

SCHOLARLY WRITING AS A TOOL FOR EMPOWERING CHANGE AGENTS IN ETHIOPIA

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This narrative describes the experiences and insights of an American professor who was invited to teach a scholarly writing course to doctoral social work students in Ethiopia. The professor recounts her initial decision to accept the offer to teach in Ethiopia, the incredible opportunities to learn about social problems and injustices from her students, her amazement at students' eagerness to learn and their appreciation of learning resources, and her willingness to return to Ethiopia. The author's Social Work students are indeed the change agents in Ethiopia, whose work will bring attention to pressing social needs, push forward policy changes, and promote social justice. Although the decision to travel to Ethiopia was life-changing for the professor, the real gain is being realized as more students earn degrees in Social Work and become leaders in changing the social welfare landscape in Africa.

"The written word endures." - Latin phrase

Invitation and Decision to Go to Ethiopia

My involvement with Ethiopia began when I went to the GADE (*Group for the Advancement of Doctoral Education*) meeting in Calgary, Canada in October 2006. The focus of the 2006 conference was internationalizing Ph.D. curricula for social work students in the U.S. To be most effective at internationalizing our curricula, we need to internationalize ourselves as educators.

The keynote speaker at the GADE conference was Dr. Alice Johnson Butterfield, the co-director of the *Social Work Education in Ethiopia Partnership* (www.aboutsweep.org). As Dr. Alice (*I am using the first name basis that is common in Ethiopia*) shared passionately about the doctoral program at Addis Ababa University (AAU) in Ethiopia, I thought: "There's a university in Ethiopia? With a doctoral program? In Social Work? Wow." My limited impression of Ethiopia was that it was a severely impoverished African nation known for drought and starvation. I mistakenly thought that such a nation, where so many people could starve to death, would not have a system of higher education. I had much to learn. I was so impressed with the engaging way Dr. Alice shared about her work in Ethiopia that I decided to invite her to Indiana University to speak at our doctoral symposium

the following spring. Her visit led to an invitation to my colleague, Dr. Valerie Chang, to travel to Ethiopia to teach the doctoral pedagogy course that she developed for PhD students in Social Work at Indiana University. Soon after, I was invited to teach the scholarly writing course.

I have to admit, one of my first reactions when I was asked to teach a course in Ethiopia was uncertainty, even fear. I was excited about the prospect of going to Africa, but worried about the potential dangers. I had never been to any other continent outside of North America, never been across the ocean, never been away from my family for an extended period of time. Would I have anything to offer? Would I be able to connect with the students? Would my style of teaching work? What about language differences? And what about those "dangers" Americans tend to hear about...political unrest, tribal wars, malaria and other scary diseases? What about the incredibly long flight? I was somewhat aware of the issues of HIV/AIDS and orphans in Africa, but beyond that my knowledge of social issues in Africa was minimal. Would my course on scholarly writing be helpful? Would it be culturally relevant? Dr. Chang went to Ethiopia before I did and came back with reports of her wonderful experiences teaching at AAU.

I agreed to go to teach the scholarly writing course for the first time in May of 2008.

All of my fears and uncertainties crumbled based on the experiences during my first two and a half week stay in Addis Ababa. I readily agreed to teach the course again to the next cohort of Ph.D. students in the summer of 2009 and again in the summer of 2010. Each trip brought new insights and new understanding about life in a developing country. Before describing some of my personal insights, I would like to review the current context of higher education in Ethiopia.

Higher Education in Ethiopia

Higher education is undergoing a major expansion throughout Ethiopia. To combat the problem of "brain drain," the government has instituted a plan to build several universities to effect a "brain gain" (Tessema, 2009). Noting the widespread political and economic insecurity over the past 30 years in Ethiopia, Haile-Mariam (n.d.) refers to Ethiopia as "a nation of aspiring emigrants" (para 3). The exodus of professionals has drained the nation of expertise needed to combat the entrenched social problems such as widespread poverty, unemployment, and poor health. According to Kyambalesa (n.d.), "The brain drain is, no doubt, one of the major constraints on contemporary Africa's quest for heightened socioeconomic development" (p. 52). As one example of brain drain, Berger (2010) points out that there are more Ethiopian physicians in Washington, D.C. than in all of Ethiopia. While it is recognized that professional human resources are "a critical element for successful economic development," the government's recent efforts at capacity building to accomplish a brain gain have been questioned (Haile-Mariam, n.d.; Wala, 2006). Academic dishonesty is widespread (Teferra, 2001), and academic workloads have become burdensome as more and more students enroll (Wala, 2006). During my most recent visit to Addis Ababa, I attended the commencement ceremony of Addis Ababa University (July, 2010) where there were over 10,000 graduates.

Despite major investments in building physical space for higher education, there is

little support for the non-tangible capacity-building to equip students with the skills needed to advance in higher education. Writing and computing resources are scarce in Ethiopian universities (Tibebu, Bandyopadhyay, & Negash, 2009). In general, there is very poor language performance among university students in Ethiopia. For example, among 3,000 Ph.D. applicants in 2009, only 400 earned above the passing score of 6.00 in the IELTS (International English Language Testing System) exam. The majority were recommended for additional English language training (Gezie, 8/11/10 email).

The program at the AAU *School of Social Work and Social Development* is the first Ph.D. Program in Social Work in Ethiopia. The program enrolled its first cohort of eight Ph.D. students in 2007. I was invited to teach a Scholarly Writing course to the second cohort of 10 Ph.D. students in 2008, and have returned to teach the third and fourth cohorts. The doctoral level Scholarly Writing course I taught at AAU is based on a similar course I developed and taught at Indiana University for the past ten years. As of July 2010, one of the 40 doctoral students, Dr. Wassie Kebede, has completed all of his degree requirements and successfully defended his dissertation. He graduated on July 24, 2010. Dr. Kebede is already making an impact—soon after he graduated he was voted to the post of Secretary of the Association of Schools of Social Work in Africa (ASSWA).

Given the newness of social work as a profession in Ethiopia, the school has had to rely on visiting professors from other countries to provide instruction and mentoring of Ph.D. students. Most often, the courses are offered on a condensed schedule and the visiting professors are in Ethiopia for a relatively short time. Recently, the school has decided to delay recruiting and admitting a fifth cohort of doctoral students until they are able to support the current students in moving towards degree completion. Despite great progress in enrolling Ph.D. students and advancing them through their coursework, the School has not had full-time faculty available to support students in completing their degree requirements including assembling and defending a comprehensive

research portfolio, writing and defending their dissertation proposals, carrying out their dissertation research, and writing and defending their final dissertations. My future plans include playing a support role in helping students complete their degrees. Opportunities to learn from students about social issues and social justice in Africa

As I have read my students' papers about current social issues and needs in Ethiopia, I could not help thinking that I was learning more than I was teaching. The students' research interests and paper topics were varied and intriguing: obstetric fistula, child begging, informal adoption, HIV/AIDS discrimination, double orphans, early marriage, abuse of housemaids, female circumcision, leprosy, migration, human trafficking, blindness and other disabilities caused by a lack of medical care for common childhood ailments, lack of social welfare programs to assist vulnerable populations such as older adults, discrimination against those with physical impairments, displacement-induced resettlement, food insecurity, child-headed households... the list goes on.

Some issues I had never heard of, e.g., obstetric fistula... a childbirth injury that leaves young mothers impaired and coping with a constant stream of urine resulting in social ostracism and severely limiting employment opportunities. Since the Ph.D. students in social work at Addis Ababa University come from various disciplines, e.g., law, anthropology, educational psychology, and sociology, my learning was further enhanced. In social work we advocate to bring attention and resources to social issues and human suffering. In the U.S., the struggle is often related to the amelioration of burden and stress. In Ethiopia, the struggle is more often for basic survival.

Amazement at Students' Eagerness to Learn

The first time I went to Ethiopia, I did not know what to expect in terms of my new students' English language skills, their writing ability, or their knowledge of social issues. Would I be able to relate to them and them to me? I was pleasantly surprised and somewhat

relieved to discover that the Ph.D. students in Ethiopia were more like my students in the U.S. than they were different. Like my U.S. students, the students in Ethiopia each had particular research interests they were passionate about; they similarly struggled with developing clear scholarly prose and using correct APA format. Both groups are critical thinkers who are able to analyze and dissect social issues in their respective countries.

One difference I noticed is that the Ethiopian students seem to be especially eager to learn and to put forth whatever effort is necessary to access learning materials and accomplish their research. The Ethiopian students are very appreciative of learning materials and any resources that can support their research projects. While the U.S. students are accustomed to active participation in the classroom as well as online learning, the Ethiopian students have typically been in lecture-based courses. I found them eager to learn about and engage in more student-centered pedagogical approaches. Though student-centered and active learning strategies are not customary in Ethiopia, the Ethiopian students have responded very well to such approaches and appreciate the opportunity to actively participate in various classroom exercises.

Another difference that stood out to me was the flexibility and resourcefulness of the students in Ethiopia. Despite the lack of university and personal resources, the students in Ethiopia were amazingly resourceful. They shared resources readily with one another. If I had only one copy of an article or some other document, someone in the class took responsibility for making sure everyone received a copy. In the U.S., I sometimes find it helpful or even necessary to devise an assignment to ensure that students do the readings. In Ethiopia, the students were eager to have their own copy of all of the resource materials, even when it was not assigned reading for the course. In a nation of limited resources, the Ph.D. students in Ethiopia are eager to gobble up whatever academic resources they can access. I was impressed that all of my students figured out a way to have their own laptop computers. Students

shared that they sacrificed in other areas in order to acquire this important tool for their education.

Another example of the Ethiopian students' eagerness to learn was their appreciation of instructor and peer feedback on their writing. Though they were mostly new to peer review, and though my comments on their papers were sometimes extensive, they expressed deep appreciation for the opportunity to enhance their writing based on feedback from both their peers and me as the instructor.

Another example of their eagerness for learning was the way they responded to the "Article Highlights" assignment. For this assignment, students were expected to read two articles and construct a 2-3 page structured summary of each article. The summaries were then copied and distributed to all class members. In addition, the student who wrote the summaries was expected to briefly share key points from each article in class. What started out as an assignment to ensure that my students in the U.S. completed the readings became a source of prolonged and interesting class discussion and debate among my students in Ethiopia. The students in Ethiopia went beyond the expectations for the assignment and challenged each other in regards to the content and meaning of the article summaries they had written and presented in class. This made for interesting and spirited class discussions that I had not anticipated. The Ethiopian students were appreciative of the opportunity to actively engage in class discussions. Since most of the Ph.D. students are lecturers in various universities throughout Ethiopia, my hope is that they will replicate the active learning strategies I tried to model, as well as the many new pedagogical approaches introduced in Dr. Chang's course.

Learning in any Context

Learning—including at the doctoral level—can occur in just about any context, even without electricity and hot running water to accommodate daily showers. Those were a few lessons learned on my first trip to Ethiopia in May 2008. At that time there was a power

shortage that led the government to shut down the electrical power in various quadrants of the city according to a rotating schedule that was supposed to be predictable, but sometimes was not. Roughly every other day, the electrical power turned off at about 7a.m. and stayed off until about 7p.m. Nevertheless, we held class every weekday and were grateful for daylight and windows. Of course, it became necessary to plan ahead in terms of making handouts and scheduling Powerpoint presentations. When the electrical power went out in the middle of a student's Powerpoint presentation during our last class session, the student simply proceeded without the projected images of his presentation. The students were able to adapt.

In the apartment where I was staying, the electrical power being out also meant no hot running water. While adjustments to shower schedules were needed, in comparison to the majority of residents of Addis Ababa who had no indoor plumbing, I was living well. I noticed that students simply rolled with the punches; the lack of power and hot running water were simply a fact of life. An urgent need for internet services could be met by going to a cybercafé and paying a small fee. I returned to Indiana pledging to forever appreciate continuous electrical power and fast internet. Imagine my surprise when on the first night home, there was a powerful thunderstorm that knocked out the power for three days. Alas, I felt prepared. Life would go on. Teaching and learning could proceed, even in Indiana, without electrical power.

On my second trip to Ethiopia, in addition to students' papers, I read Greg Mortenson's book *Three Cups of Tea* (Mortenson & Relin, 2006). I highly recommend it! The author shares about his many adventures—sometimes life-threatening—in the process of setting up schools in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The thirst for knowledge and learning was so strong that children learned without a school building, without textbooks, and sometimes without the benefit of teachers. I began to wonder if there was an indirect correlation between educational opportunities and eagerness to sacrifice for the sake of learning. It seemed to me that students with limited

opportunities for educational advancement are more motivated to make sacrifices to obtain such opportunities while those of us with endless opportunities are too often oblivious to the advantages we enjoy. In any case, those of us working and learning in resource-rich university environments have little room for complaint (even in a down-sizing economy).

Eagerness to Return to Ethiopia

My first teaching experience in Ethiopia was so positive and enriching that I did not hesitate to agree when I was asked to return in the summer of 2009. I am grateful to Lyceum Press in Chicago who agreed to donate multiple copies of a textbook I had selected (Furman, 2007) so that all of my students at AAU could have their own copy. By this time, I had modified the course so that the students' first draft of their manuscript, based on their masters' thesis, was due before I arrived in Addis Ababa. The students sent their first drafts by email, which enabled me to arrive to the first class session with written feedback on their papers. The first two drafts of their paper were ungraded, "low stakes" assignments (Elbow, 1997). Both peer and instructor review was incorporated into the course. The final "high stakes" versions of their final papers were due about a month after I returned to the U.S. This approach seemed to work well since my stays in Ethiopia were only about two weeks.

A major highlight of my third trip was being able to share the experience of visiting Ethiopia with my husband and our 11 year old son. I found my first two trips so enriching that I convinced them to come along. They too, found the visit enjoyable and educational and want to return if another opportunity presents itself. Looking ahead, I would like to find a way for my U.S. students and my Ethiopian students to learn directly from each other; perhaps through online peer review. Currently, the courses in the U.S. and in Ethiopia are offered asynchronously, so I will have to consider how to accomplish this goal. While the decision to travel to Ethiopia ended up being life-changing for me, the real gain is being realized as more students in Ethiopia earn degrees in Social Work and become leaders

in changing the social welfare landscape in Africa.

Social Work Students as Change Agents

As I have taught scholarly writing over the past ten years, I have gained a greater appreciation for the power of the written word. My initial apprehensions about travelling to Africa on my own were attenuated by the realization that I could indeed make a contribution by facilitating students' scholarly publication. It is their expertise and advocacy on behalf of vulnerable populations that will have a meaningful impact on scholarly discourse and eventually on practice and policy efforts. A first cohort student, Serkalem Bekele, who also serves as the School's Acting Dean, is involved in a community partnership with organizations that serve children in conflict with the law (known elsewhere as "juvenile delinquents"). Her efforts and leadership are changing the way such children are viewed and the services they receive.

Scholarly writing is at the heart of the learning process in higher education and is the primary means of communicating disciplinary discoveries that contribute to the knowledge base of the professions. As Ethiopia and other African nations struggle to stem the tide of "human capital flight," (Tucho, 2009), universities need to support the development of scholars who are equipped to make significant contributions to social and economic development. According to Tucho (2009), "...social, political, and economic advancement of any nation cannot be achieved without active participation of educated and skilled citizens in the nation-building" (p.23). I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to that development by supporting social work students in Ethiopia in their scholarly writing endeavors. Scholarly writing can be a powerful tool for change in addressing the pressing social issues affecting various at-risk populations in Ethiopia as well as in other African nations. I look forward to the advancements that are sure to come as the Ethiopian social work graduates step into their future as scholars and change agents.

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