

Fundamental Distinctions of Value: How multiculturalism and divergent epistemologies trigger a growing misfit in academic practices and expectations in higher education in Dubai

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Abstract: Emirati students studying at the University of the Emirates, one of three major public institutions of higher learning in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), have a wide demographic of faculty members teaching them an equally wide variety of courses. These faculty members bring with them their cultural assumptions, methods, expectations, educational practices and use of language. While previous studies in multiculturalism explore how faculty members engage, know and understand a multicultural student population, the focus of this study is to explore the differing academic practices, expectations and outcomes in regards to the diversity of cultures from each side of the classroom.

Through this research, I sought to better understand the how the dynamic of having a multicultural teaching faculty differs from what one might call a more traditional cultural education setting in which both the faculty members and students were of the same national culture. All parties involved, being multicultural teaching faculty, any student who encounters multiculturalism in education and any administration that employs such multiculturalism in education are stakeholders for whom such findings are relevant.

Keywords: Intercultural Education, The United Arab Emirates, Academic Accountability; Dubai, Intercultural Competence

Introduction

Generally speaking, it can be said that most faculty members teaching at the University of the Emirates have been educated in their country and therefore bring certain styles of learning, a certain style of instruction and a methodology of teaching with them to the United Arab Emirates. Glowacki-Dudka & Treff (2011) note in a study of a Saudi Arabian college that a multicultural faculty ‘need to be conscious of the cultural assumptions faculty and administrators bring with them’ (217). Although many faculty members have taught elsewhere in the world as well, it is our native mode of education that tends to stand out when we, as educators, approach teaching a course in a second culture. Diallo (2014) echoes the sentiments of Glowacki-Dudka & Treff and speaks more specifically and recently about the states of educational dynamics in the UAE. She writes,

Large scale importation of Western-trained language teachers to teach in a non-Western educational context poses challenges because teachers and students tend to operate from within their own distinct, social, cultural and educational paradigm. Teachers draw on Western educational models and pedagogies to teach students who have different, if not opposing, educational values and epistemologies (1).

The current study sought to collect qualitative data regarding such issues and their effects on the fabric of higher education in Dubai.

Context

This study focuses on students and faculty of Dubai Women's Campus and Dubai Men's Campus of the University of the Emirates, hereafter referred to as the U of E. The U of E was founded in 1989 with respective Men's and Women's campuses.

The U of E offers a wide range of academic disciplines and majors which also differ from campus to campus. Overall and across all campuses, however, the largest singular department is what is known as the Foundations Department. The student population, though 100% Emirati, come from a variety of secondary education programs. Those coming from public schools almost always are required to spend one semester to two years in the Foundations Department before beginning the Bachelor's Program. Those who attended private secondary schools may or may not have achieved the required IELTS Band 5.0 to be what are known as 'direct entries' in the Bachelor's Program. If they do not meet the requirements, the students are enrolled in the Foundations Program.

Faculty members come to the U of E from all corners of the globe. Some nationalities are represented more than others due to a number of factors, most prominent being general proximity to the UAE. Those represented as faculty include but are not limited to British, Irish, American, Canadian, Jordanian, Egyptian, Indian, Filipino, Sudanese, Pakistani, Tunisian, Iraqi, Chinese, Brazilian, Dutch and several others.

The students, therefore, exit the secondary education system in which they were taught primarily in Arabic by Arab teachers of their own gender and enter a tertiary education system in which they are educated by both men and women, primarily expatriate and often non-Arabs completely in English. This offers an interesting challenge to the students understandably and one which deserves research and study.

Methodology

A qualitative approach is employed with the collection of data of a single yet extensive line of inquiry. The data collected for this study are qualitative, conducted through structured interviews and focus groups from an interpretivist approach. These interviews and the qualitative data were expected to produce in-depth responses such as anecdotes, examples,

exceptions and a depiction of the academic and social reality of the experiences of the participants.

The qualitative design of this research is divided into two parts, the interviews which were conducted with the faculty members and the focus groups conducted with the students. The teaching faculty members were interviewed in a structured format for a variety of reasons. First, the interview format was chosen in an effort for the participants to discuss interpretations of their teaching experiences and express how they regard situations from their own perspective. The participants come from culturally diverse backgrounds. An example of this would be that some of the participants are from cultures which Hofstede (1980) characterizes as more Individualist while others come cultures which are characterized as Collectivist. Due to the variety of length of experience, culture of origin, age and previous locations of teaching experience of the faculty participants, the decision was made to collect this qualitative data individually in one-on-one interviews.

Students were interviewed in focus groups in attempt to allow group discussions and interaction to develop as well as a range of responses (Watts & Ebbut, 1987). The student participants in each focus group had been together for over two years, have had the same teachers and courses. As institutional practice dictates, they have been on the same academic journey together. The focus group format also allowed for a comfortable and relaxed atmosphere among the student participants which lessened the feeling of interrogation among them. I encouraged the student participants to speak freely, build upon or counterpoint the responses of their classmates. Participants are identified with a pseudonym and their true country of origin while students are identified with the marker of "UAE".

Data

Difference of Academic Accountability & Practice

At the heart of the discrepancies between a multicultural teaching faculty and the monocultural student population are ideas and practices about education as a whole. Teachers come into the work and education environment with cultural assumptions mainly tied to the ethics and practices of that which they were educated through in their home countries. These assumptions may be at odds with not only the students' previous experience but also with fellow colleagues with whom they work and also share students with. As participant Abdulrazak states,

***Abdulrazak, Algeria:** I think we all try to use our educational experience as a standard to what is the right way to teach and learn. You know, copy that model and use as our teaching model. But we need to adapt ourselves as well. But we use our background, I mean, none of us can run away from our background, the thing is how to adapt that background to the realities of the place where you work and today's education.*

Another example of this would be statements made by teaching faculty participants Hanna and Murphy, both from England. Here we see that certain teaching and social devices

used, at times caused undesirable effects with their Emirati students. These are devices that are accepted and commonplace in their home England, even in an educational setting but as a result of their experience, they have found that these practices are best avoided to create an agreeable, learning environment for all.

Hanna, England: *[Conflicts exists] because I'm a female and I'm coming from a Western country and also around the whole idea of critical thinking. Like, I know now not to embarrass anybody in class and you know, how far to take a joke. There are issues all the time dealing with that because you know, I'm dealing with Emirati males and I'm a Western female.*

R: *So, these issues would not be problems in the UK, the way you've been doing them?*

Oh, I think they'd be better understood. For example, I might use sarcasm which totally is lost here.

Murphy, England:*Yeah, the issues happen daily. Yes, of course. We rub up on each other the wrong way very easily. I can give you a good example, I was teaching a class last week and I'm having a good relationship with the class. We're trying to break each other in, if you like, trying to feel comfortable with each other and a student is talking, is turning around and talking and I asked him to be quiet on 2 or 3 occasions and I actually have to go and stand in his eye line to make him turn around. And I made this slapping gesture in front of his face as a joke. I thought in the context of the class it was perfectly OK. And then he wants to come at my and kill me, at least with his eyes and his body language. And we have a standoff and I realise it's my mistake to have done this. He has personally taken this as an insult. And so I have to put myself on his plane and it takes another half an hour to establish a working relationship which has been very positive in the time since.*

I employ a working definition of academic accountability from Huutoniemi (2016) who explored how this concept affected institutions in terms of quality control of education. She defines this as 'a moral stance towards the wider world and a set of procedures for verification. In this more general sense of the concept, [academic] accountability can bring new light to the value of interdisciplinary, and point to more direct implications for academic quality control' (p. 169). Viewing this academic accountability in a 'moral stance' speaks to the value certain academic procedures carry with them, for example the necessity or lack thereof of strict invigilation which participants mention repeatedly.

Specific questions were asked of the teaching faculty regarding a variety of academic issues such as views and teaching practices on the institution's attendance policy, submission policy and negotiation of marks with students. What was given in most cases, were responses

regarding differences of views on academic accountability, epistemology and general academic practices between themselves, the students and the institutional policy.

Tony, USA: *I was surprised at what the institution claimed we, as teachers, should be accountable for and what our students should be accountable for. Exam invigilation is a big thing here. There's the assumption that if they can, the student will cheat however they can. So, because of that we need an invigilator for every ten students in the room. We watch them like hawks so they can't cheat. That's unbelievable for alleged higher education!*

Exam invigilation was a topic that arose on multiple occasions during these interviews. The general perception by the institution as reflected in its exam invigilation policies is that students will try to cheat due to the idea that if they are not caught, it is not shameful. Therefore, it is mandated by U of E policy that during exam invigilation, as Tony notes, there must be one faculty member present for each ten students in the room to catch potential instances of cheating.

After this, I posed another general question regarding perceived differences in academic accountability expectations of the teachers and the practice of the students in faculty question. This was followed by more exact questions regarding precise practices on both the teachers' and the students' parts.

Participants Andrew and Sarah comment on their experience with students 'bending the rules' and how that affects their workload. They also seem to have differing ideas of what responsibilities the students should be accountable for, what they as teaching faculty end up having to do when these differences occur and how institutional policy regarding these responsibilities fails to support neither the teachers' expectations nor the students' lived cultural reality.

Andrew, Canada: *[The students] are always pressuring you to accept late work. They always try to haggle with their grades you give them. They try to bend the rules basically. They might be "sick" when there's an exam or assignment due which forces us to create a second exam because we can't trust them not to seek out any information about the one they missed. I mean, what are you going to do? Are you going to let them fail the course if you don't let them do it? The students know this, they know we'll bend and they'll get what they want. I mean, there are policies about these things but no one really seems to know exactly what they are because there's so much gray area and teachers pretty much do what they want anyway. Otherwise, this place will stress you out. Teaching is hard enough as it is.*

Sarah, Wales: *Certainly the idea of responsibility. Certainly coming from a Western education background, we bang on about encouraging students to take*

responsibility for their own learning. Whereas, teaching Emirati students and again, this is coming from my Western background, it seems to me the students have the ability to exercise very little responsibility in many if not most areas of their lives. You know, with the ladies, their little brother has to come and sign them out to go to the dentist. Yet, we expect them to take responsibility for their learning and make choices about how they learn and when they learn and what they learn or whatever they're working on, which I think is too great a jump to assume that they can and should be doing this.

Andrew and Sarah, as with most participants, make reference to their home countries and tend to see the mismatch of academic values and practices due to the fact that they are applying the values and practices they have grown to embrace in their home country to the U of E. An observation in conducting these interviews was that when asked directly about these specific issues which addressed 'difference', participants often took the opportunity to vent frustrations yet when asked about their general rapport with students, participants were often able to speak of a congruent relationship.

From this, it seems the humanistic element that exists in the classroom is one which transcends the institutional policies and academic mismatches that exist as frustrations among the teaching faculty members. As my participants mentioned and to which I agree, the human relationships that develop between the students and the teachers make this phenomenon a fruitful one and one which both sides can benefit from on a personal level. However, the more operational elements of the classroom experience cause some difficulty mainly due to the difference of priority regarding institutional policy and academic accountability of the students.

Institutional policy is seen as strict by all parties involved. Practices at the U of E regarding taking attendance differ from what many faculty members are used to. Faculty participants were asked to comment on this difference of institutional culture.

A recurring notion from the participants is the difference in priority of time, particularly in attendance and punctuality of classes. As mentioned by Kemp (2015), this idea is subjective and can vary from culture to culture and thus should be expected to be a point of intercultural conflict. She writes,

Time is a social construct, and the meaning attached to the construct cannot be overlooked as values ascribed to time do, and will have effects interculturally (175)

Andrew, Canada: *I mean, the fact that I am responsible for [taking] attendance is an indicator of the difference between this place and how I was educated back in Canada. Here we take much more of a parental role almost. I mean, we are responsible for things I think the students should be responsible for and we sort of*

cater to them in a way. We have to be responsible for their success or failure to a greater degree than would exist where I'm from, in a Western context.

Carry, Canada: *Let me say it to you a different way, they have a different set of priorities than we do. Family obligation is far and away number one so if a student is late because he had to pray or had to drive his mother or sister somewhere, in his mind, he's not being disingenuous when he says "Oh well, I'm not really late". He's saying it as a statement of fact, he's saying it like I'm here now because I had something that's far more important than my education to attend to. And that's alien to me. To me as a North American, you're supposed to be here at 8 o'clock and anything else is irrelevant. That is not, absolutely not as they see things.*

This example is also noted in the literature by Simidi & Kamali (2004) who state that education is less of a priority in the lives of their Emirati participants offering, 'religion, followed by family obligations and expectations are the most important factors influencing behavior of Emiratis' (20). Where Carry believes that time and rules are of the utmost importance and 'anything else is irrelevant', Abdulrazak sees this from a different point of view. To him, reasons for late submissions or absences are relevant and deserve to be heard. Perhaps this cultural dimension is better understood by Abdulrazak as he has a more acute knowledge of the responsibilities of especially the male students in regards to their families. Carry and many other faculty members would disagree with such consideration of excuses.

Abdulrazak, Algeria: *Again, I need to talk to the students to know why [they are late], you know what was the reason. I'm fair, you know I'll deduct some marks but I will also accept [late submissions].*

Here an example can be taken from the variety of faculty members' adherence to institutional policies which the students have to contend with. Faculty members with differing worldviews place differing considerations and value on certain practices, in this case, punctuality. This is another instance in which we can see the institution's desire for a multicultural teaching faculty has created rifts and obstacles for students which require them to constantly pivot interculturally. Considering this, Huutoniemi (2016)'s idea of accountability as a moral stance becomes a more unstable standard at the U of E where differing morals reflected in terms of differing academic practice present themselves.

Bold measures are taken by the institution to prevent plagiarism and cheating. Plagiarism and "copy/pasting" is often rife when students do projects which involve any semblance of research. Institutional measures translate into enforcement placed on the teaching faculty to ensure academic integrity and originality of student submissions. Cheating is not so due to the institutional policies of invigilation mentioned earlier. What are seen as major mismatches in academic practice are the steps of citation, quotation and reference which is necessary for academic work.

Central to this issue between the faculty expectations of true and original academic work and perceived tendency of some Emirati students to plagiarize is a mismatch of semantics. These university students are just at the beginning of their academic journey and often do not have a clear definition of what plagiarism is. An example of this would be the necessity to paraphrase and quote with proper APA referencing and bibliographies.

These practices are clear to the teaching faculty and with that, the assumption that they are clear to the students as well is present. Participants were asked to comment on these policies and their role in their enforcement.

Tony, USA: Although [the students] display characteristics of being naïve, and thinking “How could you dock me points or get me in trouble for plagiarizing because I’ve tried and I’ve taken so much time to do what you asked of me”. The other half says, “I’m aware that I’ve tried to pull the wool over your eyes but in my culture, it’s not necessarily bad if you can get away with something”, whereas for me, it’s bad a priori.

Tariq, Egypt: Our students think if they got it from the Internet, it’s theirs. They need to understand that somebody else made that, wrote that, thought that so it’s theirs, you have to give them credit. This is a concept that’s totally foreign to them.

Teachers from outside cultures see this differently and perhaps with differing terminology as you are guilty of doing something ‘wrong’, and as Tony states ‘bad a priori’. Here are fundamental distinctions of value which are products of having differing worldviews and levels of intercultural competence between and among the student population and the teaching faculty.

A further issue addressed by faculty participants the practice of student negotiation of marks given by the faculty members. Once again, this is a practice most faculty members state does not exist in their home culture and were not prepared for when coming to the U of E.

Carry, Canada: They try to negotiate all the time. I don’t see it as shameful but at the same time, it wouldn’t happen in Canada. These people come from a souk-culture, they spend their time negotiating and bartering. I say to students “Don’t negotiate with me. I didn’t give you this mark, you gave yourself this mark” But being genuinely indignant about the marks they receive, it happens all of time.

Hanna, England: This is linked with the concept of assessment. What would be good, to be getting an A? And that might be different from teacher to teacher depending on what they’ve been taught, depending on what they’ve been through as students in their country. Some countries are not as test-driven; there may not

be Formative assignments, only Summative, different rubrics. It's totally subjective. Here it's a completely under-developed concept. So the worrying thing is my concept of assessment is different from other teacher's ideas, let alone to the students' idea of assessment. So how we end up with a unified plan or policy of assessment here, I don't know.

Noted here by Hanna is the top-down model of assessment which other participants have stated to be a frustration. These responses are consistent with what Chapman et al. (2014) note in that their participants felt the lack of influence or input by the faculty regarding assessments and curriculum was not only different from the administration practices of their home country but an ever-present frustration in their academic work.

Samira, Lebanon: *I can proudly say that I have gained the reputation in this university of being someone who never listens to excuses or negotiates. I believe the students know this so they don't even try.*

Samira, from a Middle Eastern culture, takes an approach to excuses divergent from that which Abdulrazak, also from an Arab country, takes. The fact that she does not listen to excuses or negotiates marks, speaks to her decision to approach the 3rd cultural space in a manner which is not lenient and does not, in this context, even attempt to 'understand' her students' reasons (Kramsch, 1993). This response evidences a difference of approach between Samira, a veteran faculty member of 12 years and Abdulrazak, of only two years. We can see that time served and experience are definitive factors in these data.

Another theme emerged when participants were asked to generalize about the mismatches that occur in their lived experience teaching Emirati students as a whole, the direction or lack thereof in institutional policy and working in a multicultural environment.

Andrew, Canada: *Yeah I think the longer I stay in education and certainly after doing a lot of graduate studies, I see education as something that can really develop you as a person, develop your intellect and broaden your horizons and awareness of things, whereas I see my students thinking it is just something to tolerate. So I think they have a very extrinsic motivation to do well and learn in our university. They see it as a means to an end, not necessarily something to enjoy the process of. And I think this idea makes it harder for them to put much of themselves into it. They also try to cheat all the time.*

This section can best be summarized by the response given by Samira. What she sees as a disconnect between 3 positions, that of the teacher, the student and the administration who legislates policies which she, and others, see as unrealistic. This could be described as uninformed policy due to cultural difference between the students and faculty and lack of awareness of this on the part of the administration.

Samira, Lebanon: *The administration here has very unrealistic goals and protocols for us to follow. I know what they are trying to do, make these students what they are not. They expect us to take attendance to the minute, follow strict policies about marking and do a whole slew of things that would result in having no students left. I understand they are trying to do the right thing and promote an environment of learning which makes these guys more professional but the fact is you put a 19-year-old Emirati male in a situation; you're going to be disappointed if you demand that they bow to your will. It's just not in their nature and will drive you nuts if you bang their heads against the wall in trying get them to conform.*

The following are the students' responses to the difference of academic practice they have experienced throughout their academic careers at U of E and with the various multicultural teachers they have encountered. As seen in the data, there are a variety of practices the students are required to negotiate in their studies and they are well aware of this. What struck me while collecting this data was the ease with which the students would name regions and nationalities in regarding who does what. Responses are taken from multiple student question items in Appendix A.

Rashed, UAE: *Some of European teachers always take attendance and even mark if we are late but the Arab teachers will not. Even if I'm just late because I had to pray. Some teachers say that I should rush but you can't rush a prayer. It's about their culture, you know, if it's strict or not.*

Mohammed, UAE: *Yes, in some cases. Some teachers don't accept your excuses. For example, I might miss class because I had to drive my sister to school but the teachers don't understand that we have to do this. Sometimes, we are the one who is responsible for our family so it's hard for [the teachers] to understand.*

About attendance, it all depends on the teacher, some are more understanding and some are more with the rules. It depends on where they are from and also how long they've been teaching Emiratis, that's a big thing. I respect both ways but it means we have to change the way we study in all the classes.

What students might perceive as teachers ‘understanding’ them and their responsibilities and excuses would be another teacher’s definition of not following the university’s policy. In the U.S., it would be the responsibility of the student to gather such important information. However here, as stated by the participant Andrew earlier, it is often the teacher who is tasked with finding the absent students and informing them of the material they missed in class. Considering the necessity mentioned in the literature and the data here of intercultural competence, I question if the 3rd cultural space that we as teaching faculty and they as Emiratis students have created is always altruistic and effective for both learning and the professional development the institution expects faculty members to instill in the students.

Huda states yet another inconsistency of her teachers’ practice.

***Huda, UAE:** Every teacher has a different way to see attendance. My American teachers don’t take attendance; I know that in the States, from what they told me is it not done. Maybe they’re just doing in their way here.*

Why then, do some teachers such as myself disregard these? Is this an effective 3rd cultural space we have negotiated? Cultural norms both nationally and organizationally have, at times, been abandoned which has led to lowering of standards and even blatant disregard for institutional policies. Perhaps this is what Geertz (1973) meant by saying that the disorganization of cultural norms exist “with the only result being chaos” (44).

Conclusion

The data show there are sizable disparities of worldview regarding academic accountability and practices amongst both the faculty members and the students. Participants note that their own ontologies and worldviews seem to also be divergent from those of the institution. Additionally, we can see a variety of academic practices and adherence to institutional policies, positions toward those policies and difference between those at the U of E and those of the faculty members’ culture of origin. Evidenced in the data is clear acknowledgement from several participants that not only are there differences in academic practices but comparing those practices with that of their country is a common first step. This has led to changing and at times, completely disregarding institutional policy. Moreover, student academic expectations, practices and perceptions of academic accountability regarding their classes seem, at times, to be in stark contrast to the faculty members’ academic expectations, practices and what they believe students should be accountable for.

Stated by both participants Tony and Carry is the idea that these differences in academic practices and expectations, though learned through experience, could well have been communicated in a Cultural Orientation. Further to this, an exploration of Emiratis’ worldview and how this affects their academic practice would also have been helpful to newly-arrived faculty who might be considered lesser-equipped regarding intercultural competence or even basic knowledge of Emiratis’ ways of life.

Discussion & Implications

In this final section, I would like to restate the rationale for the study being that there may not be any other field in which the globalization of the world and people’s interaction with differing worldviews is more evident and crucial to future success than in modern higher education systems. The phenomena of intercultural education and thus the need for levels of intercultural competence in education will remain at the forefront in the skills expected to be

developed in higher education. The ever-increasing international flow of human capital makes this an area of study that will only grow in multicultural campuses of tomorrow.

The culture these new faculty members are now enmeshed in is most likely the most difficult challenge they will face in moving to Dubai. The 'cultural' information provided should be at the forefront of any training, professional development or orientation these faculty members receive and should be entwined in every session as the cultural dynamics and notably the different practices in cultural dynamics will surely permeate every aspect of their teaching practice. Arab colleagues must be instrumental in mentoring these new faculty members from Western or non-Muslim cultures to better understandings of the cultural differences that exist and how those translate into academic practice and expectation.

Teaching faculty may be in a multicultural working environment for the first time in their lives. If we consider how D'Andrea & Daniels (1995) define multiculturalism as "the process of increasing awareness of, and knowledge about, human diversity in ways that are translated into respectful human interactions and effective interconnectedness", then the U of E begins the process by leaving the participants of this multiculturalism to their own devices and offering little to no support (25). The U of E would do well in providing more acute and directed Cultural Orientation which informs newly-arrived teaching faculty about certain cultural theories and academic practices of Emirati secondary education systems.

Also, students themselves would do well in having some or any direction as to what to expect from the multicultural teaching faculty they are soon to encounter in their orientation. The university must present this information with the assumption that incoming students know little to nothing about what it is like to learn from someone from a different national and educational culture and how that might differ from their previous educational experiences.

Having a Student Orientation with interactive discussion forums with senior students, bringing in faculty members to speak and discuss issues, having administrators address rationales for such diversity and policies; these are avenues which would better prepare the student population for studying at the U of E.

Failing to understand the cultural environment of the students triggers a growing misfit between the faculty members tasked with enforcing policy and the administrators who design it. Embracing such diversity in higher education requires all parties involved to develop a level of intercultural competence and understanding in multiple aspect of education but especially academic practice.

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