Global TC Day: Bangkok, Thailand
By: Parinda Viranuvat
Consultant, Organization Development and Personal Development
Teachers College, Social-Organizational Psychology, class 2011

When I heard that Teachers College, Columbia University would be holding a 125th anniversary celebration in Bangkok, I was curious and wondered whether it would be just another alumni cocktail party in which I had to bring a stack of name cards. But no! One of my Teachers College (TC) folks was [even] panicking about his academic presentation. I used the term “academic” because the fact that I was asked to study prior to the event reminded me of those old days at school!

The event was indeed a full-day workshop with a mix of people from several groups: Fulbright Thailand, TC alumni, and American teachers who came to Thailand under the Education Seminar Program (ESP). Since the group was not all TC alumni, I was trying to find some familiar faces to calm my nerves. (Well, I didn't know then that I could use the strategy proposed by Fulbright Thailand's Executive Director - also a TC alumna - Khun Porntip Kanjananiyot, who said we could remain in our comfort zone, but still welcome others. She also gave us a few tips on how to deal with diversity in this land of smile and elephants. And then I found myself back in the familiar TC culture: decent snacks, collaborative mood, and discussions as a way of learning (i.e. you can't get away without uttering a word!). Here I am, writing a reflective paper!

The opening talk was made grand by Khun Porntip, who introduced a new perspective of old issues like face-saving culture, seniority vs. equality, and eating DNA, just to name a few. It wasn't beneficial only to our American guests who visited Thailand for a short period of time, but also to expatriates and Thai citizens like myself. It was soothing to see that these issues were addressed early so we could avoid an awkward situation, and opened the door for discussions to get to know each other in an honest way. And instead of smiling as a way to escape, I was given a new password—ASEAN. I trust, with this password, a number of doors will be open and the comfort zone will soon be forgotten.

The following sessions were not less important at all. Participants exchanged ideas on education cultures —Thai and American—with digital media that are gaining an increasingly significant role in teaching methods. But does our learning mentality change? It’s the process of making digital media a tool to quickly access broader learning resources, while outcomes still depend on how one would want to see future adults, shaped by today's teaching methods, lead the world. (Now I'm very much into Fulbright's motto, “Inspiring Caring Leaders across Cultures.”… They really care!) With this kind of workshop that cherished flipchart papers and sticky notes, we had generated an in-depth discussion of plagiarism—a heartache issue for teachers. What we care deeply was, in my own words, a child's individuation process. I still remember the pain when I had to paraphrase and cite the author's quote when I was studying abroad, for my education of 20 years earlier was all about multiple choices (if not multiple guesses) and memorizing exact words from texts. My warning to a new generation is that, from now on, you can't only just quote correctly, but you also have to limit the number of quotes. In other words, you can build on ideas that have been thought out before, but be yourself.

While the Thai education system focuses on a high-level strategy in developing critical thinkers, the American system makes an enormous amount of effort in translating philosophical ideas into something that is more related to individuals. Ultimately, it is a blessing that I have experienced both systems, to be aware of what has been missing and have an opportunity to fill in the void. I am grateful to be a part of this workshop in which opinions could be honestly expressed. Human relations are nevertheless the greatest means of teaching and learning, although I couldn't help downloading a new phone application at the end of the day!