

Reflections on Practice

Changing the narrative: Living and teaching in occupied Palestine

MARY GOODRICH

Summary: A reflection of a Department of State English Language Fellow's experience and growth during a year of teaching in Occupied Palestine.

Keywords: Palestine, open education, relationships, co-teaching, culture

Exposition: Setting the scene

I prepared as best I could: tapping the teaching materials of kindly colleagues, choosing the books that would weight my suitcases, and, after procrastinating for months, organizing and color-coding my Google drive. I studied the challenges that Arabic speakers face when learning English; I read some history of the region and paid more attention to the news.

While I hoped my efforts would ready me for the challenges of teaching in Palestine, the reality proved much different.

Twelve months ago, a season of life was drawing to a close: my daughters were grown and launched, my husband wanted to move from academia into a full-time writing career, and after teaching at Gonzaga University and in the Spokane community for more than six years, I was ready to teach overseas again. The US Department of State's English Language Fellow Program offered the perfect opportunity to try something new.

After a lengthy application process, I was offered a teaching position at Al Quds Open University in Ramallah, Palestine. Centered in the Holy Land, eight miles north of Jerusalem, Ramallah would be the perfect base for exploring the Middle East. My husband is a Roman and early Christian historian—we both longed to spend a year in the country. On the other hand, wasn't it dangerous? What about the on-

going conflict there? Feeling completely ignorant, I tried to recall past stories of terrorism, bombings, and riots—violent upheavals that had once commanded little of my attention.

How would I characterize my first encounter with Palestine? Excitement. Trepidation. Curiosity. So many emotions ran through me as I rode in the taxi through the dusty, olive-treed landscape. It was hot. I was tired from the long flight, the orientation meetings, and the ten-hour time zone difference. Soldiers aimed automatic weapons in our direction as we went through our first checkpoint, crossing into



Image 1: The author teaching a Productive Skills Workshop in Qalqilya, West Bank

the West Bank. Our driver didn't speak any English; we had a difficult time finding our apartment; I began to wonder if this had been a terrible mistake.

My concerns also embraced the professional part of my life. I arrived not knowing what (or when) I would be teaching. My university administrators had dismissed my inquiries: we would figure it out once I reached Ramallah. Not only were the curriculum and term dates flexible, but the idea of an "open" university system was also new to me. My host university's mission is to "bring education to the people." This incorporates online learning, blended learning, and mobile education—whatever will help students progress toward a degree. While I admired the intention, I wondered if it stood the test of reality: classes only meet once a week, for sixty or ninety minutes. Students are not required to attend class; they are responsible for managing their own learning. Our time together is intended to practice and reinforce what they have studied at home or online. It operates a bit like a flipped classroom, but on a university-sized scale.

Rising action: The language of occupation

Ramallah is a city in the Occupied Palestinian Territory. Although nearly a suburb of Jerusalem, the city stands on the opposite side of a separation wall, a world apart (see Image 2). Life under occupation magnifies the challenges of delivering and receiving a university education.

I feel this most powerfully when I travel. I teach two days each week in Ramallah, and two days at my university's branch campuses, which are scattered the length of the West Bank. On travel days I leave Ramallah early in the morning in a shared taxi, pass through checkpoints manned by armed soldiers, make detours when necessary for safety or because soldiers have unexpectedly blockaded roads, and arrive in troubled cities like Jenin, Nablus, and Hebron. Security and safety problems can force a cancellation minutes before I am ready to leave Ramallah—I am never certain that I will be teaching on a given day until I am standing in a classroom. For me, occupation disrupts my best laid plans—an inconvenience and a source of ongoing frustration.

My students experience a different reality. For more than 50 years, Palestinians have been denied the right to control their lives and make choices that Americans take for granted. My students have never known any other way of life. Education in Palestine cannot be divorced from the pervasive context of occupation. Each day brings another senseless death, a dehumanizing event, a terrifying situation. Contact with the students, the secondhand sharing of their experiences, adds another layer to how I perceive this situation: terrible things are happening to people I know and care about.

I'm sorry teacher, I cannot come to class. All of the roads around my village have been blocked.

I can't concentrate to do my work. The soldiers came and took my young brother yesterday. I don't know if we will see him again.

I want to be a teacher, but there are no jobs. What is the point?

I had to wait at the checkpoint for three hours.

My two cousins were killed last night.

I couldn't do the assignment. I don't have access to a computer or reliable internet.



Image 2: The Separation Wall: separating Israel from West Bank, Palestine

I'm sorry I couldn't come to class last week. I was arrested because of something my cousin is suspected of.

I want to study abroad, but it is impossible to get a visa.

I'm tired and have a headache. The teargas from the raid near my house came through the window last night. I couldn't sleep.

I have no hope that things will ever get better.

Restrictions on movement, trauma, and a denial of opportunities hinder their education. Yet, my students continue to work, daring to dream of a better future for themselves and their people. Palestinians embrace the concept of *Sumud*—steadfastness and resilience, both in a personal and collective sense. It is also “a socio-political concept [that] refers to ways of surviving in the context of occupation, chronic adversity, lack of resources and limited infrastructure” (Marie et al., 2018).

I witness *Sumud* daily.

Climax: Finding my way

It might be a cliché at this point, but it doesn't make it any less true, that you and I are first and foremost teachers of students. Teaching is relational. We are in this profession because we want to connect and engage with students in meaningful ways (see Images 3 and 4). “The student is infinitely more important than the subject matter” (Noddings, 1984). But what does relational teaching look like in practice? How can I make any sort of difference to students when I pass through their lives so quickly? I am realistic enough to know that a weekly one-hour class, no matter how inspirational, is unlikely to transform anyone's life, except perhaps my own.

It has taken me a long time to process what is happening in Palestine, politically, socially, and personally. I am beginning to understand the role I fill in this unique context, hindered by its external constraints. As Noddings writes, “I do not need to establish a deep, lasting, time-consuming personal relationship with every student. What I must do is to be

totally and non-selectively present to the student—to each student—as she addresses me. The time interval may be brief but the encounter is total.” Reorienting around the centrality of relationships has allowed me to find and feel a sense of peace about what I am achieving in this disturbed situation.

When I first came to Palestine, I found it disconcerting when my students solicited my opinion of their country, their cities, their families, and themselves. I was battered with constant requests for praise and affirmation. Initially



Image 3: Making connections: the author and a colleague preparing a meal to share



Image 4: Sharing culture, building community: the author sharing her personal story with students

I misinterpreted this as a thinly veiled way of ego stroking, bragging, or a way of asking for compliments. I understand the exchange differently now. When you grow up believing that you are “less than”—forgotten or ignored by the wider world—you are consumed with the need to feel that you matter, that someone hears your voice. I came to Palestine as an English teacher; I am becoming a cultural ambassador and a witness who sees and acknowledges my students’ struggle, resilience, and value (see Figure 1).

Falling action: Wrapping up loose ends

In addition to teaching undergraduates, my job also requires me to offer professional development sessions for my colleagues. Although I have nearly thirty years of classroom experience, I have only spent six years in TESOL. Still learning, I am always eager to imbibe the wisdom of my colleagues. However, in Palestine, my role has shifted and I am the native speaker, the English “expert.”

My “expertise” is displayed in departmental training workshops. Leading sessions for my English department colleagues has been intimidating. Most have doctorates; almost all have taught English longer than me. Nevertheless, because I have been selected by the State Department and am a native English speaker, I possess an undeserved authority. I get through these intimidating sessions by reminding myself that an effective trainer is a facilitator, rather than an expert. And if nothing else will do, fall back on the tried and true “fake it ‘til you make it” approach. I admit I still lack confidence, but it is getting easier.

Less stressful is the opportunity to co-teach several of my classes. This has proven a mutually beneficial experience, far more than simply dividing the workload or sharing teaching tips. By watching how I structure a session, my co-teachers are learning interactive teaching strategies, how to have student-centered classrooms, and where to find great resources. Conversely, they guide me through an unfamiliar educational system, teach me how Palestinian culture impacts the classroom, and serve as models of flexibility in the face of unexpected adversity. The give and take of these relationships is exciting and satisfying.

Resolution: Transformation

Three months before writing this reflection, I had to decide if I wanted to return to Palestine for a second year. The inherent difficulties and ever-simmering possibility of a national descent into violence needed to be weighed. Against

*I'm from the prettiest country
of all*

*The flower of youth, and the
sorrow*

*From bravery, fighting, and
praying*

*I'm from running for your life
and there is nowhere to hide*

From Palestine and traditions

*I'm from the moments that I
wouldn't trade for anything*

By Riham, a Palestinian student

Figure 1: An excerpt of an “I am from” poem written by a Palestinian student. (The poem was inspired by the work of George Ella Lyon.)



Image 5: The author reading a book while floating in the Dead Sea

these negatives I could place the warmth of the people, the joy of teaching my students, and the challenges that are so unlike what we experience in the West.

Over the past eight months I have seen and experienced all sorts of amazing things. I have floated in the Dead Sea (see Image 5), explored the wonders of Petra, and ridden a camel across the desert sands of Wadi Rum (see Image 6). I have eaten delicious foods prepared by loving hands, celebrated Christian holidays in Bethlehem and Jerusalem, participated in Muslim celebrations, and grown close to my colleagues and students. My first year here has increased my understanding of the beauty and richness of Palestinian culture, and heightened my empathy for those who are forced to live as second-class citizens. The recipient of overwhelming and unexpected kindness, I have been taught to find joy even in terrible adversity.

Will I return? Do I like teaching in Palestine? Yes, unequivocally yes. The experience has been transformational.



Image 6: A selfie of the author and a camel

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