

## The Politics of Education: teacher training in Montenegro 1997 - 1999

"You don't need to leave." The situation here is very calm." These were the parting words of the Montenegrin officer at the border to Croatia when we left Yugoslavia on the 5th day of the NATO airstrikes. The situation was calm, but volatile. Indeed only two days later, "Slobodan Milosevic of Yugoslavia removed Montenegro's army commander and seven other top generals ... in what was widely seen as an effort to tighten Belgrade's control over Montenegro" . On the same day "around 5,000 supporters of Milosevic took to the streets of the Montenegrin capital in the largest anti-NATO protest since the bombardment began" (AP, April 1/2, 1999).

I had increasingly come to understand my teacher training activities in Montenegro as a political struggle, albeit on a much more local scale, before the global politics ended up overrunning the local politics. Very concrete issues seemed to involve either a pedagogical or philosophical framework which clashed with my surroundings. Examples of this were obtaining curtains for the classrooms, getting equipment like an overhead projector, establishing a student club, providing access to the computer lab, which had had 16 new workstations for a year and a half but was off limits to the students. All of these issues were being resolved at the moment the NATO attacks started.

It helped enormously to have sympathetic ears in the English Department itself. I quickly learned that the strategy of my colleagues was to take control of any matters they could, that fell within the domain of the English Dept. itself, while avoiding matters that had to be dealt with through the complicated administrative process of the whole university. All of the items mentioned above fell in this domain, as well as others, for example concerning conducting exams. Indeed a question I had for myself when I first arrived was whether it was actually helpful at all to try to reform the university structure from within. Wasn't it simply doomed by the corrupt and inept broader structures? The energy and dedication of my colleagues in the English Department convinced me that we could achieve limited goals.

Often from the administration there were no competing pedagogical arguments, more of a very rugged support of an existing power base. Clerical help at the university like to shrug their shoulders and turn their hands palm up as a response to any request, even one as simple as asking for an extension cord. Information is not provided.

The philosophy encountered went beyond the institution of the university. I once asked the head of the computer lab where the economics students studied why the students did not have free access to the computer lab and was told that they would break the computers. I held workshops with teachers from all over Yugoslavia, Serbia and Montenegro, at secondary schools that had been donated computer labs by the Soros Foundation. Many of these teachers complained to us that they did not have access to the computer labs. They were used solely to teach courses in computer science.

At the same time, when asked, the teachers admitted that they had done nothing on their own to try to gain access to the computer lab. On their part, it was easier to complain and

offer a list of reasons why something would be impossible. I encountered the same strategy in the workshop itself, where teachers would throw up their hands as soon as something did not go right, let's say the double click failed to launch a program, and they would sit there with an almost defiant look on their faces, an expression that said, 'I knew it wouldn't work. I In the first meeting with the nascent student club, we brainstormed a list of 20 things that the students wanted remedied immediately, including access to the computer lab and humane toilets. But a day later, a natural skepticism had returned. It was only through actually writing a successful grant to provide for a common room that we could begin to overcome this skepticism.

Through these experiences, my understanding of my role as well started to change. Whereas before I might have defined my duties in terms of hours taught or exams corrected, now fulfilling my objectives necessarily meant providing resources and making opportunities available. This involved writing grant proposals and helping others to do the same. It involved finding out who I could work with on a professional basis to help accomplish these objectives.

Through this process, an individual becomes a force for positive change, because other individuals are encouraged to engage in the same practices. All of a sudden we are together in a mutual problem solving exercise rather than lamenting circumstances. Knowledge, skills and attitude are all involved. Secondary school teachers who wanted a one-day teacher-training workshop in the north of Montenegro agreed to write a proposal to the Fund for an Open Society in Belgrade to obtain funds. They were told that if the sum were less than 4,000 dinars (about 600 marks) then it could be approved by the English language program coordinator and would not have to be reviewed at the monthly committee meeting. Although cautioned that they would have to very precisely detail what the funds would be used for, they ended up sending in a one-sentence proposal asking for 4,000 dinars to have a workshop. This proposal was naturally rejected. When asked why they had not gone into detail, one of the teachers involved responded that this was a new process for them, that the proposal as written would have sufficed in the 'old system'. Meanwhile a school inspector successfully wrote two grant proposals for elementary schools to host a full semester course for elementary school teachers of English.

This rather local awareness raising was linked to more globally set policies. I became acutely aware of this at the border crossing. In the days after the bombing started, the government of Montenegro displayed remarkable equanimity. While media outlets were being shut down in Serbia, satellite news was being broadcast 24 hours a day on Montenegrin television stations, public and private. (After the generals were changed, this policy was reversed.) The president declared the republic's neutrality in the conflict and continued to criticize the policies of Milosevic. Finally, the republic refused to proclaim a state of war as had been done in Serbia. One reporter in those early days of the crisis called Montenegro a beacon of light in the Balkans. I realized that it was the policies of this government that first brought me to Montenegro, after the Soros Foundation concluded an agreement with them to co-sponsor a Soros fellow. My arrival

was in the midst of educational reforms, such as introducing new English language textbooks in the public schools.

Indeed those reforms go hand in hand with the reform of society. One of the most obvious needs was encouraging the students to express themselves freely. For that their trust had to be won; the group dynamics had to be fostered that would make them willing to share their thoughts with the group; they had to gain confidence in their ability to say what they wanted to say in English; they had to be encouraged not to look for the right answer but to explore possibilities; they needed training in arguing for their point of view; they had to learn better attending skills; their own interests had to be catered for so that they would take an interest in the topics; at the same time, there were certain topics that needed to be addressed, such as the value of communication and the challenges posed by a readier access to information.

It is obvious that these essential classroom skills are linked to those of a healthy society. At the conclusion of *The Improbable Survivor*, a book written just before the breakup of Yugoslavia, S. Pavlowitch remarks that:

"If the Yugoslavs are to continue living together in a united country, and if that country is not to become again the proverbial powder-keg that starts off European crises, it is essential that they should be able to participate freely in the development of their community ... They must be able to express their different ways of thinking otherwise than by hurling themselves into sectarian impasses..." (Ohio State University Press (1988))

The assistant director at the Agency for International Cooperation, which plays an active role in arranging workshops in Montenegro and abroad, cited the training of civil servants as being an essential factor in the reform of society. She then listed the same types of problems that I was facing at the university: information was not transparent; connections were more important than fulfilling public requirements. Interestingly, professional development was not necessarily valued--it could even make the person who had undergone the training threatening for others in the office. In an educational context, one might say that there was a lack of appreciation as to how to foster leadership skills. Workshops were also to help civil servants develop the attitude that they were serving the public rather than vice versa.

Fostering professional development is a fundamental factor in the type of reform that Montenegro is undergoing. In the educational sphere, a key requirement is opening up possibilities for professional growth. The course for EFL teachers at elementary schools that I held in Niksic, from October 1998 to March 1999, was the first such opportunity made available in that community in ten years. Of course this is the period of the breakup of Yugoslavia and the extreme isolation that followed. The teachers who attended that course were interested in growing professionally, improving their English competence and gaining new ideas for teaching. Over 20 teachers, came trudging to the school at the edge of town twice a week, despite work and family obligations. They managed to

complete an action-research project, which prodded them to reflect on their teaching and share it with others.

Many of these teachers then opened up their classes to the methodology students for observations and teaching practice. One student commented at the end of her observation report: "At the end the teacher was exhausted, She poured so much energy and love in that lesson, that I thought for the first time that I would like to be a teacher (even just for a short time)." This same teacher came and spoke to the methodology class about classroom management. Both the teachers and the students were willing to take personal responsibility for their own growth. Once opportunities are made available to teachers and students to grow professionally and to take responsibility for their actions, those who are ready to take advantage of these opportunities do so.

At the same time, professional growth is only one aspect of personal growth. I realized the importance of this in observing a teaching practice session where the students simply did not have the dynamism to invigorate the lesson, and then fell unknowingly into old stereotypes. In addition to the knowledge and skills provided for in a teacher training program, there have to be avenues for personal growth. An individual needs to have a greater awareness of his own presence, to learn patience and flexibility. I believe these are qualities that are independent of the teaching profession. It also throws a light on the question about whether or not there are 'born teachers.' It may be the case that one personality type is more readily accepted as a teacher than another, and that this personality type is that of a 'born teacher.' Independent of this issue, and surely more important, is the effort any individual makes to attain a higher degree of self-awareness. This will then contribute to the success in the classroom.

It is true for all of Central and Eastern Europe that dedicated professionals have retained their vision of a more effective classroom despite lacking resources and difficult circumstances. They serve as an inspiration to us all. In Serbia, as in Montenegro, the teachers that participate in professional development workshops are seeking new ways to actualize their vision of a more effective classroom. Without a doubt there has been a very strong grass roots democratic movement in Serbia. Unfortunately, there is not the same broader context for change. Educational reformers work in a much more hostile environment. During the 1998/99 academic year the government took direct control of the universities, leading to protests and resignations. They also introduced a new media law, fining and closing down a number of independent media. Tighter controls now exist for all media.

The task of the educator there is identical to that of the educator in the sister republic of Montenegro. By providing more avenues to self-expression for the pupils and giving them the tools to accomplish this, teachers there are contributing to the rebirth of society, one that will be capable of meeting the challenges of the information age. They are actually in a better position to accomplish this: the Internet has already been a significant cultural force there. One should think of the role of B-92 during the student protests in 1996/7). In Montenegro the first ISP opened to the general public in the fall of 1997, although people were going through an ISP in Belgrade to get on the Internet. Also, the level of

English is quite high. I am always struck by how many people speak excellent English in Belgrade. But well-intentioned educators cannot accomplish this goal alone. The curriculum will have to become collaborative, project-oriented and fostering self-expression. One institute that has these goals in Serbia is the Petnica Science Center, which has workshops for high school students from throughout Yugoslavia.

In conjunction with Internet workshops, the Soros Foundation established a national Listserv for EFL teachers. This Listserv has been hobbling along; one function that it serves is simply to accustom teachers to the idea of using a Listserv. It became very highly politicized in the first week of the NATO strikes against Yugoslavia. Here is the first such message that was posted:

Dear Sky News Editors,

This morning I watched your nine o'clock news and was shocked at the amount of screening you use to show only those items which justify NATO action. In your correspondent's Tim Marshal report about the hospital in Pristina you are both mitigating the humanitarian catastrophe in Pristina and telling only half the truth .

The problems is not only that a few-hour-old "babies are cared for in limited conditions" - they are cared for in appalling conditions - bombs falling, no electricity and mothers maddened by fear.

What is even worse, you somehow forget to add that the babies in question are both Albanian and Serbian. Isn't the interviewed doctor's statement, which your correspondent forgets to mention, a precious example of human care - that they will never make a difference between the patients on the basis of their nationality - something that is always worth recording?

Why are your silent about such examples? Is it because you have to persuade your audience that the Serbs are making a genocide and that there is no evidence whatsoever that would refute this idiotic statement?

Why are you mixing news items about powerful bombers only with suffering of Albanian refugees? Why aren't you mixing news items about your military power and achievements with suffering of the babies in Pristina maternity ward, both Albanian and Serbian?

Are you an independent television?

which immediately induced the following response:

Dear Mirjana,

Your e-mail did surprise me! Who gave you the right to use the teacher's network for your propaganda, mam!? I thought that, at least, on the net I do not have to deal with 'Serbian politics. You try to convince people that the Serbians are the ones who are suffering. Is that so? Tell me, madam, how many Serbians are walking through the mountains at this moment? How many Serbian people are forced to leave their homes? Did the Serbian government send a bus in front of your house to force you out of your home? Did they separate you from the male members of your family? Did they kill your son, your brother, your father or your husband in front of your eyes?! Did anyone tie you on the tree so that you can see and witness how your child is being killed; and, then, let you go free to die slowly from the emotional pain? Do you know where the members of your family are, Madam? I hope you do -- I don't know where some of my family members are right now, and it hurts ... it hurts like hell (and, I do hope you will never have to go through the things my people are going through. You are a human being. I do not wish any human to be tortured or embarrassed only because s/he belongs to a particular ethnic group)! You are also mentioning babies - Albanian, Serbian babies. This is where we differ: for me a 'couple of hours old baby' IS a baby, while for you that baby is 'Albanian' or 'Serbian. You're telling fairy stories to the world, Mam. There is no love and no 'care' for Albanians from Serbian doctors! Why don't you tell people some true stories for a change? Why don't you tell them that hospitals are being used for the Serbian armed forces? Why don't you tell them that NATO is not urging people to leave the hospitals, your president (Milosevic) is! He is the one who is sending the bombs to those hospital you mention in your mail turning hospitals to military bases! He is taking the sick out of hospitals and sending his military there. And, this is what's going on in Kosova now. Albanians are not running away because of the NATO attacks!!! They are forced to leave their homes! And this is the truth madam -not 'half the truth' as you call it. Not everyone is blind, and not everyone believes in 'Serbian fairy tales'. Fortunately for us Albanians, Milosevic can not order the whole world to sell 141S stories.

One last thing: I hope that the next time you decide to 'tell' one of your stories, you will choose some other network to do that.

Diana  
Ulcinj - Montenegro

PS

Best regards to Mr. Marshal & my warmest thanks for trying to tell the truth to the world.

Almost miraculously, given the circumstances, conciliation was achieved and the politicization of the Listserv stopped: Here are the final two messages in this thread:

Dear Diana,

I am very unhappy that my reaction to 9 o'clock news At Sky News Television of 30 March, 1999 was so gravely misunderstood by you.

I have never been a Miloshevic fan, I am not spreading any Serbian propaganda, I reacted as a human being who believes that there are not bad nations or good nations, and that such an impression should not be either explicitly or implicitly created by the media. I believe that we should stress examples of compassion of people belonging to one nationality to those of another, rather than provoke people of different nationalities to kill each other.

Another reason that I reacted is my fear as a mother for my children sitting in the cellar and waiting to be blasted by the bombs to nothingness. I am very sorry if you interpret basic human fears as propaganda for one side in these unhappy events.

I have a large number of relatives among the refugees who were bombed out of Croatia, and who have gone through the same ordeal of war atrocities, who cannot go back to their homes and are being bombed now for the second time, but I still do not think that the Croatian people are to be blamed, and I do not want them to have the same destiny.

Neither have I wanted your next of kin to have the same destiny. Human suffering must be shown, but its presentation must not be one-sided. I cannot blame you, Diana, for what is happening to my family. I do not think that you are spreading Albanian propaganda. You are reacting to your disaster, just as I have reacted to my own, and its grave prospects. I am very unhappy that neither you nor me cannot control our lives any more.

As for Tim Marshall, I share your opinion that he is a good reporter. I was not criticising him, I was criticising his editors at the Sky News Headquarters. On the same day, in the evening, I watched another report by Tim Marshall from a hospital in Belgrade, where he mentioned that Albanian patients are also treated there. I would be very unhappy if our hospitals refused to treat a patient just because he or she is of a different nationality.

Dear Mirjana,

I do apologize if I misunderstood your intentions. I guess this war is bringing the worst out of me - I am truly, truly sorry if I've hurt you.

Your letter touched me deeply, Mirjana ... I hope & pray that you, your kids and all the innocent people will come out of this war unharmed.

To...from Novi Sad: I have neither a wish nor the least desire to reply to such an ignorant person!

To the other people who will get this mail: My apologies for bothering the rest of you with things you probably are not interested in reading. This is the last time I'm using this network to send/reply messages related to the on-going war in Yugoslavia.

All the best,

The person from Novi Sad had in the meantime posted a message that was very critical of the NATO bombing attacks.

The politicization of Listservs, by the way, was not restricted to this one. The following message was posted to the worldwide TESL-L Listserv on April 4:

My question is simple:

What is an English Teacher to do when her classroom has been hit with an English/American bomb?

We speak of teaching culture as well as the language. But how does one teach great English/American culture if ones students are being bombed by that same culture? Should we rise above it and simply forget about the fear, pretending that it is happening to someone else, convince ourselves that these great cultures are not really doing this on purpose? Maybe my school has been hit by a mistake? Unfortunately I do not have a classroom any more. It has been hit by a cruise missile from a US war ship in the Adriatic. My students are afraid and angry. Classrooms are places where people come to learn and have fun while doing it.

EFL teacher, Yugoslavia  
... @Eunet.yu

This is an appropriate question and shows the intersection of education and politics. In the classes that I taught the day after the bombing campaign started I had intended to play two Bruce Springsteen songs, Nebraska and This Land is Your Land. I played the first, and it proved to be cathartic. I opted to skip the latter, however.

One of our major achievements was to bring together the university and teaching community. A few years ago the university had held a conference for teachers, which, by all accounts, was not successful. The lecturers used the opportunity to lecture to the teachers in an academic style. We have managed to bring teachers into the university and the students into the classrooms. When teachers participate in workshops, they generally agree to let students come in and observe their classrooms. Some students also do their two hours of teaching practice with these teachers. Both students and teachers check out the methodology titles that we have in our Resource Center, established through successful grant proposals. As I mentioned above, teachers have come to the methodology class to share their experiences. In one short year we managed then to establish a foothold in schools throughout the republic, and to change the image of the English Dept. to a resource for teachers. This could have further consequences when the post-graduate program is established there.

One of the most dramatic changes for me in the almost two academic years that I was at the University of Montenegro was the attitude of the students. When I first came, the students were full of doom and gloom. When asked about the next century they would typically respond by saying that we had fallen back to the Middle Ages and would stay there or go backwards. Now, at least prior to the NATO attacks, students had become reasonably optimistic, no longer necessarily saying that skills don't matter because what you really need are the right connections to get a job, or that the future would only get worse. On the contrary, their faces revealed that beacon of light in the Balkans.

In fact, the challenges here truly did create opportunities, for the people of Montenegro have been tested in circumstances that somehow give voice to the challenges of the 90s and the coming century. I think their readiness to face these challenges is exemplified in the following short essay by a third-year student:

#### Follow your Dreams

Everybody has dreams. Many people give them up and forget about them through the years, or change them as the years go by and their lives become calm and settled. They feel secure and lose their creativity, courage, self-confidence.

On the other hand, some people go for it, do everything they can to fulfill their dreams. They are persistent, have the strength to overcome many difficulties they stumble upon on their way to making their dreams come true. Their inventive minds never get tired of struggling with obstacles. In fact, these obstacles make them stronger and encourage them to fight for their dreams and goals even more. In that way they want to leave something practical and useful for the whole society, to leave their mark or make something easier for future generations by a new technical invention, for example. Or, maybe, some of them want to get everything they can from life. So that, when they grow old, they can look back and

feel really content because they did everything they wanted to do; they don't leave any regrets.

I think that every man has the strength 'required' for aspiring towards his dream. But not all men cherish and develop it. Many of them just ignore it because they fear changes, disappointment and hurt in life. The difference is that a man can be disappointed by some goal he achieved which didn't turn out so great or he can be disappointed in himself, at the end, because he didn't try to achieve it at all. And that's the greatest disappointment of all: when a man is disappointed in himself. So ... follow your dreams!

Trevor Shanklin