Finding Goldfields 2.0 – The Paradoxical Benefits of Teaching International and Comparative Workplace Law to International Students from the Safety of One’s Home

Removing yourself from native soil, stepping into a classroom with students from another country, can stretch your abilities, enabling you to achieve a depth and balance in your teaching that may not have been possible had you stayed home. – Susan Bisom-Rapp (2009)

In the last 20 years, one of the more exciting developments in the American legal academy was the increase, for a time, in international and comparative law courses in many law school catalogs. Related to the effort to internationalize the curriculum was the proliferation of law school semester and summer study abroad programs. In the mid-2000s, one could confidently report that the project of preparing American students for transnational legal practice was well underway. More recently, and sadly, there has been a retrenchment and return to a more inward and domestic law-orientation at many law schools.

Nonetheless, the curricular and programming advancements of the mid-2000s not only benefited American law students; they also enriched the pedagogy, repertoire, and experiences of American law faculty. Those of us lucky enough to teach outside our borders, especially when there are students from the host country in our classrooms, appreciate the joys and challenges of grasping a foreign legal system and representing our own system in a manner that is comprehensible to students whose legal culture may differ quite a bit from our own.

This author has been fortunate to teach law in several countries – China, France, and Italy. Indeed, my plan for the spring 2021 academic term was to teach for one month at the University of Modena and Reggio Emelia in Italy. The proposal for my Ph.D. seminar was crafted not long after the COVID-19 emergency arrived in the United States in March 2020. At the time, university campuses had quickly shuttered and professors, with little lead time, moved their classes online. I and my Italian colleagues assumed that by Spring 2021, life would return to normal. We were not correct.

Rather than give up on the opportunity to teach and learn from the mainly Italian Ph.D. students, I offered my seminar online for one month late in the fall 2020 term. Despite a distance of 6000 miles, the seminar, in my view, succeeded. This talk is a reflection on that experience and a chance to compare it with what I learned about pedagogy while teaching in China in 2007. My talk will begin with a consideration of the goals I had for both teaching experiences, the challenges attendant to each, and the outcomes achieved in two very different international teaching endeavors: one very far from home and the other in my home. I will conclude with a plea to renew a commitment for what one author calls law student “global competency” through greater use of technology to make meaningful connections across borders a reality.