

# TDF (Teacher Development Forum) Speaker Event

## *"Teaching through a Global Recession"*

On **Wednesday, March 25<sup>th</sup>, 2009** at **7 pm**, TDF hosted a discussion panel on "Teaching through a Global Recession". 3 guest speakers talked about different aspects of how the financial crisis is affecting teaching and teachers in China as well as the Chinese government's new directions in education. The speeches were delivered in a discussion group manner with questions and comments being given as the talk went on.

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**Ms. Kelly Brantner**, the last speaker, spoke about student's needs in her institution's EMBA program – a program aimed at work-experienced persons wanting to upgrade their corporate skills. Ms. Brantner is Beijing's Executive Project Director for Rutgers University She spoke about students enrolling in the EMBA program and the skills they most lack when starting out – skills that are not taught in university training but could very well be in the future.

#### **Ms. Brantner's talk - Executive Summary**

Her talk began with an introduction of the university she represents in Beijing and the EMBA program and a bit about her background which has eventually brought her to China. In her job, she's in charge of recruitment and interviewing candidates who would like to take the EMBA and she also talks with corporate HRs with regards how the EMBA can be used for their high potential leaders.

Her main thought for this night's talk was "what kind of skills do individuals that are graduating really need to have in order to be attractive to multinationals?" One overlapping aspect that she mentions is the lack of 'soft skills' particularly (presentation skills, problem-solving, creativity, teamwork and others) – something that universities don't seem to address.

In her interviews and in the personal statement candidates need to hand in prior to joining the program, she is shocked by the poor writing skills not only in the English language itself but in the organization and train of thought. She wonders how they will be able to hand in a case study to the university professors. The same is seen in structuring a presentation.

She mentioned talking to an individual who did a presentation in university recently and was surprised when asked how the presentation was graded that it was graded on the quality of the graphics in the PowerPoint rather than the delivery skills or the handling of question.

The next point of her talk was about having (or not having actually) 'critical thinking skills'. She noted that it first of all never taught, it is seen as something R&D or marketing do, and that because of the one-child policy in China, that children are brought up rarely being criticised nor have to criticise in return – it's just not part of the upbringing.

Kelly talked about a report regarding the 'skills crisis' in China from the Asian Development Report that states that the skills crisis is due mostly from the failure of the education system in China to keep pace with the growing demand – they state that China is producing many graduates but not the right ones. Another report (McKinsey) states that only about 10% of Chinese graduates have the soft skills necessary to be hired by multi-nationals.

Some countries, Kelly mentions are actually starting to implement critical thinking classes in their primary school curriculum. Many are implementing the work of Dr. David Debono which emphasises critical thinking.

Kelly talked about some ways that giving and accepting feedback (criticism) can be taught. In their classes, they for example, do role plays with three people – two players and one observer.

After a comment from the audience mentioning that people who join government organizations in China don't seek further improvement since they (seemingly) 'have a job for life', Kelly commented that that also is going to have to change especially as China is entering more into the WTO. The days of fat and heavy organizations are counted.

She added that CEOs want to be competitive and that many candidates when wanting to join the EMBA program say that they like the diversity of the classroom, the different cultures and the different perspectives of problem-solving. She also says that many organizations are virtual teams from different parts of the world and therefore need to understand the different perspectives in order to work together.

Kelly stated that as soon as people get some of these basic soft skills developments then organizations won't have to spend so much money and time to train them up front.

She talked about a project by Edward DeBono which is called CORT and aims to bring cognitive thinking into elementary schools. They are in the process of looking at ways of introducing it.

The rest of the talk revolved around audience questions and comments on the topic of bringing in critical thinking into the workplace and other related ideas.

### **Talk Notes**

This is a set of notes following the progress of the presentation. It includes questions from the audience. Note that any text that is placed within quotation marks are not necessarily the exact quote. This set of notes complements the recording where everyone was looking at the slides. The recording, if you did not receive it is available on the TDF site – [www.tdf-esl.com](http://www.tdf-esl.com).

I'm with Rutgers University. We are the state university for New Jersey. WE have been in Shanghai and Beijing for over two years now. We offer an Executive MBA program.

My background is not in university actually. I worked in Canada for a private consulting firm. What we did was a lot of executive development, a lot of executive education and because of that experience, Rutgers asked me to join the team here.

My job has two sides: first, I am actively involved in the recruitment of students and thereby interview anyone who's interested in our program and find out why they want to take it. I find out what their learning and development needs are and what learning environment they're looking for.

Another part of what I do is talk a lot with corporate HR with regards to the EMBA program – how they can use it for their high-potential leaders and how it maybe fits into their succession-planning needs.

When asked to speak tonight, I gave some thought on these two groups and looked into "what kind of skills do individuals that are graduating really need to have in order to be attractive to multinationals?" A lot of the work that I do is with Embassies, NGOs and multinationals.

Regardless of what industry I've worked with (aviation, manufacturing ...), it's interesting to note an overlapping need that they see as universities continue to graduate individuals that have some really amazing technical skills but are very weak when it comes to their 'soft skills' development and this is a trend that I continually hear.

For soft skills, I'm defining them as presentation skills, the ability to work in teams, practical problem solving, creativity and ever business writing continues to be challenges that we see.

I often ask HR 'why do you think that gap continues to exist?' They simply say that the Chinese system of education traditionally is based on memorization and that's really been the heavy focus. Things like leadership and creativity in the workplace is something that hasn't been a priority.

From what I have seen as a personal comment, in part of our MBA program application, I ask to see approximately a two-page personal statement. I want them to write it and I want to see why do they want to take out program, what kind of learning environment do they want and also how do they think they're going to add value to the classroom environment that we offer.

It continues to amaze me that I do not get statements that are short, that are concise, that are a logical flow of ideas. They use past and present tenses and their grammatical structure is just horrendous. And then I find myself saying 'you want to be able to hand in a case study for professors from the United States?' (all our professors in our program actually come from our

campus in the US). They have very specific expectations for our individuals who attend our course here.

It continues to be a problem and I continue to see statements that don't articulate clearly why they want to take our program. I am also surprised how people who enter our program don't know how to structure a presentation and how should the information flow.

SO, on our orientation program, we spend a lot of time giving individuals examples on how you put together a case study and how you put together things like a presentation, what information they should be presenting and how they should look.

I first thought that these lack of skills was due perhaps to the fact that our participants were older. So, I called an individual that I know who is in university right now (because perhaps it was something that they first started to address at universities). I asked him if he did presentations and he said yes. He had one as a homework assignment. Asking him if the course gave him any guidelines towards the presentation, he said no – just a homework assignment. I then asked him how they graded the presentation – was it the delivery, the handling of questions ...est. He said no, ... it was on the quality of my PowerPoint and the quality of the graphics.

**Comment from the audience:** confirming that on her 30 years of teaching corporate English she got to hate PowerPoint because the learners simply write everything up on the PowerPoint slide and then read it in front of the class.

**Kelly:** in one of my experiences with a Canadian 'presentations expert', he emphasised that slides should have no more than 3 bullet points and that the audience was not stupid, they know how to read so the presenter better add value to the presentation.

One of the other practice areas of the organization I was working with in Canada did was 'critical thinking skills' and we talked a lot about corporate innovation and it's interesting that when I came here and we started talking about creativity in the workplace, which I feel is a basic soft skill need, ... many state that 'it's not my job – it's for R&D and marketing'. So I asked, 'what about the need to improve performance and procedures and add value to existing services?' – they would say 'that's not what I do' and they confirm that they've never had any kind of critical thinking skills training in schools.

(Kelly went on to give example on how critical thinking had changed Prudential Insurance Company years ago by coming up with a new successful service concept that she notes, was not from R&D nor marketing. She added that Boeing Company who hires highly skilled technicians would probably not hire you if you didn't have critical thinking skills.)

One interesting thing I noticed (from reading online as well) is that because of the one-child policy now, a child almost never gets criticised in their growth and as a result, don't take criticism well. And that's a shame because criticism is not a negative thing. It's meant to help improve your performance and enhance your present work. They have had a hard time seeing this constructively and that's something they're going to have to get over and move forward with.

The Asian Development Report talks about the overall Asian region and particular countries and the issues they're facing. They talk about a skills crisis. They state that "the skills shortage is aggravated by China's failure to produce the right kind of graduates rather than too few ... the root cause of China's skills crisis lies in the leap of demand for skills that the education system has failed to keep pace with."

I agree, I continue to see that. There is data available to confirm that. The McKinsey Report for example in 2005..... They say that when you take graduates for example in engineering, China produces 10 times the number of graduates in engineering than the United states does. But, when you take a look at the soft skills and what multi-nationals are requiring, only about 10% of those graduates are going to meet those requirements.

So when you filter out the soft skills requirements including English and others, the actual number of graduates that multi-nationals would actually want to hire is probably equivalent to what the UK is presently producing.

My opinion is that as China continues to move forward from an agriculture and a manufacturing based economy, into services and into high-tech, they need to address those soft skills problems in their education system right now from the beginning.

Regarding critical thinking skills, countries like Australia, Ireland Argentina and Singapore are putting critical thinking classes into their primary school systems. They want children to learn how to think, what the different perceptions are and to really broaden their perception in the whole thinking process. China also has to move along that path.

There are some strides being made – a lot of organisations have for example expressed a lot of interest in the work of Dr. David Debono and are starting to use it. There are apparently some small tests as well in schools where they are trying to see how they can incorporate critical thinking.

**Audience comment:** Regarding accepting criticism in the workplace, one thing we need to remember is that Chinese people do not like to 'lose face' and when I'm thinking about my students I always say it's better to lose face here than it is in front of your client or your boss. This situation will not change in 5 or 10 years. I think we've got one generation or more to go.

**Kelly:** Yes, I agree and that was one big learning when I first moved here. I gave a feedback in my office in a situation where there was someone else around and she totally lost face. It was a real learning for me ...

That said, there are ways that we can teach people how to give a receive feedback. In our classes, when we do role plays, we always do it in sets of three and the third person we use as an observer whose role it is to give feedback to the other two in the role play. Then we switch so everyone has a chance at being an observer. After a while people do become comfortable at giving and receiving feedback.

It can become part of a performance system. For example, IBM have specific competencies and expect mid-year reviews and end-of-year reviews, So those wanting to work for such companies better get used to the feedback aspect of their job.

**Audience question:** Do you teach logic or chronology in say,... presentations?

**Kelly:** These are basic presentation skills which include that but it depends a lot on the circumstances if it's a sales presentation of an information session.

One thing that bothers me is when people aren't being respectful of time. You always have to keep the audience in mind and not run over.

**Audience comment:** regarding skills, the government company I work for hires engineers for the petroleum industry. These engineers studied and got their degree but once they're hired, they don't seem to care what job they're given. They got in and that's what they wanted. Now their career goals are to become managers and not a better engineer for example.

**Kelly:** that kind of entitlement is a very scary thing to feel and I think that even with government organisations, that kind of entitlement is going out the window. I think that the current financial crisis is going to change it. I think that as China moves more and more into the WTO, ..... I can't wait for the day when banking institutions become more competitive here and that things like quality and customer service becomes important.

All will have to change. For example, IBM was very top-heavy for many years and a lady I worked with based out of California had the job of cutting about 35% from the bottom line – and she did and it was all based oalong the entitlement curve and the productivity curve she developed.

The days of government companies when they are fat and heavy and where individuals say 'I'm going to have a job for life' and the attitudes are perhaps changing.

When I interview people and I ask them why the want to take the Rutgers program, they say, 'I like the diversity of the classroom environment, I want to be able to learn much from different cultures and understand problems from their perspective – I need for my career progress to broaden my perspective'.

Organizations are moving that way with a lot more virtual teams and all of a sudden when you're on a team with someone who's from South Africa, America and India, you have to

have an understanding and perspective about how different individuals approach problems differently. I think that Chinese nationals, people, they want that kind of opportunity and experience; they want to be in those kinds of organizations.

**Audience comment:** A point about working for state-owned companies is the hidden benefits that the managers get. That is very different from what we can even imagine in other world companies – the money they can earn through other opportunities not to mention the security they have simply doesn't even exist elsewhere.

**Kelly:** True but CEOs now want to be competitive so it will have to change, especially looking especially looking at the current economic situation in China. China has a lot of wonderful skilled people in many aspects and I just think that they need to augment it with soft-skills training.

As an example, architecture, when they're learning about their projects, why not also give them the opportunity to sell their projects, to be able to present their ideas to potential clients and how to deal with client objections. I think that if we start to incorporate some of those thoughts and ideas, Chinese nationals will become much more interesting and hireable by multi-nationals.

We see that in the program, there are a couple of individuals who are with Kraft and who have done a lot of work but no sooner had they graduated from our program that they were on a plane to Chicago. They were transferred by Kraft and it was the first time that Kraft had put Chinese nationals into these positions in the United States.

I think that as soon as they get some of these basic soft skills developments then organisations won't have to spend so much money and time to train them up front. It will allow individuals to move into these high potential moving tracks, ... and it will happen.

**Question from the audience:** Do you think that it is feasible to introduce soft skills into primary and secondary schools? And if so, how do we handle the training for supporting the teachers who probably don't have those skills?

**Kelly:** I think that's possible. For example, Edward Debono has a process that he calls CORT which is about cognitive thinking and is specifically designed for elementary schools in particular. They are looking into how to introduce it. He want to see it taught on a much larger scale. It is a matter of getting trainers p to speed quickly.

**Audience comment:** just to mention that the ministry of education is really behind task-based learning in English language teaching in basic education and I think that this could be a starting point. The difficulty is actually training the teachers to deliver it. They could do it here in Beijing, in Shanghai and in Guangdong ...it's when you get into the west, into the countryside. It's really hard to do that but I know that the ministry of education is thinking about ways to do it, so it is a way forward.

**Kelly:** I also think that when you have a few little successes these can lead into the snowball and then people can see that it's not just a theory and what are the results. When you can see measurable results you can actually see some of the changes and benefits.

**Audience comment:** there's a very interesting project with Professor Wang Qian who has worked with task-based learning here in Beijing. What they found is improvement not only in language but across the curriculum is enormous.

**Kelly:** There's a Montessori school that has introduced critical thinking into the school.

**Audience question:** you mentioned role-playing with 3 people and one person being and evaluator. Is that critical thinking skills training?

**Kelly:** not necessarily. What we have in the EMBA program is leadership and negotiation and part of the leadership skills we define as the ability to give and receive feedback. Especially as part of performance reviews and in coaching individuals. And any of the role-plays we do that are based on giving and receiving feedback, those are what we always do in 3. And what we do is that we give a bit of a template to individuals acting as the observer so that they have some very specific guidelines as to what kinds of behaviours and what kinds of actions that they should be looking for.

Role-plays sometimes only last about five minutes and the last two minutes after that are actually spent debriefing. The debriefing notes are turned into the professor and he keeps them and uses them as part of their grade because he wants to see that they're actually giving objective feedback.

**Audience comment:** I keep getting from students feedback saying that 'yes, we're learning all this but we're not going to be able to put it into action'

**Kelly;** well, you know, there are examples of people who are putting it into action and they're not necessarily trying to change the organization, they're just trying to deal with their team to start with and implement just a couple of little things.

Again, it's the small successes that can sometimes make a difference. Those whose environments say they can't use it, it's maybe time for them to leave and find another place that will allow it. Baidu is an example of a Chinese company that is using that – they're out there...

That's basically what I wanted to talk about.

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### Some final questions and comments from the audience

**Question for Xiaoyang:** do you see things like critical thinking coming in the Chinese education?

**Xiaoyang:** yes, you know, we call it 'education reform'. So the first round of education reform (was had) and from this year, the second round will begin. So we talk about task-based teaching, critical thinking, things like that. But it's really a long way, to enhance the teachers to think critically.

**Audience comment:** yes it's hard in a classroom, when you have a room full of kids who can't even move out of their seats.

**Xiaoyang:** but the lucky this is we move forward.

**Kelly:** Edward Debono actually has an office here and it's interesting to note that most of their clients are SEOs, not multi-nationals and all of their materials is in Chinese. And they get a really wonderful reception from organizations who want to implement critical thinking. Because you can actually tie it to bottom-line results and the money that they have saved.

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### Final comments

**Comment from the audience:** Just one comment I'd like to make ... we compare things so much with our own country we come from and I think one always has to stop and think about how far China has come in 30 odd years. We see that it has developed so quickly particularly in the cities that sometimes we need to be a bit patient as well because they have done so much better than almost any other developing country and I think that sometimes we need to give a little credit as well.

You know, it's so easy for us to criticise and I include myself doing that and like tonight we hear some many points about things that need to change that we also need to be a bit patient as well. Not too patient but we need to keep pushing it but with a balance.

**Kelly:** yes, and coming from North America, we tend to be an 'instant society – we want everything instantly. Yes, I agree when we see the amount of change that has gone on and what they are trying to accomplish as well, we need to support that.

**Paul:** I think another thing as well, to take that to the next logical step. The way China and Asia is developing is also not what can we teach people, what can we change ... but also what can we learn from China.

Actually the Chinese education system has many, many strengths that either we've lost in the west or that we don't really 'take on board'. For example, people have asked me would you like to go back to the UK and teach? But no, I would never teach in the UK. Chinese students, rightly or wrongly, have that massive respect for the teacher and it's a great environment to work in. Although it does cause problems in terms of challenging people and so forth, it's still

a great environment and when you're talking about the sciences and things like that, they're leap years ahead of most western countries.

So, it's a kind of 6 of one and half a dozen of the other.

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### **Closing**

**Keith:** So, on that very constructive note, it's probably a good time to stop. So, thanks once again for all the speakers and do stick around so we can get to know each other and ask other questions .....