

Alliance for International Education – Amsterdam October 2017

Closing Conference Summary

Terry Haywood

Philosophers rarely provide an answer to our most profound questions but they excel in pointing us towards new avenues for our inquiries – and on Friday afternoon Professor Marli Huijer stood on this stage and did just that when she asked this audience of internationalists and educators, committed to mobility and innovation, to look at things not from the perspective of migrant adventurers who go in search of the new but from that of “those who stay behind”. Her words resonated on a personal and professional level with many of us and I wonder if that is what motivated one of the questions to our student panel yesterday morning which echoed Professor Huijer’s thoughts: “when you became international what did you leave behind?”.

Let me say right away that I don’t see anything particularly negative in Professor Huijer’s term “staying behind”. The verb that she incorporated in this expression implies a choice: and it’s a perfectly legitimate decision for somewhat to “stay” when others decide to “move”. More disturbing, and I think she sometimes conflated the two meanings, would have been say “left behind”. In what I have to say today this is an important distinction, so please follow my words carefully.

“Stay behind” also has another significance to me that might come in useful as a metaphor – it’s the name given to a top secret operation developed by NATO during the cold war and deployed especially, but not only, in Italy. Groups of usually inconspicuous citizens were recruited and given elite training to stay behind in case of an invasion from the Warsaw Pact that might one day sweep across southern Europe. “Stay behind” teams had access to secret stockpiles of resources that would enable them to operate behind the enemy lines and carry out sabotage to create an internal front subversive to the invading powers.

I am going to use both these metaphors in the next ten minutes to explore some aspects of the status of international education today and to offer some personal insights on how our presentations and discussion over the past three days have shed light on them. The Alliance conference is a particularly appropriate place for this kind of reflection. What we have been doing at all of our conferences for the past 15 years is tracking the development of our educational sector and trying to make sense of what is happening – what kind of schools occupy this particular educational space? what makes the education they provide distinctive? what ideas are emerging in learning, curriculum and leadership? And where is it all taking us?

Can we glean anything from our collective experience over the years and over the weekend to suggest what is in store for those who will move with international education into the future? And what will be perhaps *left behind* or *stay behind* in the inevitable and relentless process of historical change that lies ahead?

This weekend the Alliance has confirmed something that’s a good sign for the state of international schools. I’ll try to sound like a philosopher - We have come to recognise what we know; we are also increasingly aware of what we don’t know; and we take encouragement from knowing that there are things we are happy not to know. So how did I do? Let me put it another way. A few days ago I got an upgrade for my Android smartphone and overnight I received an upgrade to Windows 10 on the device I used to write these notes. You can tell from this weekend’s presentations that there are

a lot of great things going on in our school operating systems – and that is something many teachers in other schools envy us for. We also know that there is plenty of room for upgrades and improvements even though we don't yet know what they might look like. And one of the reasons for being happy about this degree of unpredictability lies in the opportunities that international education will continue to provide for individual teacher researchers and pioneering learning learners to explore and discover in the future. That's a good sign for any profession – especially one in which I hope I can say with some certainty that there is no immediate risk of losing employment to artificial intelligence. As new operating systems are rolled out in our schools there will be some who may want to *stay behind* to avoid the inevitable stress that change involves – and there is probably room for them as well because our network is increasingly diverse – but in the long run we'll probably find that there is no going back to the old ways once the new software is truly up and running.

There is more good news – really good news. It has to be good news that the number of international schools continues to expand at an exponential rate. According to data collected by ISC Research there were just over 2500 schools when the Alliance was founded 15 years ago and there are over 8500 today, a more than threefold increase, with a projected further doubling to around 17000 schools in the next decade. That's great news especially for our student teachers here this morning from Stenden – you should have plenty of opportunities ahead in an expanding professional arena!

I'm not sure that the breakdown of the new schools represents quite such good news. One of the questions put to our students yesterday morning inquired about their idealism, to which they provided a resounding response. Well, even after all these years I still consider myself to be something of an idealist, too – and I continue to talk and write about values and international mindedness if for no other reason than to make sure that conversations between educators don't just deal with the technicalities, undeniably important as they are, of curriculum structure, pedagogy and assessment. We know that some of the motivations for international education are changing – the ideologically driven schools are being increasingly outnumbered by those that operate unashamedly for profit in a competitive market that caters to the children of the wealthier classes. But the jury is still out, in fact it hasn't even convened, on the question of whether the idealistic drivers are being entirely *left behind*, or whether they will just have to find new avenues for expression. I will have something to say about this in a moment.

One of the really good pieces of news from this conference has been the passion with which presenters have shared exciting new practices and insights developed within their own learning contexts, be it schools or universities. The growth in our sector has led to the consolidation of some major players in curriculum and assessment, such as the IB, Cambridge International Examinations and the IPC, and this will place a huge responsibility on them as they will increasingly be perceived as “official” voices and guarantors of international quality and learning. I admit that I came to Amsterdam pondering whether the pace of innovation in international education has actually been slowing down during this consolidation phase in which it is harder for new providers to break into a market already occupied by such prestigious names. In other words, I wondered whether the essential approaches to curriculum, learning and assessment are *staying behind* – or at least not progressing with the same energy in the new era of school expansion – and whether the pioneering phase of development in international education has actually been *left behind*. I am very glad to say that I will leave Amsterdam with a renewed optimism that there are going to be plenty of exciting times ahead for practitioners. Not only do the big players demonstrate an ongoing passion for their responsibilities by continuing to review and develop their programmes, but it's even more exciting

to recognise there are still going to be plenty of opportunities for individual schools and educators to explore, create and invent projects and experiences that are unique to their own institutional contexts. Some of the sessions I enjoyed most here in Amsterdam were those in which teachers shared the ways they were grappling passionately to design and develop learning experiences that would work only in their schools.

The new era of international education isn't as naïve as the former. I sense that 15 years ago at our first conference in Geneva we were more optimistic about the irreversibility of the internationalist dream. George Walker alerted us that international education was entering the age of influence. We still imagined that 9/11 (2001) and the War in Afghanistan would be blips on the radar of history, and that science would find ways to reverse climate change; the conference summary in 2004 made the case for a world currency and the crash of 2008 was beyond our events horizon. We were taken in by the benefits of globalism, the appeal of multicultural internationalism and the manifest destiny of our idealistic vision. Some of those visions are crumbling around us and today our ambitions are founded in a more cautious pragmatism - but I don't believe that the dream has been entirely *left behind*. The message from this weekend is that we are still confident that we have the pedagogical tools and the educational know-how to provide our students with the skills and values that will enable them to face the challenges of the coming generations so as to unravel some of the knots we have tied ourselves into recently.

To do this, perhaps the biggest challenge that still lies ahead will be to strive for greater parity in access to international education by reinforcing the presence of international mindsets within national schools – not only to serve in the national interest by producing the business and diplomatic leaders of the future or the workers for an artificial intelligence economy, but by forging citizens with international vision and a sense of global responsibility. This won't be easy. As a movement we haven't really been successful in this arena to date and the socio-political landscape across the Western world shows signs that our task won't get any easier. But as there is an encroaching legitimization of values that are totally opposed to our idealistic vision of the global citizen then the impetus for international educators to be active in national schools will take on an even greater imperative. I hope they won't find themselves as isolated as the NATO Stay Behind teams were expected to be, but they still might have to take inspiration from Neil Postman's 1970 call to see "teaching as a subversive activity". Like others of my generation, I've always been fond of this expression – and come to think of it, there might be an important role for these "subversive" teachers across many international schools too, if being subversive means focusing on the values and attitudes of global responsibility as well as on helping students obtain top scores in exams and gain admission to the top 50 universities worldwide.

Neil Postman's appeal is significant in another way, in that it conveys the belief that the impact of the individual teacher or leader can go a very long way even when the system in which they operate is not necessarily supportive of their aims. I saw plenty of evidence for this over the weekend, too, and this is important because of the increasing complexity of network in which we operate. 15 years ago the international schools network could still be called a "movement" and appeals could be made to the protagonists of this world as if they had a unity of intent. This perception has been *left behind*. The international schools network of the future appears to be a system that will be unmanageable as a whole, with a multiplicity of school groups and governance formats, numerous accreditation and authorisation models, corporate curriculum providers and independently generated programmes, and, as we have seen, primary goals that range from educating the global citizen to earning profits for shareholders.

But wait a minute Schools will still have Heads and teachers – there will still be learning goals that incorporate values and attitudes as well as parents who want their children to develop with an ethical framework as well as a cultural baggage and skillset that will enable them to find university places and jobs. And don't we thrive on diversity? The scale at which schools are coming on the scene may make the system ungovernable but it will also provide a multitude of opportunities for everyone in this room under the age of 80. And the younger the better. Maybe I was right in thinking that in absolute terms the rate of innovation is slowing down – but the opportunities for teachers to innovate will be greater because of all the new schools that need to have curriculum models developed for them. Maybe there is a drive towards the economic profitability of our schools in the eyes of private equity funds, but the demand for quality from parents (and from the students themselves) will not be limited to exam efficiency alone. Just as the green economy will replace dirty engines with more ecologically compatible devices in our cars, the demand for ethically motivated citizens with an awareness of global interconnectedness will ensure that there will continue to be a place for our idealistic and visionary educators. More, in fact, than ever before.

So we have a lot to look forward to. International education has a relatively short history and one that we have been privileged to have had a part in. And it will have a dynamic and thriving future. You don't all have to accept the same role in this. There is space for all of you if you embrace the changing world that we are a part of. And we need you to be different. We need some of you to move on and take the challenges that will be provided in the new schools that are appearing. We need some of you to *stay behind* in your current roles, put down roots and strive to develop international minds in your localised context. Provided, that is, that you *stay behind* – and are not *left behind*.