

A review of Nanwani, S. (2022). *Human Connections: Teaching Experiences in Chongqing, China and Beyond*. Singapore: Suresh Nanwani.

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Suresh Nawani is currently Professor in Practice at Durham University, UK, with 30 years of experience working in international organizations and lecturing in many countries. He has a passion for improving teaching and education, which is the focus of his research. He is also an accomplished communicator, as evidenced by his book where he uses, with good effect, text, images and photographs to create an engaging, accessible and honest account of his experience lecturing for a month in China and what he learned:

... exploring the implications of asking and answering questions, such as “How do I improve what I am doing in living the values of human flourishing as fully as possible?” (Whitehead, 2020). (p.81)

Suresh brings to life his personal, social and intellectual challenges, experiences and learning from, and with, his students and colleagues as illustrated by this extract:

I felt excitement in teaching for one full month, coupled with the fear and apprehension of staying and teaching in a new environment. Would I be able to survive for one straight month?...

... for the first time, I taught this course to a Chinese-speaking audience, where students have Chinese as their main language of learning instruction.

So SWUPL¹ in China was a new experience for me, with breaking frontiers, as the undergraduate students did not have English as their main language of instruction, though they were selected from a larger group that had better knowledge of English. Also, it was the first time the cohort had a foreign teacher (meaning non-Chinese) teaching in a language that was also foreign to them. Some students came from thousands of miles from Chongqing (in southwest China), as far away as Tieling in northeast China, and have to face major adjustments living in a city of more than 15 million people and sharing student accommodations for the first time at a young age of 18.

The combined excitement and fear of a new environment was an exhilarating and rewarding experience: the rich and foreign culture; the splendid and foreign food; the sociopolitical system; the excellent internet access, though I missed my access to Google, which I'm used to; the climate; and the young and eager students. I say foreign culture and foreign food because Chinese culture in China and Chinese food in Chongqing and Sichuan are so different from those in the Philippines, Singapore, and elsewhere like the United States.

I live in Manila, although I was born in Singapore and am a Singaporean. China is a huge country and is resplendent in many ways: In a way, it is a continent, with its sheer size and population (as the world's most populous country). Development in China was incremental 30 years ago, but now it is spectacular. I speak some Mandarin, but again, Mandarin in China is very nasal and different from the Mandarin I hear in Singapore and Manila.

I have to be honest: I had initial settling-in problems. It was a comfort to confide in my coordinator, Associate Professor Yin Wei, and colleague Dr. Meng Yuqun, both of whom provided encouraging support. It was after a day or two that it hit me, and I realized I had to get out of my apprehension and look at my personal reactions myself and my surroundings. Although I've felt lonely before, that was only a state of mind: I had no reason to be lonely and alone on this occasion. I had to interpret my new circumstance – being and teaching in Chongqing – with hope and positivism. (p. 27-29)

I think you may be able, like me, to relate to the values that Suresh clarified as they emerged as he researched into his on-site educational practice post lockdown:

These values and understandings include (1) active class participation and confidence-building during presentations; (2) social inter-actions and friendly connections; (3) the school motto – be learned and earnest, cultivate virtue, and think highly of law, which has been proudly recited to me by many students; (4) moving on to new pastures, including pursuing postgraduate studies (so far at least 9 of the 30 students, and many more are expected in 2022); and (5) different and additional values and understandings surface in unusual times such as the Covid-19 pandemic. (p.78)

I was invited by Suresh to write a testimonial for his book. Having reread his book in order to write this review for the Educational Journal of Living Theories I have reread the testimonial I wrote. As I think it presents a concise summary of what Suresh's offers in his book I repeat it here:

¹ SWUPL Southwest University of Political Science and Law

“Learning is more than acquiring knowledge; it is an enriching experience that feeds the mind.” Professor Suresh Nanwani gives this phrase a rich meaning in this book about his educational journey teaching in the Southwest University of Political Science and Law, China. Whether you are looking for practical or theoretical ideas to improve your educational practice, this book offers a lot of food for thought.

As Suresh shares some of his physical, cultural, and emotional experiences, as well as his academic, intellectual, and scholarly journey, he brings to life his own humanity and that of his students and colleagues. With the use of images and words, he communicates his embodied meaning of integrity, professionalism, and spirituality; values that give meaning and purpose to his life as a researcher; and “the bond created in teaching to students in a foreign land, where barriers and impediments in language and culture are overcome in the pursuit of enhancing our values in life through living educational theory.”

His book provides rewarding suggestions and interesting reflections in establishing meaningful relationships with his students and colleagues in his journey. Suresh’s passion for improving his teaching and learning shines through the story of his exploration of the “implications of asking, researching, and answering questions such as ‘How do I improve what I am doing in living the values of human flourishing as fully as possible?’

I now want to go onto why I think the book might be of interest to practitioners who are similarly motivated to ‘spread values and understandings that carry hope of human flourishing’ (p.78), by extending their practice, understanding and knowledge of Living Educational Theory Research. What particularly caught my attention was the account Suresh gives of how and why he developed, what he called, a model:

... of what it was to feel the best of myself, seen through creativity, appreciative living, and ikigai, so I could bring out the best in me and make myself complete and purposeful. It was like finding the intersection of these three models – creativity, AI/AL, and ikigai – and in that intersection, I was immersed in a new light. This was the stepping stone that laid the foundation for my Matter-Ikigai-Creativity-Appreciative Inquiry/Living (MICAI) Intersection Model (see Figure 8.1). (p. 49)

He illustrates how he subsequently used this to enable him to research into his practice in other contexts to improve his educational influence in his own learning to improve his values-laden practice, in the learning of others to do the same and to enhance the educational influence he has in the learning of a social formation to realise its humanitarian values as it meets its other obligation too. Rather than seeing Suresh providing a model to be followed or applied what I see him do is create and offer a relatable account of his living-educational-theory methodology and research as Laidlaw and Mellett (2012) describe:

The aim of any researcher is to analyse a situation in order to understand it better and then to disseminate this new understanding for others to share and learn from. The aim of any reader of an account of that research is to seek fresh insights for effecting change within his or her own context. The concept of relatability allows the reader to ask the basic question: ‘*Is this research applicable / transferrable to my own situation?*’ Relatability is offered as a criterion for generalisation to take place. Cukurova *et al.* (2018) summarise the situation:

... the merit of research evidence for practitioners lies in its contextual information ... Bassey (1981), in his comprehensive review of research into single events, ... argued that the 'reliability' of research can be more meritorious than its generalizability. He contended if judged by the criterion of the usefulness to practitioners, the value of educational research is in the extent to which a practitioner reading it can relate it to her/his own teaching. (p. 3)

I hope I have given you sufficient detail of the book to whet your appetite and you go on to explore the book to create fresh insights that will help you develop your practice, knowledge, and understanding of Living Educational Theory Research, disseminate your new understandings of educational, values-driven practice for others to share and learn from and so bring into being a more humane world.

References

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