similar in spirit online. The students conducted Zoom interviews with key partners in El Salvador as they learned about ethnographic research methods. Advantages of Zoom included the ability for more people to share in the interview experience than would normally be the case in person and for students and faculty with lower Spanish proficiency to better follow the interviews through teammates’ live notetaking. Starting conversations with key collaborators predeparture helped the team to hit the ground running later in the summer in unexpectedly rich ways when they arrived in El Salvador. Because of the online experience, even if the students had not traveled, they were able to complete an intensive two-week ethnographic research training online and earn a digital badge from Michigan Tech. This strategy was a quick pivot that emerged from countless meetings of a faculty team crafting an international research experience in a pandemic with no existing road maps. Working from the middle with tools at their disposal, faculty leaders adapted spaces, artifacts, and activities for a new learning environment, which integrated Salvadoran collaborators

with communication technologies to train the students and inform our research plan when we could not travel to work face-to-face.

CONCLUSION

New variants of the coronavirus continue to cast uncertainty on some version of a “return to normal.” International educators likely must continue to adapt (often on the fly) as they have been doing since early 2020. To call these adaptations “pivots” seems appropriate to a certain degree. However, to think of what we have been doing as “pivoting” leaves our movements in an imagination of reaction, rather than creation. We have already been crafting and creating experiences for global learning in a new normal as international educators in the middle, helping our students navigate an uncertain and rapidly changing future of work and global change.

In this piece, we have argued that thinking of our work as “craft” is particularly germane to this moment. It adds further dimensions of skill, design, and even artistry. All are qualities that many of us operating in the middle of international education would like to associate with our professional endeavors. Crafting also connects us to a larger human experience of daring to experiment, adapt, and bridge gaps between our discoveries and the contexts in which we might employ them. Extemporaneous, collaborative crafting from the middle is generative and gives us many resources for building new vessels to carry us into the future.

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Jonathan L. Larson, PhD is associate director of the European Union Center at the University of Illinois in Urbana–Champaign, where he works with the U.S. Department of Education and the European Commission. He has worked in education abroad and volunteered for NAFSA and the Forum on Education Abroad.

Kari B. Henquinet, PhD, is a principal lecturer in anthropology at Michigan Technological University, where she has directed Peace Corps partner programs for the last ten years. She specializes in international development and humanitarianism, and enjoys mentoring graduate and undergraduate students in global and community-based research projects.



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