

Introduction to the Danger Inquiry

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It was early March in 2009 when we found ourselves hiking deep in the high mountains of Western Bali in the country of Indonesia with a group of 10 University of Guam students. It was a beautiful day and the air was cool and crisp. It had rained the night before and so the steep mountain slope was a bit muddy and slippery. For several hours we had accompanied one of our students who had a weak ankle from a few years ago and was worried about falling. Things were going very well. We were surrounded on all sides by rivers and waterfalls, mountain springs and thick forests of clove and fruit trees and special medicinal herb plants. As we neared the end of the trail some of us found ourselves falling back in the group to stop to enjoy photography and take it all in. All of a sudden, we heard a scream. We ran down the trail to the front of the group and found our student with the tender ankle on the ground. She had fallen and hurt herself badly. It was that same ankle that she had been so worried about. Just then the rain began to pour down and things seemed to be spiraling out of control. The rest of the students were instructed to go on ahead. A couple of students stayed behind with me [K.J.] to help the injured student. Every time she tried to walk, she shrieked in pain. We realized that we would have to carry her out of the forest. One of us ran through the forest, found some villagers, and using very limited Indonesian tried to get them to understand that we needed a stretcher of some sort. Finally eight men appeared with a quickly made stretcher to help get this student out of the wet forest and onto a road, so we could get her the medical care that she needed.

It is not necessary to go into all the details of what followed. Basically, what we seek to share in this Introduction is that it was this accident, this unfortunate turn of events, that opened us up to opportunities and experiences that we would not have had before. As one Balinese man later told us, “We are not always in control and must recognize the larger forces of the universe, if we are to find happiness. Her pain will be the source of her comfort; her misfortune will become the reason you are all here in Bali.” This was definitely a different way of thinking about and understanding danger. And we both admit now that it was this accident that was the catalyst for some very profound thinking and reflection on the part of all our team members.

So what does this story have to do with a collection of essays and papers entitled the Danger Inquiry? Everything. The University of Guam’s mission is to provide and facilitate opportunities to Discover ourselves and the world around us in ways we may have never imagined before; to Enlighten by lifting the veils that often keep us chained up and bound in ignorance, not allowing us to see the true nature of our lives and the possibilities the world and our communities have hidden deep within; and finally, our University’s mission is to provide avenues for each student to understand and appreciate the purpose of their lives through Service to others. This mission and the opportunities that flow from it can lay the foundation that serves as the cornerstone of a life-long journey involving the exchange of ideas, discovering new ones and true fellowship.

It is often within the most unexpected times and places that we encounter opportunities to learn and grow, and it is up to us to recognize these. Many opportunities pass us by every day, and thus we need to develop the capacity to be open to these opportunities, e.g., new ideas, people, places, and most of all new capacities within our own character.

Our quest may take us alone or along with our students to far away places, to have the chance to meet, live among, and learn from some of the most amazing cultures and people - from the small mountain villages of Western India to the Bedouin tents of the Sinai desert, from the homes of the Hmong people of Laos to the huts of the fishermen in the Maldiv Islands, from a kibbutz on the western bank of the Sea of Galilee to the marae meeting houses of Maori people in the South Island of New Zealand, from the Pantheon in Rome to the Blue Mosque in Istanbul to the Acropolis in Athens, from the village huts in the Andaman Islands to the alpine cottages in the Swiss Alps, from the southern coast of Guam to the villages of the Cook Islands, from the congested city streets of Manila to the monkey forest found in Ngeaur [Angaur], Palau – and from Bali, Indonesia, the Island of the Thousand Temples, to the cliff lines of the University of Guam Campus in Mangilao, our quest always seems to bring us back home. In the course of our journeys, we often ask our students and ourselves what we want our lives to mean. ‘Why am I here and what is my purpose?’ ‘What is happiness and why is there so much suffering?’ These questions continue to haunt us as we pause to look back on where we have been and look ahead to where our lives may take us next. We believe we are finding some answers, answers that keep us asking more questions, but answers that help us find peace within ourselves as well.

It is no accident that the University of Guam is perched on the cliff lines of Mangilao overlooking the Pacific Ocean and the world beyond. The Chamorro word “Mangilao” literally means “They observe” – a more active form

would be “mangi’ilao” – “They are observing.” Some say that this place was named as such, for this is where the Ancient Ones could look out over the ocean and chart the movement of fish. Today, we can still do the same thing, but we are not only looking at the fish but also the movement of much more. We are observing the movements and currents of both the natural environment and the global forces of change that continue to shape our island community, as well as those of others around the world. It is from this vantage point then that we comprise a community of learners, trying to make sense of the world we live in. The cliffs of Mangilao served the Ancient Ones well, and so it continues, to the present day.

And as we observe our world, which can beckon us to far away places, we find that our own community is at a pivotal moment in history. We, like so many around the globe, are seeking to find balance in a world that is pulling us in two different directions. We are at once a community adrift in the water without knowing our destination – truly without a rudder or the stars or the fish to guide us. We have been sold “hook, line and sinker” as they say in America, on the notion that more is better and we have gone out of our way to build up our island, cover our green spaces with concrete, and pave over our jungles. We have bought into the idea that more money means more happiness and we have thus welcomed more tourists, more military buildup, and more and more of everything. But there is a rumbling on the horizon, a rumbling that has begun at the grassroots. It is a rumbling for something different, something more meaningful, something more spiritual, something that cries out from the depths of 4000 years of history in the western Pacific region, something more indigenous, something that calls for a more just and humanitarian world, a world where all people can find their voices and contribute to a global society and culture unlike any previously found in human history. It is nothing short of a revolution. This can be heard off in the distance through the chants of our children, through the poetry and story-telling of our youth and through the vibrations of the ocean when, for the first time in 250 years, a flying proa named *Saina* [literally translated as: Elders but also is commonly used to refer to the ancient ones that came before) set sail a few months ago from Guam to Rota. Many, including some who are involved in this revolution, critique it as powerless or insignificant, but this does not diminish its impact. It is coherent, organic, self organized, and comprised of millions of people who are dedicated to making change happen. When anyone questions Paul Hawken (2007), who has written and spoken on the subject of this movement, if he is a pessimist or an optimist about the current state of the world, his response is this:

“If you look at the science that describes what is happening on earth today and aren’t pessimistic, you don’t have the correct data. If you meet people in this unnamed movement and aren’t optimistic, you haven’t got a heart. What I see are ordinary people and some not-so-ordinary individuals willing to confront despair, power, and incalculable odds in an attempt to restore some semblance of grace, justice and beauty to this world. This quiet revolution is making great inroads and each of you are part of it (p.4).”

The late Mother Teresa has stated that knowledge always leads to love, and love to service. In our efforts to educate our students, we are compelled to take them out of their classrooms, away from their computer screens, and unplugged from their iphones and facebooks, place them into another cultural context and allow them to discover a part of themselves they had forgotten existed. Danger is always present in our back yards, our streets, and our classrooms and in our travel to far away places. And we are often moved to think of our own island as a microcosm of the global village that we endeavor to encounter. Our own island paradise is a compressed universe. As Dr. David Khorram (2007) eloquently states, “Everything is close together. The depths of the island’s beauty is obvious as you gaze into her eyes, but so too is the piece of spinach stuck between her teeth. They are both unavoidable. How you respond to the spinach is what defines your experience (p.20).” And this holds true not just on an island, but for the entire world.

The *Danger Inquiry* is an initiative that was begun at the University of Guam (UOG) in 2006. In that year, the UOG President and Vice Presidents made the decision that AN/SO 405 Community Development, team-taught by us, could not offer the field component embedded in the course, which involves taking our students out of their classroom and placing them into a “hands-on” fieldwork situation in Bali, Indonesia. It was deemed too dangerous to travel off-campus from Guam to an overseas location with UOG students, because of potential risks that could undermine the safety and well-being of the students, especially in the context of globalization and international terrorism. The island of Bali had just been through a second international terrorist attack in 2005, resulting in significant apprehension on the part of the university administration.

As an outcome of this decision, we decided to conduct research on the topic of Danger in Academia. Our proposed research endeavor was strongly supported by the Dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences (CLASS) at UOG, Dr. Mary Spencer. We spoke with UOG students, UOG faculty, and UOG administrators, and

conducted extensive library reference research on the topic. Dr. Amy Owen, the Editor of the new online journal within CLASS at UOG, welcomed the *Danger Inquiry* essays to the journal's peer review process. The outcome in terms of publication of our research is this set of essays entitled the *Danger Inquiry*.

In this collection of essays, we pose a central question: To what extent should universities and colleges continue to offer overseas travel-study academic courses, in the Age of Globalization and International Terrorism? Writers of the various essays, as teachers and learners, share their experiences, especially concerning overseas travel study opportunities to earn academic credits, for post-secondary students. We believe that the experiences and points of view shared by these writers merit thoughtful consideration.

In the first essay of this collection, Rebecca Stephenson and Hiro Kurashina provide an overview of danger in the age of globalization within the context of higher education. Basing their arguments on their first-hand experiences in more than a decade of field schools abroad, the authors highlight the value of such programs to the totality of the educational experiences of undergraduate students. Their essay allows the reader to hear from students themselves, offering a clearer understanding of the importance of these endeavors from the perspectives of students. The paper concludes that, within the context of globalization and danger, academic scholars must now empower their university students with greater caution and awareness, while continuing to offer them innovative opportunities to engage the wider world that beckons them from afar.

Nadine Kaschak was a student during the particular time in her life that she shares in the second essay. She discusses her experience studying in what is often perceived to be one of the most dangerous places in the world – Israel – with its daily uncertainties and complexities. She came to the conclusion that the profound insecurity she felt, and the explosive nature of the political situation was too much to bear for the two years of her course of study. Nadine left Israel only four months after she arrived. In her reflection she writes, “I lost a considerable amount of money on my deposit for graduate school, and I also lost my relationship with a man that I thought I could spend the rest of my life with.” But, she explains, she could not live any longer in Israel, because of the never-ending sense of danger she experienced day after day.

The next essay by Lan-Hung Nora Chiang looks at the concept of Danger from a different perspective. She reflects on the possible dangers involved in teaching a standard general education course within the context of a single university setting. “Exploring Taiwan – Geography and Environmental Resources” is offered by the National Taiwan University and addressed such fundamental questions as: Might being enrolled in a rather ordinary general education University course involve danger for students? As University faculty, we keep in mind the possibility of danger when we escort university students overseas to pursue academic endeavors. But, what might be possible risks for students on our university campuses of origin? To what extent should we feel concerned about the comfort levels of foreign students who study on our home campuses? As we work with students who are local residents, should their perspectives and needs outweigh those of international students who may be on campus for only a short time? How do these two groups of students interact with each other? Could danger present itself on campus for both groups of students, in the form of unsettling academic experiences, unexpected personal challenges, and/or being forced to explore in depth one's strongly held beliefs and values? These questions comprise the central inquiry in this paper.

The next essay, written by Michael Howard, reflects on his almost two decades of directing a field school in Southern Thailand for Simon Fraser University in Canada. Howard takes students through four countries and two university campuses, from separatist regions to border towns, and through extensive experiences, illustrating the changing nature of the world we live in which requires constant monitoring from year to year and even month to month. Educators must be willing to be flexible with their field school agendas, with safety first and foremost in their minds, so that students can continue to learn and experience their world in significant ways. As our *Danger Inquiry* goes into press, Howard and his university students are in Hanoi, Vietnam, preparing to begin a week-long trip “up the mountains.”

Kim Skoog's essay also highlights many years of experiences with travel courses that take University of Guam students and community members who reside on Guam to China, Tibet, Nepal and India. In his tales of danger and adventure, Skoog reflects on how one deals with both the anticipated and unanticipated threats inherent within such endeavors. He argues that danger is ever present, but need not necessarily be a “deal breaker.” Taking steps to control and minimize dangers and threats can allow for a smooth experience for all involved, and provide remarkable learning experiences to keep and treasure.

Finally, this collection of both reflective essays and academic research entitled the *Danger Inquiry* closes with a joint paper by the two of us that reflects on lessons learned in field school endeavors that take students away from their university campuses of origin, and place them into a different country. Ten lessons gleaned by us in the course of ten years of experiences highlight both the singular value of such an enterprise and the realistic steps that can be taken to mitigate danger in the complex world that surrounds us.

References

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