**Interview with Yong Zhao**

***ATA News:*** **What year did you first come to the United States, and was it a culture shock?**

**Zhao:** It was around 1992 and, yes, there was some culture shock. The biggest difference was how many choices there are in the U.S. When you order a sandwich, they ask you all these questions—all kinds of choices for the bread, the meat. And now Subway asks you even more questions. I had been teaching English for so many years, yet I didn’t know how to order a sandwich. I also found out that before you can buy shampoo, you have to know what kind of hair you have—is it oily, dry, normal?

This might not be the experience of people now, because China has developed; they may have similar choices. I grew up in a little village in China, and I was a poor teacher. I was lucky to have soap to wash my hair with.

***ATA News:*** **Do you have a family in America?**

**Zhao:** Yes, I have been happily married for nearly 20 years. I met my wife in China when she was working with a Russian teacher at the same college. We had our first child in China; he is now a student at the University of Chicago. We also have a younger daughter, who is 12 and in eighth grade.

***ATA News:*** **You mentioned that you are in an airport. Where are you, and where are you going?**

**Zhao:** I’m at the Austin, Texas, airport. I just did a presentation at a conference for the Texas Association of School Administrators, and I am on my way to San Jose, California, to do a presentation for a new teacher centre.

***ATA News:*** What is the focus of your research?

**Zhao:** My current research is in three areas: understanding what knowledge matters to different countries in the age of globalization, exploring online education and how it can prepare our children for the future, and exploring ways to use computer games to support language and culture learning, as well as more authentic assessment of 21st-century skills.

I think the first area is of particular interest to Alberta. All countries have to ask this hard question: What knowledge is of the most worth? We have all these international tests driving our education content as if that is the most important thing for everybody, for every country, developed or developing. Many countries have their eye on the PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) and TIMSS (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study) results. Recently, Chinese students had the best results, so everyone started to think that China has the best education. This is completely mistaken. You can read my analysis of why Chinese students scored so well on my blog (http://zhaolearning.com).

What does it mean to be well educated and to have world-class education in the age of globalization? What should we try to teach? The answer is quite different from what most would think. The content of education should not be globally homogeneous or globally benchmarked. It should be locally unique and build on the strengths of each child, teacher, school, community and country. The more unique you are, the more valuable you become globally. Moreover, education should be responsive to local conditions, but with a global perspective.

Education should encourage students to discover and develop their talents, and equip them with knowledge and skills that others don’t have. The more we help develop people in terms of creativity and entrepreneurship, the better off we will be. I see students as global entrepreneurs. We should teach them to invent jobs, not find jobs. A lot of current employment may not be there when they grow up.

Alberta scored well on the PISA, but while that may indicate the health of your education system, it doesn’t necessarily mean that your children will be successful globally in the future.

These test scores do not predict a country’s success. Some countries, like the U.S., have not done well on test scores since the 1960s, yet many of them remain strong and innovative. Some bad test-takers now build prosperous companies, become great innovators and entrepreneurs, and grow up to be outstanding musicians, artists or athletes. The countries with high test scores do not necessarily have great economies. The Asian countries are trying to move away from test-oriented education despite their historical excellence in test scores. Again, you can read more about why test scores do not predict a nation’s future prosperity, or an individual’s future success or happiness, on my blog or in my book *Catching Up or Leading the Way*.

***ATA News:* Should parents stop encouraging their children to conform?**

**Zhao:** The education system today is about the same as it was a hundred years ago. I agree that you have to learn how to do well within the system but*,* at the same time, doing well should not come at the cost of sacrificing the human spirit, our passion, our curiosity, our creativity and our boldness.

***ATA News:* Do you think that there is a link between seeing students as global entrepreneurs and why you are exploring online education?**

**Zhao:** Yes. As our current education systems are configured, students are isolated within their physical boundaries and don’t know other peoples, cultures or what is happening in other places. Political leaders and the media often portray others as competitors, but our children should learn to see others as potential collaborators and possible consumers of what they make or invent in the future. Being online, hopefully, will help bring students out of isolation, providing opportunities to learn and work together with children from other cultures. Technology has re-created us, which forces us to live in a globalized, virtual world. Our children may understand local industries and have become consumers of new technology; we need to teach them to become global creators of new concepts, new ideas and new technologies.

Another reason I am interested in online learning is that there are a lot of children whose educational experiences are defined and constrained by what is available locally. I hope that by using technology we can provide innovative, cutting-edge and globally oriented educational experiences for kids who live in remote areas, isolated areas or poor areas, where they might not have access to great artists, museums, libraries, art galleries or cultural experiences. I have started building a virtual lab school at the University of Oregon. It will engage students, not only in traditional courses but more in design workshops or design studios that allow children from all over the world to learn and work together. For example, an Alberta student could design an English-language game for Chinese students, and students in China could design a game to help Alberta students learn Chinese or understand Chinese culture. They will also be able to codesign and work on things together. We hope to launch the website this summer.

***ATA News:*** **What are some of the things that you see other countries doing that are being overlooked in the U.S. and Canada when it comes to helping students grow as individuals?**

**Zhao:** I see a lot of movement toward more personalized learning and student-oriented education in the U.K., Australia and some Asian countries. These countries are paying more attention to individual needs, desires and learning levels. In the U.S., we are ignoring that and trying to standardize students’ learning experiences. A lot of countries are increasing their emphasis on global citizenship. Students are learning other languages, learning about other cultures, visiting other countries. This is happening in Australia, England, Nordic countries and China. Each year China sends many teachers and students abroad. In the U.S. the focus has been on the past, what we did not have, what we did not provide. We need to engage students, to inspire them. The goal has to be to aim higher rather than lower.

***ATA News:*** **What could teachers do to increase students’ initiative when it comes to schoolwork?**

**Zhao:** I think teachers need to start by engaging students in authentic work, authentic projects. Knowledge is often taught in such a way that children find it irrelevant to their lives. I believe human beings are born problem solvers, and through solving problems we learn. But the problems have to be real and relevant rather than artificial and contrived, like the homework we give our children. We could start by helping students identify authentic problems globally and learn how to address them. Our teaching needs to start with a problem that leads to an authentic product. A product can be a service that helps someone; it can be a book, a film, a game, a website. What if all Alberta Grade 3 students wrote and recorded audio books to help kids in other countries who are trying to learn English? Or they could explain what snow is like to kids in Barbados. We can teach by embedding knowledge into projects that encourage kids to actively seek knowledge, not passively receive it.

***ATA News:*** **But isn’t this hard to do when you have 35 Grade 3 students in one room?**

**Zhao:** It’s not that hard, actually. I think all kids want to create. They can be in charge of their own management. The most important thing is for teachers to have the desire to cultivate the spirit of learning and have faith in our children. It’s a change of philosophy for teachers to view their responsibility as cultivating students who are self-regulated learners, to help them develop their creativity and entrepreneurial spirit, instead of just covering what is prescribed in the curriculum. We need to encourage students to seek knowledge rather than passively receive it. This change would help us redevelop the education system. Also, we need to have more trust, more faith in their goodness, not view them as children who are trying to do bad things or want to be lazy. Yes, they will make mistakes—they are children, they are learning. Make them responsible for their own learning, give them decisions to make. If you take away the power to make decisions, they will not take responsibility and they will not learn to be independent learners.

***ATA News:*** **Is this type of learning already being implemented somewhere?**

**Zhao:** Actually, I haven’t seen many countries do this. Most schools are still stuck in the industrial age; they are not in the 21st century yet. We are still thinking about imparting a body of knowledge, telling our kids to memorize this and that, and they will be OK. Teachers are not dictators who say you *must* know this. If a child is ready, it’s fine. If a child is not ready, we try to force it. I think that’s wrong. We need to use the curriculum as a guide, as a reference for what is important to cover.

***ATA News:*** **So let’s say a child is not ready and he is in Grade 3. Would you move him on to Grade 4 the next year anyway, or would you keep him in Grade 3?**

**Zhao:** The concept of grades, in my opinion, should be abolished [*chuckles*]. Grades are defined by age. It’s a social institution, with most everybody following along, but kids have growth spurts, physically and mentally, and what we need are fluid and dynamic learning communities. So if a child has Grade 3 knowledge but they are already aged 10, they can work on projects to gain that knowledge. We know that some kids are at a Grade 3 level in math and a Grade 8 level in reading. I think the concept of grades should be changed to teams of learners, and children can flexibly join different teams that suit their level and interest.

***ATA News:*** **Do you know of a country that is using this team concept right now?**

**Zhao:** I think there are some innovative schools in many countries. Many countries are doing something like this but not on a large scale. In Victoria, Australia, they are trying this, but I’m not sure where they are at with it right now.

***ATA News:*** **Right now our teachers are tied to the system and they can fluctuate a bit, but they still have to get students ready for achievement tests in Grades 3, 6, 9 and 12.**

**Zhao:** If you take the view that all children are different, with different strengths and weaknesses, and that they learn in different ways and progress at different speeds to different levels, then you can see that the concept is completely outdated. Of course, teachers will have to be re-educated to handle this. Do they really believe children can do this? Right now teachers have unlimited control. Do they really want to provide the liberty and freedom necessary? Are we secure enough in ourselves to do this?

***ATA News:*** **And will parents be ready to accept this?**

**Zhao:** Educational change is a longer-term and much broader process than what we call instruction in the classroom. Instruction is only a small part of a person’s education. With my own kids, I say, “I support you, I support your choices. I want to talk with you about your choices. You decide, and then it’s your responsibility. You can pursue a writing career, economics—whatever makes you happy, whatever your heart desires. And then you can change that. If you give me an earnest effort, with discipline, after a while, you can give it up. Try something different if you want to, but only after you have given it an honest try. Don’t give up because the first time you try is hard.”

***ATA News:*** What do you think about the U.S. movement that encourages teachers to work longer hours and parents to ensure that their children are working harder at schoolwork? Is this going to help?

**Zhao:** It’s just more of the same. It’s what you do with the longer hours, what actually happens. Albert Einstein said that the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results. We don’t really know enough yet about the growth of human beings. We may know how knowledge gets transmitted, what’s more effective, what’s less effective, but for a personal educational experience, we have to go back to our traditional wisdom of a warm, supportive, encouraging environment for kids. Also, exposing kids to broader experiences in the outside world can be very helpful, rather than forcing them into a boring, barren classroom to be instructed for additional hours.

***ATA News:*** How important is it for governments to support teachers’ professional development and teachers’ preparation time? Do you have any examples of what is going on in these areas in other countries?

**Zhao:** It’s crucial. A lot of our teachers work in information-driven, test-driven education systems, and they’re not up to date on the big changes going on outside of the system. They are not familiar with the exciting things happening in technology, science, even mathematics. So for them to change their perspectives, to get a glimpse into the children’s future and the world they will live in, it’s essential that teachers understand and keep up with what is going on. We all need to grow. We need time to grow. If we want globally oriented students, we have to have globally oriented teachers. In China, they are sponsoring principals, teachers and students to study abroad, in England, Australia, the U.S., Canada and many more countries. China’s vice-minister of education recently announced a plan to send over 10,000 principals to study abroad over the next three years. Most are coming to North America. They already know how to help kids do well on tests; they are coming here to understand how to develop creative and innovative thinkers and how to reduce their students’ excessive academic burdens. They have been working on cutting instructional hours for subjects like math, and increasing physical education and art.

China, Korea and other Asian countries have much more teacher preparation time. In a typical five-day, 40-hour week, a teacher in China will teach 11–13 hours in front of students—what we call contact hours. The rest of the time they are preparing, working in teams, learning the best ways to teach. This, of course, means larger class sizes. For elementary students, typically classes have 30 or 40 students, but some can have 50 or 60 students, and for high school classes it’s higher—up to 100.

***ATA News:*** What do you think the future will look like?

**Zhao:** Definitely the future will be global. Whether they stay in Alberta or wherever, a lot of our children will be somehow involved in global transactions. A lot of our activities will be virtual, so our consumption, our technology and our lives will be mediated by computers, networks, phones—all those kinds of things. Future jobs in the developed countries will be about creating new things and finding innovative ways to solve the problems brought about by globalization and technology, such as environmental degradation and international terrorism. I don’t think you will see huge manufacturing companies in North America—a lot will be automated or outsourced to developing countries.

***ATA News:*** Do you have any suggestions that would help Alberta teachers prepare our students for the future?

**Zhao:** I encourage teachers to learn more about what is going on in the world and to try to figure out what will happen in the future. We need to understand children’s lives today and participate in their lifestyle. Otherwise, we will be irrelevant. We need to think like a child—which is healthy anyway.