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Contributed by Steven Young
Tuesday, 09 October 2007

It's time we got real about each other

By Brian O'Flaherty

iBall Sep 24, 2007

JILNAUGHT WONG, of Auckland University's business faculty, may be a popular man in the Chinese community. I don't know. But I'm prepared to bet his popularity won't increase in certain quarters for some of the remarks he made during the Bananas NZ Going Global conference in Auckland last month.

In an environment which even before lunch on the first of the two days was heading toward a measure of implied recrimination, I found his comments refreshing and realistic.

Before I recount his views perhaps I should give an example of what I suggest is over-sensitivity and that implied recrimination.

At an earlier session Canterbury University's Adam Lam touched on what is arguably one of the most common questions in any language: "where are you from?"

Incredibly, he termed it an "alienating" question. He didn't say why. I cannot begin to imagine why. My students ask it of every new arrival and no-one thinks anything of it wherever they're from. No-one recoils in indignation, refuses to answer or shows the slightest sign of resentment. I've been asked the question in 20 countries from Japan to Australia. It's simply an icebreaker, a conversation starter, even a sign of interest.

To see it as alienating, I suggest, is to read into it elements which are not there. For heaven's sake, people of the same nationality ask it of each other – there is no racial implication, no hidden prejudice. It isn't alienating. It's curious, courteous, even a pick-up line between boy and girl, but alienating? Not a chance.

To see it as anything but an innocent inquiry is over-sensitive. I guess there's an over-sensitive sector in every migrant or migrant-derived population. It's in that quarter that Jilnaught Wong's comment might not have been well received.

In the cause of establishing balance, I suppose, he observed:

"I'm not sure there are Banana-specific complaints to overcome to be successful", meaning successful in a country where the majority population is white. "Everyone", he added, "gets the same chance."

A realist can only agree.

To a question about "fighting" skin-colour discrimination, he responded, "I don't believe I've ever been held up by the colour of my skin";

He acknowledged that students whose first language is not English have trouble getting work in New Zealand but said that difficulty was not correctly correlated with communication skills "which are the real cause of difficulty getting jobs";

"I'm sure that's true. And perhaps students are misled into believing their English is better than it is. Currently I'm teaching a student – not Asian – who has sat the IELTS test and emerged with a band score good enough to admit him to most university courses, but he's not within a year of being able to write even an informal letter in colloquial English. And I don't believe universities generally see it as their task to teach English to students studying courses other than English.

Out in the real world commerce would see him in the same light – a nice guy, excellent worker, well-qualified in his home country, but he can't write a letter as they need it written, and even a telephone conversation would be a little slow. If there's an applicant who can do those things they'll get the job. That's business.

On the other hand, students need to be realistic too. If their writing keeps coming back marked with the same mistakes, if they are only scraping through speaking tests they must ask themselves the hard questions. What are they doing? What aren't they doing? Why in six months haven't things improved more?

Realism means acting on what they know, what they're told. This should be the English student's mantra: I cannot learn English in the classroom alone; I cannot afford to walk out of class at break or day's end and lapse into my mother tongue until class tomorrow. I have to speak English at every opportunity. Mistakes don't matter.

Realism is what one of my former Korean students did last summer. For many weekends in a row he sat on a bench in Albert Park and approached strangers cold, explaining that his mission was to learn English and asking if they could give him five minutes.

Which brings me to a factor Jilnaught Wong didn't mention but on which he might have had an interesting perspective: the well-known practice of employers discarding CVs as soon as they see a foreign name, and/or illegally intimating to recruitment agencies that they don't want to know about anybody carrying one.

Challenged on this, they will cite "New Zealand experience". And the critics respond, "how can these applicants get New Zealand experience if no-one will hire them? It's a vicious circle."

I have no sympathy for employers who take this tack. Racists apart, the rest are losing huge opportunities by not at least investigating whether an applicant actually can communicate competently in English. I don't blame them for declining to take on people who can't communicate.

On the other hand, a bit of corporate social responsibility doesn't go amiss. I've spent time teaching employees of two of our biggest companies because their employers valued and wanted to support them. I recall too a little Onehunga company with a Latin American worker who struggled with the language. The company paid and he progressed.

Because this is my last column on the conference I want to look at a couple of other issues.

Talking about Asian-American author Frank Chin, Kirsten Wong said, "he speaks for the part of us we don't allow to speak; the part that's been suppressed".

I have to ask, who suppressed it, and why? If it's still suppressed in a country where speech is supposed to be free, why?

Then Adam Lam again, discussing the 40 million Chinese diaspora which has formed virtual communities through the internet: "cyber identity changes the balance of power in the socio-political sphere by masking ethnic identity".

What is this "power"? And isn't this "mask" a positive thing? It forces those with a judgmental turn of mind to judge the idea, not the person, which is the life of all debate.

Liu Shueng said, referring to the loss of 400 bodies in the 1902 sinking of the Ventnor, "for the Chinese people, going home is paramount".

In the context of 1902 the sentiment is understandable. But did she use the present tense deliberately? Is China still home even to a sixth-generation New Zealander? It may well be. If it is, I'd like to know why. That's not a challenge; it's a plea for understanding.

We must, I think, constantly ask questions, review and verify or change our beliefs, our values. Do we think them valid because of their source or their intrinsic worth? Has anything changed in 10 years? In 50? Some things don't. Others assuredly do, not least our view of a world in continuous transition.

"We must," someone once said, "never stop asking questions." Who was that? Ah. I remember. A guy called Einstein. First name Albert.

FOOTNOTE: In the last column, which also looked at the Bananas conference, I mused on where it might be going and said that Liu Shueng saw the three conferences as steps, but I wasn't sure of the destination. She was good enough to clarify that in a brief letter.

"I thought it might be of interest to respond to your summary of the Banana conference, and answer that question 'where was it going?', " she wrote.

"It is well known that small minority communities tend to do what they do really well, but often these events or get-togethers are often similar in nature and attracting the same people. There is a place for this, but the Chinese community thought it was time to move beyond our own small communities and bring people unknown together.

"From the outside it is easy to think that the Chinese community is a homogeneous group whereas they are as varied as the diversity within New Zealand. Issues of dialects, urbanisation versus rural environments, different forms of government, time of being in New Zealand, expectations from other places to here in New Zealand, all go into the mix. It was time to move from a closed community to being more open.

"The Chinese have enough confidence in wanting others to listen to their realities, acknowledging other different ways of communication, and not just be comfortable in one's own skin, but to be comfortable about other people who have very different realities in their skins. This is not an either or, nor is it a judgement of right and wrong. It is about acceptance people who are different but also Chinese, and to the celebration of how we got here, and how being Chinese is something

that links us together. That seems like a good place to be going.”