

Teaching Public Management as a Fulbright Scholar in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

A Fulbright semester teaching MPA students at the University of Malaya in Kuala Lumpur involved hospitable faculty colleagues, promising students, interesting intercultural experiences, the challenge of teaching a course far from prior fields, and a reunion with a former student who had become Secretary General of a major Malaysian Ministry. Recommendations for potential Fulbright Scholars focus on the importance of initial introspection regarding the destination country, considerable personal and professional flexibility, consultations with recent Fulbright Scholars, early research on housing options, and fully embracing the numerous unexpected opportunities.

To honor the 65th anniversary of the venerable Fulbright Scholars Program, the editor of the *Journal of Public Affairs Education* invited Fulbright award winners to “chronicle specific experiences, describing how their adventures affected them overseas as well as in their teaching and professional development” (Schultz, 2011). Such first-person accounts are inescapably anecdotal but can, as case studies, give potential future Fulbright Scholars information, advice, insights, and encouragement that may be of practical value. These reflections on my experiences in Malaysia in 2010 may provide ideas and lessons to consider when undertaking a Fulbright.

BEFORE DEPARTING

A key difference between a merely good Fulbright and an outstanding Fulbright is probably finding an especially suitable match between the Scholar and the venue. Presuming one wants at least a one-semester academic experience and immersion in another culture, the initial question is: which one? For those seeking a purely research Fulbright, their topic may immediately narrow their options; but, for a teaching Fulbright, opportunities encompass most of the countries on every continent. Some introspection at the outset can help winnow the decision to a wiser choice.

One’s willingness to be pushed beyond old comfort zones should influence how seriously certain developing countries and dramatically different cultures

are considered. In my case, I wanted to live and work in a place that was neither too undeveloped nor too developed, with access to modernity but where the novel, gritty, traditional culture had not yet been scrubbed away into globalized homogeneity. Factors like language skills also deserve weight. I am not sufficiently fluent in another language to lecture in anything but English. That ruled out most teaching awards in Brazil, for example, where Portuguese lecturing was required. Also, the destination country's academic calendar would need to allow me to complete the fall semester in the United States before going overseas.

Only one Fulbright application is allowed per year. In screening with my checklist of requirements and preferences, one country stood out: Malaysia. Its vibrant traditional cultures have not yet been erased by modernization. English is the language of instruction at leading universities and is widely spoken thanks to nearly two centuries of prior British rule. And semester schedules did not overlap. The Institute for International Education, which administers the Fulbright Program, listed a university-level opening to teach American government in Malaysia. Steamy tropical weather would be a bonus.

Many Fulbright recipients in public affairs, public administration, and public policy have gone to South and East Asia, especially China, India, Japan, and Korea (Adams & Infeld, 2011); but not many have gone to Malaysia, perhaps due to its relatively low visibility in the United States. Whatever your personal criteria for the ideal locale, a successful Fulbright surely starts with clarity about those criteria in order to find the best possible fit.

Once my country goal was identified, the Fulbright application process was not too onerous: a short essay, an online form, and a few short sample syllabi (for the advertised course and alternative courses), along with three letters of recommendation from colleagues. A medical checkup came later. For teaching positions, there seemed to be an understandable interest in ascertaining the applicant's adaptability and classroom savvy.

This first stage was not difficult, but subsequent phases required patience while the application goes through a series of committees. Then, if all goes well, the application goes to the destination country, where it is subjected to more reviews and ultimately requires approval from the final institution for placement. Some positions are linked to certain institutions, but most are countrywide and do not have an automatically designated university. Consequently, many quasi-approved Fulbrighters may learn they are cleared for China, for example, but not know for certain until a month or two before they depart if they will be dispatched to Beijing or Hangzhou or elsewhere—or even exactly what they will be teaching. At some point, one must start making decisions with optimism that everything will be favorably resolved sooner or later. Of course, people who get too upset by uncertainties and unpredictable timelines might not be good candidates to live and teach abroad, at least outside a few punctilious nations. This raises the vital factor of flexibility.

The good news eventually arrived of the final confirmation of my Fulbright teaching award at my preferred city and school in Malaysia: Kuala Lumpur (KL) in the MPA program at the University of Malaya (UM), the country's largest, oldest, and most prestigious university. The bad news was that the chair of the Department of Administrative Studies and Politics said they needed me to teach management and organization theory because the American government class was not being offered and regular faculty were teaching all the other courses from my regular repertoire of research methods, applied statistics, and policy analysis. She reasonably assumed that a full professor at a school of public administration must be well acquainted with Mary Parker Follett and Herbert Simon, et al. Alas, not only had I never taught organization theory, I had never taken a course on the subject. But I had promised the Fulbright Commission "flexibility," and I vowed to deliver. At first glance, the subject seemed fairly straightforward; but as the core text, the department wanted me to use Shafritz, Ott, and Jang's *Classic Readings in Organization Theory* (2010), a compilation of many dense original texts that seemed ambitious for MPA students lacking native fluency in English and as well as for their visiting instructor, who lacked fluency in the whole topic. With little time during an especially busy semester in the United States, this new preparation would be a task to tackle after arriving in Malaysia.

LIFE IN KUALA LUMPUR

Flexibility was also crucial when it came finding a place to live in Kuala Lumpur (KL). The Fulbright program helps with many details of the transition but, depending on the country, may not do much to facilitate finding shelter. My goal was to live in the city center and be close to a station on KL's network of monorail and light rail, but most landlords want a 1-year lease, not 6 months, and upscale buildings that cater to Westerners demanded excessive rents. Despite a few days of anxiety as the hotel budget dwindled, with the help of an industrious young real estate agent (who was also a periodic Buddhist monk) and strong negotiations, I rented a fairly spacious one-bedroom unit high in a new condominium that had a view of the iconic twin Petronas Towers from my living room and was not far from a monorail station.

Because I had previously traveled overseas extensively, especially in Southeast Asia, most of the exotic sights and sounds of KL's Malay, Chinese, and Indian potpourri were not new to me; so I underwent no new "culture shock" or epiphany. Yet the saturation experience of living and working there for an extended period was vastly different and thoroughly enjoyable.

As another aspect of flexibility, to fully embrace this once-in-a-lifetime immersion in another culture, I had pledged to push myself to accept every invitation and opportunity that came along and see what the adventures would bring. Buy a traditional *baju malayu* with *songkok* as required to wear at an upcoming royal wedding and risk looking like a crazy *mat salleh*? Yes, certainly.

Join the throng at the Thaipusam festival at the Batu cave Hindu shrine as well as worship at the nearby Baptist church? Yes, of course. Go to lunch with a talkative Syrian named Osama who adored F. A. Hayak and sat by me on the monorail? Yes, indeed. Substitute for the ill keynote speaker tomorrow at a medical college? Yes, I will do my best. Speak to UM faculty about American attitudes toward foreign policy? Yes, even if my chief research on this topic was a quarter century ago (Adams, 1984, 1987). Participate in a closed-door UM faculty session on intercommunal relations among Malay, Chinese, and Indian Malaysians? Yes, but be diplomatically reticent. Attend a faculty meeting that I was not obligated to attend? Yes, and feel déjà vu listening to faculty concerns about deans, budgets, and publication pressures. Help design a new Master of Public Policy degree at UCSI University? Yes, my pleasure. In short, I accepted these and all other invitations, including questionable ones that would have been declined at home, and had a far richer Fulbright experience.

TEACHING AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MALAYA

A crucial but unpredictable ingredient in the Fulbright experience that you cannot know in advance is the degree of hospitality and collegiality you will encounter at your destination institution. I was fortunate to land among extraordinarily congenial faculty. The wonderful woman who chaired the department invited me to join her family at parties and lavish Malay weddings, including a royal wedding in a Sultan's family to which she belonged. She urged me to visit Kota Bharu to see "old Malaysia" and arranged for her nephew who lived there to be my guide. She made sure I was invited to everything that might possibly be of interest. Other faculty members went out of their way to be friendly as well. Almost everyone took me out to a special lunch, dinner, or wedding at least once.

Some impressions regarding this warm welcome: Faculty members who had earned degrees in the United States or had a Fulbright experience there seemed particularly eager to reciprocate what was, thankfully, a happy experience in the United States. Plus, Malaysians, to make a sweeping generalization, are gracious and sociable people. I take no credit for their hospitality, but I did make a conscious effort to be extra friendly, extra humble, and avoid any hint of adversely judging any cultural differences or university practices.

At the university, from time to time I would encounter a new practice that no one had mentioned to me because it was routine at UM. For example, halfway through the semester I discovered that within 24 hours, all final examinations needed to be submitted for review and polishing by a faculty panel and then translated into Malay, photocopied in a secure location, and sealed in a vault until the morning they were solemnly brought by a senior staff member to the final examination hall. With little idea what the rest of my organization theory course would actually cover, this newfound task required some rapid reading and creativity.

Another unexpected campus practice was the discovery that all 3-hour-long, evening graduate classes take a prayer break for the majority Muslim students, followed by complimentary tea and seasoned rice dishes wrapped in banana leaves. That break offered a nice chance to chat informally with the likeable young men and women in the MPA program.

A less pleasant practice was that UM students did not have to commit to taking a class until the fourth week of the semester. Some students rotated in and out of my class trying to decide if this alien instructor would be decipherable and reasonable. There was, I later discovered, a widespread fear that the visiting instructor would demand what they reckoned must be absurdly high American academic standards. At the end of my month of auditions, with a net gain of a few people, the result may have been a self-selected group of students who were atypically brave and curious.

My new preparation was the most time-consuming challenge, requiring days each week to digest the material, convert it into beneficial PowerPoint highlights, and develop strategies for class discussions. Having heard colleagues joke about teaching a class where they stayed one session ahead of the students, this was my first time to actually have to do just that. Yet, surprisingly, teaching a new subject far outside my area, while laborious, was quite satisfying and certainly fresh, lacking any recycled material at all. I learned an enormous amount about organization and management theory, and the evidence of the midterm and final examinations was that my students did as well.

My basic pedagogical approach was not too remarkable: mostly lectures supported by PowerPoint along with some class discussion. My students, I had been warned, would become very shy the moment class started, so I should not count on much participation. Requiring a weekly one-page recap of highlights from the readings was my device to try to at least ensure preparation. One accidental discovery was that getting the class to first talk about something frivolous and nonacademic—the recent Malaysia-Chinese badminton battles, the best local cell phone service, favorite Hollywood stars, activities during the Chinese New Year holiday—helped break the ice at the start of each session. While, just like back in the USA, a few students resolutely never volunteered a comment, we managed to have some fairly good, substantive discussions.

At my home university, some of us are putting increased emphasis on communication skills; and I decided to incorporate that into my UM class. As a break from the heavy class readings, three-student teams were assigned light, “pop management” books to summarize in 15-minute presentations. Dread of that one assignment drove several to drop the class, and most of the rest viewed it with trepidation. But I gave tips on public speaking and using PowerPoint effectively, and the first two teams (bribed with dinner for volunteering to go first) were so good that others seemed emboldened and made fine, sometimes superb, talks. For almost all, it was their first presentation in graduate school;

and, for most, it was also their first public address in English. It also served as a memorable confidence-building exercise.

After complimenting a team presentation, questions were raised during the prayer and tea break about whether my praise was based on a relaxed standard, not on an American standard. I tried, perhaps with some success, to convince skeptical students that their lively, well-organized remarks would have been good anywhere. Indeed, most of my students were smart, bighearted, public-service-motivated people who seemed to underestimate their own potential. They seemed genuinely moved and surprised that I saw such promise in their lives.

That matter of encouragement made an event near the end of the semester all the more dramatic. We were invited to the executive conference room on the top floor of the national government's Ministry of Works, the large department that builds and maintains the country's roads, schools, bridges, and other public infrastructure. Our host was Datuk Thomas George, the Secretary General, the highest-ranking civil service administrator at the ministry. Almost three decades earlier, Thomas George had been a quiet international MPA student in my class at the George Washington University (GW). Sitting around the grand paneled room, my UM students asked him questions we had collectively developed to get his thoughts on leadership, managing diversity, participatory management, and other issues covered in class.

The Secretary General responded eloquently, drawing on examples from his leadership in the Ministry of Works and quoting professors with whom he had studied long ago at GW. He even distributed a page on management issues in large organizations that he had saved from an MPA class nearly 30 years earlier. He also spoke about the value of careers in public service and the importance of personal



MPA Students and Fulbright Professor at the University of Malaya (Spring 2010)

integrity. Several Malaysians had told me that his reputation for unquestioned integrity and intolerance of corruption, along with his management and diplomatic skills, had vaulted him into the upper echelons of public management in Malaysia. After an amazing hour, we adjourned to a catered dinner that the Secretary General, my old unassuming MPA student, hosted for us. In case anyone had missed a key subtext, I made it explicit back on campus the next week: Study hard, work hard, manage wisely, seize opportunities, be scrupulously honest, and every one of you, just like Thomas George, can have an immense impact in making this country better.

My classes had an undercurrent of frisson, the dynamics of which I struggled to identify. Was the excitement and fear due to my nervousness about my limited command of organization theory? Was it my concern about decoding Malaysian accents without calling for comments to be repeated several times? Was it caused by my struggle to read the reactions of the “silent majority” of extremely polite but taciturn students? After a few weeks in KL, I began to untangle the accent; although I would still sometimes hear people chattering on the monorail and try to figure out what language they were speaking, only to realize eventually that it was English. My own English seemed to pose no obstacle. Having traveled overseas often, I had learned to purge most idioms and slang from my speech when I step off an airplane; and, because I was raised in Texas, speaking slowly requires no extra effort.

Ultimately, I attributed the frisson to the sessions being about far more than organization theory and the English language. These were, for those of us in the room, serious cross-cultural events. I was the first American, or Westerner, that most had ever known. My own attitudes and values were under study even more than those of Mary Parker Follett. Their sentiments were simultaneously under my microscope. During one evening break later in the semester, Cahaya confided that I was the first *mat salleh* (neutral Malay slang for “white guy”) she had ever known. Her two friends nodded in agreement. I was not just the first Yankee; I was the first Caucasian, a dimension I had not considered. They had seen pale tourists around town but never had real conversations with them. Inquiring how you personally compare to someone’s expectations and stereotypes is unlikely to elicit a candid answer in any culture, especially not in a highly courteous and deferential culture like Malaysia’s, so I resisted asking.

Incidentally, I cannot recall being pushed to defend U.S. foreign policy except by one dean, and I never sought to ingratiate myself by gratuitously criticizing the United States. While the euphoria over Barack Obama’s election was ebbing in the states, his halo was still shining brightly at the time in KL, and I did hear much admiration for him.

At the end of the semester, students insisted on a gala celebration. Farhana, from Dhaka, prepared a buffet of rich Bengali dishes. With Sharina serving as the disk jockey, the department chair joined us to lead the *poco-poco*, a Malaysian

line dance. A 3-by-4-foot “we’ll miss you” card was filled with effusive good-bye notes. Red icing on the big cake said, “Great Experience with You—We Love You!” This was not a routine class that “clicked.” It was a mutually extraordinary, cross-cultural “great experience.” If former Fulbright teachers get misty-eyed and nostalgic about their time abroad, I suspect it is because—like me—they had a magical time getting to know eager students and transcending cultural barriers.

My semester had both notable differences and similarities with Donna Infeld’s Fulbright teaching MPA students in Beijing (Infeld & Wenzhao, 2009). Quite unlike her class, my students had rather good English conversational skills, were accustomed to a full-semester syllabus with all assignments announced on the first day, shared the Western negative conception of plagiarizing, and were not stunned to be asked to critically evaluate readings. Very much like her class, however, my students were also highly attentive and respectful, were eager to get to know the visiting instructor outside the classroom, were comfortable with team projects, and appeared astonished to be commended and encouraged. While my students were considerably more vocal in class than were Infeld’s in China, these Malaysian MPA students still did not rival their outspoken American counterparts in my classes at home.

DEPARTING MALAYSIA: PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

To recount a Fulbright without trying to convey some of these emotional and interpersonal crescendos would strip it of much of its impact. That must be why the *JPAE* editor, as a former Fulbright Scholar, knew to ask his colleagues to “chronicle specific experiences” and describe “how their adventures affected them overseas” and not simply to enumerate their “professional development.” However, the impact on my professional development and activities has indeed been significant in ways big and small, giving me a fascinating cross-cultural education, stimulating two new lines of research, expanding professional relationships and collaborations, and somehow galvanizing my classroom sessions back at home.

There seems to be growing interest in broadening American academic horizons beyond our shores to add a more global perspective to our curriculum (Straussman, 2008; Fritzen, 2008; Barber et al., 2007; Jreisat, 2005). The Fulbright months offer an enlightening education about another polity and culture—or, in the case of Malaysia, *cultures* plural—and train us to see beyond the confines of the United States. Not until after returning home did I begin to recognize just how much I had cumulatively learned and absorbed about Malaysia and the region’s history, politics, and cultures. Every day in KL had been a workshop where I was the pupil. My reading assignments included local newspapers, books, and blogs, but the daily “field trips and interviews” outside my apartment taught the most. My students, colleagues, and other new friends were my teachers. The complex Malaysian mosaic is not without tensions with its deep cleavages of language, religion, and ethnicity among its Malay Muslim majority, its substantial Chinese and

Indian populations, and the indigenous peoples of Sabah and Sarawak. Although communal unity may be stronger than national unity, the complex society still functions remarkably well by practicing civility and respect.

While my Fulbright was a teaching, not research award, the semester in Kuala Lumpur was much more productive than I expected. Using a short self-administered questionnaire, UM's Dr. Nik Rosnah and I collected data on the public service motivations of MPA students that we incorporated into an international comparative study and presented at a conference in Manila (Infeld, Adams, Qi, & Rosnah, 2010a); it was soon published (Infeld, Adams, Qi, & Rosnah, 2010b). Overall, the Malaysian MPA students were more similar in their career objectives to the American than to the Chinese MPA students (p. 813):

Despite differences in cultures and regimes, ultimately all three groups of graduate students wanted public service jobs that allow them to serve the public fairly, ethically, and meaningfully. While serving the public, they nonetheless did not want to take vows of poverty and prioritized jobs with security and good benefits that would allow for career advancement. At the same time, . . . personal growth [was] particularly important for the American and Malaysian students.

Thanks to e-mail, a U.S. colleague and I continued to collaborate quite effectively on unfinished papers. Our progress was actually faster than usual because of the turnaround advantage of a 12-hour time difference; as she slept, I prepared my revisions, which she then amended while I slept. Furthermore, my Fulbright directly inspired another line of research collaborations about the role and utilization of international education exchanges (Adams & Infeld, 2011a, 2011b).

It may be a Fulbright cliché to say that you return home reinvigorated, but that is exactly what happened. Even more than from an ordinary sabbatical break, the energy from that intense, nonroutine classroom experience at UM somehow seemed to reignite my classroom at GW. One powerful demonstration of the long-term influence of teaching was still vivid, and so I reached out to the widow of the professor of public management—whom the Secretary General had especially quoted and whose handouts he had saved all these years—to let her enjoy this echo of her husband's continuing legacy even on the other side of the globe.

One post-Fulbright resolution has been to do more to engage with our visiting international scholars. While previously presuming that we were being reasonably cordial, now I fear they may get lost in the shuffle of a large urban university. At a minimum, I want to make sure to take each of our visiting scholars out to dinner and to some other social occasion. Similarly, I have made an extra effort to befriend and go out to lunch with our international students; and, given my deeper appreciation of the courage they must have to undertake study in another culture and another language, throw a party for them at my home.

RETURNING HOME: LESSONS LEARNED

Tempting as it may be, one cannot become a perennial itinerant Fulbright Scholar. After a hiatus of 5 years, individuals are allowed to apply for a second Fulbright, but not for a third Fulbright, except to a very few underserved countries. Five broad lessons from my time in Malaysia are worth remembering for my next Fulbright and worth underscoring for American colleagues when they contemplate a Fulbright.

Lesson one was the value of careful deliberations about the target country. To some extent of course, the quest is like picking a doctoral program in that reputation alone does not tell you in advance exactly how you will relate the particular personalities to be encountered. And for a research-related Fulbright, substantive factors will probably dictate or constrain destination choices. But for a teaching Fulbright, where most parts of the world are an option, one can still roughly estimate the likely personal fit with factors such as language, culture, heritage, schedule, development, personal daring, and special interests. One colleague was drawn to China, in part, so her adopted daughter could experience living in the land where she was born. In my case, Malaysia proved to be an ideal fit for the reasons discussed earlier. Looking beyond high-profile countries should be a part of search considerations, in my opinion, not just to find awards that may not be in such high demand but to find fascinating locales off the beaten path where the rare Fulbright Scholar may be especially appreciated.

Lesson two was to contact recent Fulbright Scholars, especially those in our fields, to gain their insights and suggestions. Once I learned my assigned university, I contacted a helpful American who recently taught there on a Fulbright to learn more about practices such as the expected classroom attire for instructors. Neither suits nor coats were worn, he said, and ties were optional, thus trimming my transported dress clothes down to one suit that was sufficient for the few required occasions. He also discouraged me, for a variety of reasons, from bothering to investigate the university's faculty housing.

Lesson three was the importance of starting early to explore housing options. While ultimately fortunate, I should have begun this process sooner by talking more with local Fulbright administrators and former Fulbrighters, and by doing more research online. Having a safe, comfortable, convenient retreat in which to sleep, work, relax, read, and even cook is important, as are Internet access and proximity to markets, services, and transportation. With a little searching, the Fulbright housing allowance should usually be quite adequate for finding an acceptable place to live. Again, personal tastes will influence the extent to which one wishes to "rough it" for a few months, retreat to an enclave of expats, or do something in between. I myself tend to prefer to "go native" during the day (getting \$2 haircuts with the locals two blocks away from the \$20 haircuts at the upscale mall), but have more familiar surroundings in the evening.

Lesson four was the absolutely essential need to be open and flexible. Assume that there will be interesting twists, big and small, that allow you to demonstrate your equanimity and resourcefulness. In my case, the major challenge was the distinctly new course preparation, which I decided to accept as a splendid learning opportunity. Various smaller and unexpected matters were almost all resolved satisfactorily by a combination of good humor, acceptance, and agility, and by resisting the urge to escalate them (internally to myself and externally to others) into terrible dramas. Alas, I did let one incident bother me—after buying a cheap, defective printer from a merchant who refused to replace it, I foolishly got angry instead of laughing.

Lesson five was the value of not being shy, of accepting every possible invitation and opportunity that came along and issuing invitations myself. Time flies, and the Fulbright will end all too quickly. As noted earlier, I welcomed all sorts of invitations that enriched my experience. Making the most of the time meant getting to know colleagues, students, and other Malaysians. In retrospect, I was not fully prepared for the extent to which many of the students were eager to get to know me and may have erred in keeping a little too much professional distance, especially early in the semester. I could have spent a little more time socializing with groups of students after class. Perhaps another mistake was doing too much of my reading and other preparation for my new public management course at my cozy apartment rather than my university office, where I could have shared a few more lunches with faculty colleagues. On balance, however, for an introvert like me to be receptive to the warm Malaysian hospitality allowed for an enthralling experience.

Friendships and professional relationships that were developed during my Fulbright last year show strong prospects for enduring. New invitations to return to speak, conduct workshops, and teach at UM as well as at two other local universities offer attractive possibilities for ongoing academic visits. One or two of my promising MPA students in KL will surely become another Secretary General in a few years. In the meantime, tickets to Malaysia have already been purchased for this summer to renew friendships, give a few lectures, and even make a few tourist stops that I never got around to seeing during my busy Fulbright. If you have an adventurous spirit and have not yet taken your first Fulbright, do not delay.

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A Fulbright Scholar in Malaysia

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