Chapter 16

A Counterpoint on American Education and Media: One Fulbright Scholar’s Quest to Prepare Students for Travel to America

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ABSTRACT

Coming from Azerbaijan to America as a Fulbright Scholar, I packed as many assumptions as I did suitcases. After conducting my research, I realized that everything I learned while visiting the United States should be shared with my students, to prevent them from some culture shock and to prepare them to be globally-minded, thinking of mediated messages about foreign countries in a critical manner. This chapter is a result of this endeavor, a sort of auto-ethnographical tour through the America that I saw through my positionality as an Azerbaijani woman.

INTRODUCTION

Emerson once wrote, “Life is a succession of lessons which must be lived to be understood” (Brainyquote.com). I have had several lessons in my life, three of which are closely connected with the Fulbright Visiting Scholar Program that has fantastically been playing the role of a life teacher for the great number of world scholars such as myself for seventy years by establishing their network and enabling them to visit abroad and to share their experience. Upon my return from the United States, my answer to questions about my international exchange was: “I consider America to be Heaven and the people living there angels.” One can find my expression exaggerated, but this is view of an Azerbaijani woman making a trip to a foreign country by herself, having never had other trips to foreign countries except Moscow. In the U.S., I found myself alone among Americans, apart from my three children, experiencing cultural shock, feeling desperate and lonely, yet I was surrounded by love, concern, and smiling faces. What follows are few specific lessons regarding American education and media that I share with my own students to increase their global awareness and media criticality.

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After receiving my first Fulbright award in 2003, I conducted a research study on poetry translation from Azerbaijani into English and vice versa at East Carolina University, NC in collaboration with American poets Julie Fay, Peter Mackuk. Based on my collaborations, I published a textbook entitled *Literary Translation: Theory and Practice* for my students at the Azerbaijan University of Languages. In addition, I published another textbook called *Usual and Unusual America*, sponsored by the US Embassy to Azerbaijan with my husband, Musallim Hasanov, a screenwriter at Public TV visited the U.S. as well. The goal of the book was to prevent Azerbaijani students travelling to the U.S. for the first time from having cultural shock. For the purposes of this chapter, I focus on American education and media, and trying to incorporate these lessons into a curriculum to develop students’ global citizenship and media criticality.

**AMERICAN EDUCATION THROUGH AN AZERBAIJANI PERSPECTIVE**

The American education system of America is vastly different from the Azerbaijani education system. This chapter will first explore the primary school grades. I had the opportunity of getting acquainted with work system of one of the elementary schools of Greenville city. The school principal, Isabella Weaker, informed me that there were 485 pupils at the school. She also mentioned that majority of the pupils were African American and 25% of the students were representatives of other ethnicities. With a high population of this school’s student being from economically disadvantaged families, many of the school children walk directly from the bus that takes them to school to the cafeteria for a free breakfast.

As I discussed the school with Weaker, I noticed there is a TV set in all the rooms and in the room of the principal. The principal can watch what is happening in the classrooms. As the classes begin in the morning, the principal greets all the schoolchildren and the teachers. Then two pupils give a talk on the most important events taking place in the history of America this day. They also memorize the names of the celebrities born this day. After all this, the principal urges the schoolchildren and teachers to take a loyalty oath to the state flag of the country. The text of the oath consisting of is as following:”

“I pledge allegiance to the Flag of the United States of America, and to the Republic for which it stands, one Nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.” During taking this oath the pupils and the teachers stand in a queue turning their faces to the state flag hung in the classroom putting their hands on their hearts.

Following the Pledge, I attended a music class at the school. The teacher does not make the pupils recite the text of the poem comprising the song. A copy of the text is given to each pupil and they sing the text of the music from the paper. Students seldom recite the texts; rather they approach the texts analytically and learn to analyze the texts in America. A fellow Azerbaijani, Rana Mammadli (personal interview), a music teacher in America, characterizes the pupil-teacher attitude this way: “They don’t