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Have Mouth Will Travel?

One day, years ago, my mum said, “You just need your mouth and you can go anywhere and survive.” My mum is illiterate and yet after her marriage at the age of fourteen, she had set foot in a different country, picked up a new language, learned to recognize numbers, and rose to be able to assist my father in his business. Her mouth was the only asset she had. For years, I had believed in what she said but today as an international graduate student at Michigan State University, I am not so sure. I am an MSU alumnus who has returned for a doctoral degree after seven years, confident that my prior experiences in the U.S. would make this new five-year journey easier. Looking at my current academic and social life, never in my life had I been so blatantly wrong.

Sometime during my Ph.D. program, I realized that something more was needed than just being able to talk. I will never forget that first day of class when a few other international students and I had kept on staring at one of our American classmates, admiring the eloquent manner in which she spoke for a full five minutes in response to a simple question posed by our professor. In my mind, his question only required a “Yes” or “No” answer and maybe two or three words to add to that. That day as she was talking, my international friends and I glanced at each other with nervous smiles pinned on our faces. It was not just the length of time that she took to express her ideas that fascinated us but also the manner in which she did it. It was so impressive and she sounded almost like a professor who had read hundreds of books in this area beyond my one miserable article mandated by the syllabus. And she was only probably half my age! That day I thought to myself, “Is this what I am expected to be able to do in my doctoral
level classes? If so, how am I going to survive in my next fourteen classes over the next three years?” I was truly worried.

In the past few years as I continued taking classes, I kept on noticing how class after class my American friends were always able to give lengthy and confident answers in such an elegant manner. Watching their rich classroom participations and frequent interactions with professors, I often felt like a failure, as though I didn’t belong to my cohorts. But very soon I realized that to be able to finish my program successfully, I cannot continue being like this. I had too much of pride and did not want to be labeled as a poor learner. One day, I saw a quote that seemed like an omen urging me on to talk, “Speak up; even if your voice cracks.” I also knew that this is the only way to get better grades in classroom participation. Furthermore, one of my senior friends had also advised me that I should make my voice be heard as early as possible in the semester. He said, “Don’t wait till the end of the semester to open your mouth to say something. If you do that, you will be surprised to hear your own voice.” Heeding this advice, I decided to force myself to participate more frequently in my classes, whether eloquent or not. By now I have also come to the conclusion that doctoral classes are not just about academic reading, writing and presenting at conferences but also about how, when, what, and with whom we talk.

I saw my first opportunity in my next class. In response to a discussion on an educational issue, I jumped straight in and gave my opinion and then related that to what is happening in the Asian countries, in particular reference to my home country, Malaysia. To strengthen my views, I cited a few examples from my previous schools, glad that they came to my mind at the right moment. I spoke about the high schools where I taught and the concerns I had teaching state-mandated curriculum to a classroom of thirty five to forty students of mixed abilities. Surely this will be a different scenario for my local friends to think about, I thought happily. After a few minutes of talk, I was done and looked around in anticipation of further questions from my
mostly U.S. classmates. I glowed at the thought that for once I was the expert and that I certainly knew more about my subject area than any of them. At that time, it felt so good to feel smart.

In contrary to what one would expect, that day I returned to my apartment feeling dejected. The student who continued the discussion after me did not at all refer to what I had mentioned but had simply shifted the topic to a different perspective. There simply wasn’t any follow-up on what I had said. Not only was there no follow-up during classroom discourse but there were also none during the conversations during break or even after class. “But I always took an interest in what they said,” I deliberated in self-pity. After many more experiences like these that were similar to what most of my international friends were also experiencing, I pondered if it is even necessary to express my ideas and why I should even continue doing so if they were not reciprocated. Why even bother? Such negative thoughts ensued for a while making me more withdrawn. I slowly transformed into a wall paper in most of my classrooms. I hid behind my laptop and took lots and lots of notes and only spoke as needed, just enough to make my presence felt.

My concerns as an international student in the U.S. did not just stop at academic level but they also spilt over to my social life. I will never understand how it is possible to be in four classes with someone and not go beyond the superficial ‘How are you?’ and ‘I am fine!’ templates that are common occurrences around here. Often I get extremely tired of “We must have coffee sometimes” type of conversations. Sometimes weeks and months go by and we still continue talking in the elevators and corridors about having coffee! Am I expected to make the first move even if I didn’t bring up the topic of having coffee in the first place? In the beginning, I used to go to my classrooms early waiting to strike a conversation with fellow classmates before the professor walks in. There were numerous times when it did not go beyond a superficial template-type greeting and sometimes it was not even possible to get a glance from
them let alone start a conversation. One thing that never ceased to amaze me to this day is how it is possible to have conversations with a person many times and yet each time feel as though introductions were just taking place.

With all these happening around me, I am not so sure anymore if being able to talk alone is sufficient for one to survive. However, these days I have decided to take a more philosophical approach towards my concerns as an international student in the U.S. This radical change transpired when recently it struck me that my days at Michigan State University and in the U.S. are numbered. In two years, I will cease being a formally registered student and will return to my home country. Do I want to waste the limited time I have here to ponder on all the negative things around me? Furthermore, isn’t it naive of me to expect others to act the way I like? Of course diverse family and cultural backgrounds are going to lead to various behavioral patterns. As I started to rationalize things, these days I have become more accepting and understanding. What could be wrong if I make the first move to make our elevator talks about coffee become a reality? If I feel left out and uncomfortable to engage in classroom discussions, instead of howling to myself and to my international friends, shouldn’t I just be proactive and bring it up to my professor? If my classmates are disinterested to learn about me and my different world, that is all right too. I just have to move on to someone else that shows enthusiasm. Perhaps I should continue reminding myself many times a day that I should speak up, even if my voice cracks.

The next time I go back home, I will tell my mum that we can certainly survive anywhere in the world with our mouths but as international students in a far away land, we need to be able to do more than that. Survival alone is not enough; we should be able to create homes wherever we go. Living in a world that is increasingly crossing borders and cultures, it is important to push aside our personal frustrations and strive to move forward with positive thoughts. Certainly, I have to do this because I am in the teaching profession and this is what we teachers always do.