

Western-Educated Faculty Challenges in a Gulf Classroom

Nancy Sonleitner

University of Oklahoma, USA

Maher Khelifa

Zayed University, Dubai

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate challenges for new Western/Western-educated faculty and their responses to those challenges as they began teaching at a national women's University located in the Arabian Gulf. Twenty-four new faculty were recruited for the study. Faculty were hired from America, the UK, Canada, and Australia to provide an American-like education to students. 75% percent of participants were native English speakers, and 54% had not taught in a foreign university before. Before arriving in the country to begin teaching, the participants were asked to complete a questionnaire measuring their attitudes towards student learning and performance, and their teaching methods. Six to ten weeks after the beginning of their first semester they were asked to participate in focus groups. The focus group questions asked faculty to discuss issues and challenges they were facing and how they were coping. Results of the quantitative data and the focus groups show faculty were facing classroom challenges but were committed and creative in finding teaching/learning strategies. Focus group data further showed faculty were experiencing cultural differences that were challenging and frustrating. They were finding their teaching rewarding and were enjoying the experience of interacting with the students who were the first generation of women in the nation to be educated in a Western-style pedagogy.

Introduction

Teachers, in general, are committed to enriching the lives of their students (Chase et al., 2001) by sharing information about the world around them, and specifically in their area of expertise. When this sharing is done in their native country they are usually familiar with student classroom behaviors, the general educational background of students, the

expectations of faculty/student interaction in the classroom, what students are responsible for in their education, and what teachers are responsible for.

However, when faculty emigrate and teach in foreign educational settings they struggle with a host of classroom difficulties (Sommer & Sommer, 1991; Dyer, 1998; Long, 1999; Minnis, 1999; Shatz, 2000; Khelifa, Sonleitner, & Barise, 2004). Writings on teaching in foreign countries suggest that teachers face challenges that are frustrating, but are also highly rewarding (Sommer & Sommer, 1991; Fitch & Kirby, 2000; Shatz, 2000). In general, faculty challenges seem to be due to their built-in expectations about teaching and learning (Sommer & Sommer, 1991; Dyer, 1998), to different classroom interactions and behaviors, to differences in classroom culture (Sommer & Sommer, 1991; Shatz, 2000), and to communication difficulties (Long, 1999; Minnis, 1999; Khelifa, Sonleitner, & Barise, 2004).

The literature on teaching in foreign countries (Sommer & Sommer, 1991; Caiger, 1994; Thomas, 1997; Dyer, 1998; Long, 1999; Minnis, 1999; Fitch & Kirby, 2000; Shatz, 2000) also offers descriptions of student classroom behaviors, student attitudes towards education, teacher-student communication in educational settings, and faculty encounters with the local classroom culture. Faculty cultural expectations for student classroom behavior are depicted in the literature as deeply embedded in faculty perceptions. These expectations have been found to lead faculty to wrongly interpret, at times, certain classroom behaviors of foreign students (Dyer, 1998), and to prevent faculty from recognizing the cultural and linguistic factors that determine, shape, and disguise student involvement and active learning (Caiger, 1994). Drawing wrong conclusions about students based on misunderstood cultural assumptions was found to cause frustration and disappointment in both faculty and students (Dyer, 1998; Long, 1999).

Minnis (1999) points to the need of teachers to be cognizant of relevant cultural factors when importing educational ideas and concepts to their new teaching environment. Researchers (Leach, 1994; O'Donoghue, 1994; Crossley & Vulliamy, 1997; Thomas, 1997; Dyer, 1998) also caution about the pitfalls of uncritically transferring educational ideas and innovative concepts to foreign classrooms. They stress the need for a cross-cultural reflective practice where teaching methodologies and assumptions about teaching and learning are filtered through the local cultural context.

In this context, Long (1999) notes that faculty's knowledge about the culture of the students they teach helps them face classroom challenges when they arise. However, the intricacies of culture are not always transmitted accurately through books, discussions, orientations, or web sites. Living in and confronting the culture is a sure way to really understand the extent of cultural differences (Long, 1999). This study therefore explores the experiences of

Western/Western-educated first year faculty as they encountered the teaching and learning environment in a new national women's university providing American-type education in a Muslim Arabian Gulf nation.

The Cultural Environment and the University

The cultural and environmental setting of the University in which the faculty began teaching is an Arab Muslim one, with social restrictions placed on male and female interactions. In general, unrelated males and females are separated at about the age of six, when they begin elementary school. Females are generally not permitted to leave the house unless with the escort of a family member and they generally abide by the social and cultural rules and do not interact freely with unrelated males.

The country has experienced rapid economic and infrastructure growth and development. Global corporations like McDonalds and Citibank have located in the larger cities, and satellite television provides exposure to Western media images. The large expatriate workforce creates demands for activities relevant to their culture, so there are a large number of movie houses for the different immigrant nationalities, and an equally large number of ethnic restaurants, and gathering places. The local population is exposed to, and in most cases enjoys, the ethnic diversity in their country.

The university is a young one, seeing its first cohort of graduates in the 2001-2 academic year. The institution is distinctive because of its student-centered mission, and its intent to provide an American-like education to its students. Other distinctive features include an all national female student population, English language instruction within the context of Arabic culture and society, emphasis on technology in teaching and learning, and drawing of most faculty from institutions in the United States, Australia, the UK, and Canada. This creates a mix between Arab Muslim students in their own social/cultural environment, and Western/Western-educated faculty with teaching experience in Western colleges and universities.

The Students

At the time of this study there were approximately 1200 national female students at this Western modeled university. Almost all of them had received their pre-college education in their country. Student pre-college background included a predominately state school education in which the English language is taught only as a subject. A very small number of students attended private schools where English is usually the main language of instruction. The pre-college educational experiences of students attending private schools were in general positive. However, the educational experiences of most students attending state

schools were not as positive. For example, they have experienced verbal abuse and physical punishment for minor offences such as answering questions incorrectly or forgetting to bring homework or books to class (Sultan, 2003).

State school students were in general expected to regard the teacher as an absolute authority, not to ask questions, and to memorize facts. This kind of pre-college teaching/learning environment inhibits freedom to explore and discover. It also instills a concern and fear in students about making mistakes and places a strong emphasis on performing to the teachers' standards. Students are not encouraged to learn about social issues and how to develop plans to address them. Further, it is not the practice for teachers to engage students in group or team activities for learning.

This educational background, combined with gender segregation, translates into students, in general, being shy, lacking information on global issues and events, not having opinions about issues that do not directly affect them, and not having experience of expressing what is on their mind and acting on their curiosity.

On the other hand, students are, in general, polite and very kind, and they wish to be helpful and to do well in their classes. Their culture fosters cordial interpersonal relationships, and they develop these types of relationships with their teachers at university. Culturally, students are rarely alone at any time when on campus, and close social relationships are central to them. They expect their teachers to care for them, and are disappointed if they are spoken to brusquely.

New Faculty Orientation

New faculty are given an orientation from the University Human Resources and teachers who joined the University at least one year previously. The new faculty are informed of differences in student behavior and achievement compared to what they were used to finding in Western universities. In general, new faculty could expect students to have difficulty with printed and spoken English, which is the language of instruction at the University. They could also expect that students are concerned about achieving high grades and that students may try to negotiate to get a higher grade.

The orientation includes cultural considerations as well. Male faculty are informed that female students are not allowed to have physical contact with male faculty even in the case of illness or accident. Further, male teachers are required to knock and wait briefly before entering the classroom. Knocking before entering a classroom gives students a warning that a male is about to enter the room. Nearly all students wear the *shayla*, or headscarf, to cover their hair at all times, even in the presence of other females. However, those who

wear the *niqab*, or the face veil, in the presence of males may remove it when in the company of other females. New faculty are also told about the five times of Islamic prayer per day, and that two of those times happen during the school day.

Method

Participants were new faculty recruited for the study by email early in the summer before they arrived in the University near the end of that summer. Of the 35 new faculty hired to teach during the academic year 2002-2003, 24 (65%) completed a mail-out questionnaire. The questionnaire faculty completed before arriving on campus contained Likert scale items that measured new faculty's perceptions of their abilities to motivate students, attitudes toward student success, opinions about teacher and student classroom conduct, and how much they agree with different ways of handling students' difficulty with course content and methods of teaching. Descriptive data were generated as a way of understanding faculty expectations for success in providing substantive knowledge to students.

During the 6th through 10th weeks after classes began, focus groups were conducted with faculty to get their views on how they were experiencing class preparation, presenting information, and classroom behaviors and culture. The focus groups were recorded and transcriptions were made. Analysis of transcripts was done by identifying particular issues that arose most frequently about aspects of their teaching experiences.

Questions for discussion during the focus groups included three overarching categories: how they had experienced the previous few weeks of teaching; student learning; and experience in the classroom. In the first category faculty were allowed to speak freely about any aspect of their initial experiences, as well as respond to directed questions about preparation time, including what they were doing that was the same as before, and what was different. The second category included questions about how faculty perceived signals students used to send the message they were actively engaged, learning, and comprehending. The third category included questions about delivery of course content, difficulty students had with course content, and with teaching methods, and observations about classroom behaviors.

Results and Discussion

Pre-Arrival Survey Results

Of the 24 faculty who completed the survey, 15 (62.5%) were male, and 9 (37.5%) were female. The mean age of the respondents was 50, with the span of ages being from 32 to 71. Eighteen (75%) had a Ph.D., 1 (4.2%) had an Ed.D., 4 (16.7%) had attained an MA or

MS, and 1 (4.2%) had an MBA. The country of education included the USA (54.2%), Australia (20.8%), Canada (12.5%), and the UK, Syria and Egypt with 4.2% each. Faculty educated in Syria and Egypt were hired to join the Arabic and Islamic Studies program.

The native language of the participants was English (75%), Arabic (16.7%), plus two respondents with other native language backgrounds (Swahili). Asked if they had gotten their education as second language students, 79.2% responded *no*, and 20.8% responded *yes*. Asked if they had had previous experience teaching in a foreign university, 54.2% had not, and 45.8% had. The average number of years of teaching was 19.1 (Min = 4, Max = 45).

The questionnaire asked faculty, in general, about their experience in teaching in foreign colleges or universities, and their attitudes towards teaching and student learning. Ninety-two percent agreed with the statement "*I have been able to motivate students to learn, no matter what I teach.*" Faculty were then asked to describe in their own words the methods and techniques they used to motivate students. Responses included being enthusiastic and animated in lecturing; creating a positive and fun learning environment; using field trips and guest lectures to keep it interesting; meeting student needs and active learning; and relating course material to students' lives. New faculty also said they relate course work to future job responsibilities, and that they develop collegial relationships with students.

Faculty were asked their opinions about student classroom behavior. Sixty-seven percent responded that they disagreed with the statement, "In a class conducted as a lecture, students should sit quietly in the classroom and take notes." Seventy-seven percent disagreed with the statement, "In a classroom conducted as a laboratory or group task, students should work quietly and concentrate on the task at hand." Ninety-six percent agreed that "In a classroom conducted as a lecture, students should interject questions as they arise thus facilitating discussion about lecture content." Eighty-seven percent agreed that "In a classroom conducted as a laboratory or group task students should interact with other groups in the classroom, getting help and advice from one another." These results suggested in general that new faculty think that students should be a participant in learning, rather than a passive recipient of knowledge.

Regarding students' success, 87% disagreed that students do poorly in college because they are lazy, 73.9% disagreed that students do poorly because they do not study, 67.7% agreed that students do well in college because of good teachers, and 95.8% agreed that students do well in college because they studied hard. These responses may suggest students who studied and had good teachers do well, but the new faculty thought there may be other reasons for lack of success, other than not studying or having good teachers.

New faculty were asked their opinions about teaching in the context of students doing poorly. Ninety-six percent agreed that if students do poorly instructors should change teaching methods; 100% agreed that if students have problems with instructors' teaching styles that teachers should listen to the students; and 87.5% disagreed that students should ignore problems with teaching methods.

As a follow up to the items about students having difficulty with course content or teaching styles, faculty were asked to write in their own words how they handled the issue. Responses ranged from searching for ways to change instruction, to meeting with students, and class wide discussions to reach consensus about solving the problem. Faculty reported they also tried to address learning styles, and simplified content information to ensure students levels were matched, and using fellow students as course content mentors.

Focus Group Results

Between six and ten weeks into their first semester of teaching, new faculty were asked to participate in a focus group where they would have the opportunity to talk with the researchers and other new faculty about their teaching experiences up to that time. Five focus groups were held to accommodate the different schedules of participating faculty. The number of participants per focus group ranged from two to five faculty. Topics for discussion included how they experienced the first few weeks of classes, how their class preparation time was going, what differences they noticed from how they were preparing for class now compared to before coming to the University. They were also asked to talk about delivering course content and any trouble students may have had with course content or their method of teaching. New faculty were asked to talk about how they attempt to get student attention and get students engaged in learning and how students were responding to their efforts. The initials used to identify quotations of faculty are not in any way related to the new teachers' real names. This coding has been done to protect their anonymity.

First Few Weeks

When asked about how the first few weeks had been going, faculty expressed frustration, disappointment, and also pleasure from interacting with students. They felt frustration about their expected student norms and the actual level of students in the study university. They also expressed frustration at the amount of effort and creativity to motivate, and share knowledge, and see in students a commitment to learning. This is similar to Dyer (1998), Shatz's (2000), and Sommer and Sommer (1991) experiences with teaching in a foreign university context. Faculty further discussed the expectations they brought with them from their experiences teaching in a Western university, and how those expectations were

frustrating when encountering the range of students' abilities to communicate. As one new professor in the study university put it.

I think what makes them different is their language ability...I think that has been the biggest surprise for me is - is the student's language...I think where I see more difficulty is in the written form and not so much in oral discussions. (J.A.D).

Men and women in the study mentioned that during the first few weeks they felt nervous about potential unintentional violations of local cultural taboos when presenting class material. One male teacher had this to say.

I suppose the difference is something you normally would have done without thinking twice about it...you can't do that. You have to first of all check: Do everyone, is everyone allowed to listen to music? You cannot give an assignment [like] watch TV and find [the concept of the lesson] without first asking who can watch TV and who can't. (B.H).

A similar comment was made by a female.

...you need to be very careful about the material that you use and make sure that they are applicable to the setting. (L.F).

Some of the men were experiencing the cultural aspect of restricted male/female interaction and explained how it affected them.

It's a funny feeling to walk down the corridor and have people turn away... And, that's going to take some getting used to. It's like you've got the plague. You walk...and it's an interesting feeling, I've never experienced before. It's just an eerie feeling that happens every day I go walking down the corridors here. (J.M).

Similar to Shatz (2000), some faculty in the study observed that they had discovered students could focus better in small groups. Students may be more comfortable working in small groups rather than joining class wide discussions because of their educational history of being put on the spot with direct questions and being punished for not giving the correct answer. It may be also that culturally individuals are not to bring attention to themselves and stand out from others. Added to this, many students appear to be painfully shy.

The orientation new faculty received was as comprehensive as it could be, but there are nuances and subtleties that experienced faculty may have encountered so repeatedly that it passes from their conscious awareness and they may not have thought to include it as part of the orientation. One of these subtleties is students' non-verbal behavior. Some new faculty expressed the difficulty they were having because the non-verbal behavior they experience in Western students was lacking in the students they were teaching in the study institution.

I find a lot of their habits as students is a bit problematic. You're accustomed to Western students behaving in a certain way, like attending, giving eye contact, not getting up and walking out of class maybe two or three times during the class...they're delightful, they're polite, very responsive at the individual level. But, they just behave in ways Western students don't behave. (A.S).

Preparing for Class

New faculty who participated in the focus groups reported that when they prepared materials for class they simplified content and used resources from publishers more than they had before.

One difference in teaching here compared to teaching [before] is that I have to make things simpler. I need to look at the [text]book and pick the concepts that I want them to know about - and thankfully in that particular book the publisher comes up with all these wonderful slides that you can incorporate into a slide presentation and then give handouts to the students. So, I have a lot of help because we have these CD ROMS available. But, I need to do that. That's different. (J.L).

One faculty member mentioned that his preparation was much as he expected based on the orientation of new faculty.

Someone told us in our orientation that we might cover a third of what we would cover in [his previous university]. And, I found that to be accurate. So far, about a third. I'm simplifying [information in textbook chapters] for them and putting it on Power Point presentation...I'm boiling things down, down, down... (R.R).

One new professor who had been struggling with the clash between his expectations and the reality of his classes summed up what faculty should be doing.

Everyone should come with the idea of boiling their courses down to what do they [the students] really need to know...If we focus on that. (M.L).

Because the medium of instruction is English in an Arabic speaking culture, many faculty were frustrated by the differences in their expectation for language and communication, compared to the English language ability they were encountering. Educators in Western colleges and universities expect students will come to class prepared. One professor was frustrated that her students could not prepare for class by reading assigned chapters in English because of the comparatively high level of English in many of the Western college textbooks she planned to use in her courses. Below, she describes how she does not take for granted any longer that students come to class prepared and how her class preparation has changed accordingly.

I don't assume in either of my classes that students are...reading the material. Before, I used to assume that. It was expected...But, now, I structure classes based on that, that students have not...read the chapter or the material... (L.F).

Preparing for class for several new faculty involved spending lots more time including searching for images that would visually portray concepts. One professor was philosophical in her use of images.

When you're teaching, you really have to start at the level where they are [students]. You really can't start at a higher level and if you're bringing in textbooks and resources that are at a higher level you're going to be very frustrated. I tend to use a lot of photographs. And, so, I have a lot of material...they're either CDs with pictures on them or Power Point presentations with pictures and a lot of diagrams. (T.S).

Some faculty commented that having multiple sections of the same course allowed for something similar to piloting the prepared lesson, and having an opportunity to modify the lesson for subsequent sections. Other faculty were frustrated in planning class lessons not only because of students' difficulties in comprehension, but also because of logistical problems.

My desire would be to have them do more hands on things which they really love. But...I have no place to leave their work if they don't finish it. If we do something creative in class, I have to gather it all up ...other people have classes that are like laboratories, which would be terrific if I had a classroom where other people used it but where I could say 'leave this material. We'll pick it up the next time we meet.' So, planning for me has been a split between [heavy substantive work] or do I plan for something that is creative and that they will enjoy. (M.N).

Every one of the new faculty struggled with new preparations, or preparing for classes they had taught before but needed re-doing for the academic and cultural context. They struggled with gaining student interest and motivation. One teacher summed up the feelings of everyone.

I've tried a variety of things [videos, Power Point presentations] because I'm trying to figure out what the course is about [new preparation], what is best for them, what is going to be most useful for them and what is going to keep them interested and motivated while still feeding them something that has real academic purpose. (M.N).

Presenting Course Content

After preparing a lesson, the instructor will deliver it to students. New faculty were asked if they presented course content differently than they had expected they would. In general, most faculty concurred with the statement that course content had not changed

substantially, just the pace. A similar finding was reported by Khelifa, Sonleitner, and Barise (2004) who examined reflective practice and teaching change in pursuit of instructional effectiveness of new and continuing faculty from the same institution.

It obviously can't move as fast. Basically, I've just had to slow down the pace. I mean, I'm still delivering the same content in the same way that I would have expected. I don't think substantially it's changed. K.J.

Part of slowing down is because professors make a point of repeating material. However, that has to be balanced with keeping student interest:

I am spending most of my time doing a lot more of active learning and then going back and reviewing concepts...I found that I've had to repeat material more often. (L.F).

Several professors had discovered that having students work in small groups stimulated student interest. One professor decided to use group work routinely.

I had a little bit more success, well maybe a lot more success, when I've broken them up into groups and get them to do some work in smaller groups. And, I think that's probably the way to proceed in that class. I think part of the challenge in teaching is to pick the strategy that is going to work for these students. And, I think that's part of the fun, as well. (J.L).

Presenting course lessons takes more time not only because of having to repeat material more often, but also because teachers have to think of how to present abstract concepts and theories in much simpler form. Many new faculty had decided that English was an obstacle and that images in the form of videos and graphics would say a lot more than written words. One professor explained it very well.

I use a circle that represents an idea and combine the circles...and I can then talk about a number of things...They understand that, they can see that - the circles are labeled - I have different labels...But, they have a visual impression, they have something to hang words onto. The concepts have become visual, rather than verbal, and I think that's important. If you can give them a visual way that they can conceptualize, then I think the language is easier for them to hang onto. (J.L).

Even though new faculty presented course material at a slower pace, used visual images to increase communication, and put students into small groups to work through class lessons, there would still be difficulties with content. This may come from their background in rote learning. Unlike education in the West, understanding and applying concepts was not the focus of their pre-college education, and being able to regurgitate memorized information was encouraged. Faculty members, then, recognize that students are skilled at repeating words, but do not have an understanding of the concepts the words represent.

[Simplifying concepts into] one simple word that they then - because it is on the screen or it's on a slide it is then able to be read and to be repeated back. But, you can get the words repeated back but I'm not necessarily sure that they've understood the concepts... And I think that's a real problem. (J.A.D).

Another problem connected with expectations generated from Western educational models, is that students will not admit in front of other students that they don't understand. Certainly, some students in Western classrooms are at times reticent to admit in front of classmates that they don't understand. But, frequently teachers in the West can discern if students need extra help understanding. For students in the study university not admitting they don't understand could result from feelings of embarrassment about English, or shyness that does not permit students to do this. It is also possible that students' cultural background and pre-university educational experience were not conducive to freedom of expression in the classroom. However, one professor was delighted that he had finally been able to lead students to a point where they were comfortable speaking up and saying they didn't understand.

But, only now I've got a few that actually will sit there and say: 'I don't understand. What do you mean when you say that?' ...Now, actually a free will, 'I don't know what you mean. Can you give me another example, please?' (B.H).

Dealing with Difference.

In this culture individuals are nearly always in the company of at least one other relative or friend. When they have a problem it is customary to speak to someone about it for advice. Sometimes, when there is a problem between two people, one will enlist the help of a third person to speak to the other. This minimizes embarrassment for both parties, and also has the effect of providing a less subjective negotiation for working out the difficulty. Students bring this behavior to the University. Experienced faculty have described experiences of four to six students coming as a group to their office with a complaint about teaching method or course content. In these situations there is usually one student who has been selected to speak for the group. This behavior is new for Western faculty who seldom experienced these phenomena in previous teaching institutions.

Possibly because of their educational background of being punished for making mistakes, combined with their willingness to please and their desire to do good work, students have a sense of insecurity in producing work without explicit instructions about how to do it. This had been somewhat of an unexpected behavior for some new faculty. They will bring drafts of their papers to faculty for feedback, and they will do this repeatedly until the paper is perfect.

They insist on many drafts of their writing. They want to keep going until it's perfect, and then, they'll say 'Now, is this an A?' (M.L).

One professor quickly understood that the students do this because they need explicit direction, and spoke about how students want to complete their work perfectly according to how the professor wants it. They want to produce the work according to what's in the professor's mind, not necessarily the students' minds.

Western students usually provide oral and body language signals that they are motivated and engaged. Western faculty are familiar with these signals and are encouraged when they receive them. Non-western students may differently express signals of being motivated and being actively involved in learning (Dyer, 1998). Faculty, new or experienced, want to motivate students. Motivation brings with it a sense of imparting interesting and compelling information that students want to receive. When motivation is not there, when students seem apathetic, it has the effect of prompting faculty to try techniques and strategies to stimulate students into active learning (Dyer, 1998; Long, 1999; Shatz, 2000; Khelifa, Sonleitner, & Barise, 2004).

New faculty expressed frustration with what they perceived to be student apathy. Non-motivation was what faculty concluded from students' communication styles, tardiness in class attendance and turning in homework, apparent non-readiness for class-time, and students' lack of career goals.

In some cultural groups it is not unusual for several friends or family members to have simultaneous conversations with everyone in the group at the same time. To some Western cultures simultaneous talking and listening is unfamiliar, and it is a concept difficult for some to understand because of the implicitly enforced rules that one speaker should contribute at a time, and that no-one should interrupt the one who is talking. One professor gained insight into student behavior with an experience at a local conference.

I was at [a community function] and they had speakers...Well, its really quite different from what we're used to. I mean, if the same event was happening in [the professor's country] it would be quite - things would be organized, very simple. Here people - the guys are talking, people are walking in front of them, pictures are being taken, discussions are going on over here, and I am thinking, 'This is like my class!' (J.L).

Other new faculty expressed their reaction to these phenomena.

I've had an interesting experience, also. The time I'm talking to students and a couple here are talking to each other (in Arabic) and a couple there are talking to each other and I'm saying, 'you need to connect with this.' [And they reply] 'Oh, we're listening,

we're listening.' And, I have a sense that they are sort of listening. It's not as if when they're talking that they're not paying attention completely. (F.A).

One professor suspected the talkers would do poorly on the exam.

... when I had this exam, I was really curious to see if those that tend to be more talkative scored poor on the exam. And, they didn't. Some of them were my best students. So, it really, it kind of threw me for a loop. (T.S).

Thus, when students talk to each other during class it does not necessarily mean they are not paying attention. Or, when they don't give undivided attention to fellow students when presenting projects, they may be practicing their cultural habits regarding what is the norm for giving attention to others. New faculty are surprised when students who outwardly appear to not be actively engaged in learning turn in work that is beyond the expectations of faculty, or give presentations that are at professional standards.

But, they just knocked me out of my chair when they did their public presentations of their paper... I had not expected to have such a range of abilities and skills and especially on the high end, the poise, the organization, the connection with the other students. The real preparation of their Power Point plus engagement of the students. It's the best, it's as good as something that my graduate students [back home] have done. (M.N).

Educational Goals

Some professors were unsure of the educational goals of some students because of their seeming disinterest in obtaining specific employment after graduating.

[I'm] running out of ways to motivate them. [I've asked them] Why do you come to the University?' They actually have to do homework [on] 'Why are you here? What do you want to be when you're finished?' ...The ones that do better in class are the ones who have clearly stated, 'I am here and I want to go into this [major] because I want to...'
Those are the ones with a totally different attitude toward what they're doing. Even if it's the same difficulty, they're right on. (B.H).

In order to understand what students want from their education so that teachers can help them achieve their educational goals, one professor suggested asking students what they want.

We can get to the motivation by asking them questions like why they are interested in taking this course, why they are here, what are they doing...why is this important to learn, is this important to you, what benefit does it have for you to learn this. And, I think when you ask questions like that, it taps into their motivation, [a student told him] 'This is good for me because I want to know something now about my children that I didn't know and that's important to me.' (J.L).

Some faculty claimed there is an association between having a career in mind and academic performance. But, one professor took a cultural view of the issue.

These [students] are fighting with relatives, parents, husbands, sisters, aunts, uncles, whatever, on the cultural issues. And, you know, it's a great benefit that [the University] wants them to have something the parents didn't have. They want them to have an education. But, working...I think that becomes the cultural issue and I really think that what's going to happen is when our [students] have children and the children grow up, they're going to want them to have a different life [not restricted in working options]... Some [students] want to work... for whatever reason. Then, there are those that [say to themselves] 'Well, if I work for a year, okay. If I don't work at all, okay.'...You cannot expect all the [students] to get a job because they may not want one, or their spouses, or families may not want them to have it. They want the education. C.C.

Student Behavior

There is a sense that, culturally, punctuality is not valued to the degree it is in the West. To Westerners, being lax in punctuality imparts an impression of disinterest and perhaps disrespect for others. In the classroom it is considered to be disruptive when students come in late.

The University has an attendance policy in which students are required to be in class, unlike Western institutions of higher education that place the responsibility to attend class on students, reasoning that students can decide for themselves how they spend their time. However, students receiving free education in the University are expected by the government to avail themselves to the fullest of their educational opportunity, and attend every class. Therefore, the University has developed a policy that allows students to attain a certain percentage of absences from class before being suspended. This requires faculty to take roll for each class. The University policy, at the time these focus groups were conducted, required students not to be more than ten minutes late for class. If faculty have not imposed their own attendance rules in their syllabus, students assume this means they have ten minutes of time before they must be in class. Unlike Western students, many students in the study university do not treat the ten minutes as time to get to class before being counted absent; rather, they treat it as ten minutes of chatting and socializing time in hallways outside the classroom. This causes problems for faculty who are operating out of a punctual world view and who start class on time. The frustration is that when students enter ten minutes or later, they have missed instruction time.

I set up a format. They pick up their materials when they come in. And, some of them sit down, get their computers set up, and they're very task oriented. Others - maybe half the class - come in late. And, its generally those that come after the 'ten' that are

just very disruptive. I try not to make it an issue...They're just always a little behind. I feel bad as an instructor because they're not getting all the information. (T.S).

In discussing these problems with student behavior, one professor analyzed the issues by relating it to socialization into the student role.

I don't think that most of the students that we get have ever been taught to be taught. I mean, they've never been truly engaged by teaching. They've never been in a classroom situation where the teacher was truly engaging them and there was a dialogue back and forth and there was truly a discussion. They're not there yet, actually. At some point, I hope to be able to get them to that point. (K.J).

The idea of socializing students into the role of university student was brought up by another professor who seemed to suggest a solution to the perceived problem.

You almost need a ten week class for the brand new ones, to say, 'Okay, this is how the place works. This is what you do at university.' All this could be done in Arabic. I had a couple of talks 'this is not high school. Now you're in university.' (B.H).

In making comparisons of Western students' behavior with the behavior of students at this university, some faculty were very uncomfortable with the non-emotiveness of students in the classroom. It may be that culturally students are not emotive in the classroom and that it is not an indication of lack of understanding or comprehension (Caiger, 1994; Dyer, 1998). They may be trained not to express their feelings and thoughts to those in authority, especially to teachers who in Arab and Muslim culture are elevated to the status of "an almost prophet." This causes problems for Western faculty who are accustomed to, and rely on, students providing oral and body language that signify active listening and comprehension, or non-comprehension. For example, comprehension could be nods, and eye contact. Non-comprehension could be a frown or confused look. Faculty perceived that these university students do not display these types of behaviors. This has led many faculty to assume students are not understanding, are not listening, or are in some way not engaged with the lesson. This sense is further exacerbated when faculty, thinking students do not understand, ask students if there are questions, or if they need something explained further and receive only silence, or a comment of 'No, sir/No, miss,' usually given by a representative speaker for the class.

Conclusion

This study examined new Western-educated faculty challenges in teaching national women in a Muslim Arab nation using a Western teaching model. In a questionnaire faculty completed before arriving to the study University to begin teaching, they indicated that they

practiced a pedagogy of active learning, of active student involvement in their education, and that they expected to continue these teaching methods in the study institution.

Based on the results of the focus groups, it is clear that first-year faculty of the study University were attempting to offer students an educational experience that called for student participation in the educational process, and that required students to be critical and analytical thinkers, and independent and motivated learners; an experience students, in general, were not very familiar with and did not know how to maximize to its fullest potential.

In general, students' pre-university educational experiences did not seem to prepare them for the student-centered type of education followed in the study institution. To the contrary, for many students their prior education was replete with negative experiences that continued to affect their present learning. It is unfortunate that students' pre-university education did not encourage them to be active in the educational process, to provide input into classroom discussions, and to think for themselves and question everything.

These two educational approaches contradict each other, and students and faculty at the study university struggled with these differences. Students were beginning, however, to respond to a freer intellectual environment and faculty were learning how to coax this desired ability from their students.

In the present study, new faculty showed the quality of never giving up on trying to reach their students. The focus group transcripts contain many examples of efforts faculty went through, as well as the reflective process they used to create strategies for gaining a connection with students. Teachers were committed to sharing their substantive knowledge and were enthusiastic about students learning what they had to offer. Teachers developed a variety of ways to keep learning interesting, stimulating, and to create an environment of student-centered, student-relevant learning. Faced time and time again with what appeared to be student apathy, faculty were continually thinking about how to motivate and change presentation of material, performance requirements, and involve students in learning.

Faculty continually monitored their effectiveness in the classroom, sometimes in response to signals from students, which faculty may have misunderstood. The reflective process they went through, the efforts they expended, and the commitment to share their special knowledge with students in a culture so different from their own shows that these faculty were giving their best.

Challenges remained, however, especially because of the social-cultural dissimilarities of the student-teacher dyad. Frustration concerned the cultural clash of expected student norms and actual realities of students' lives and backgrounds. Faculty felt frustration at the

amount of effort and creativity it took to motivate, share knowledge, and see in students a commitment to learning.

Faculty taught students who, on average, did not have world experience and therefore often could not relate well to information being taught and seemed uninformed when instruction was about social issues. New faculty expressed frustration with students' reluctance to speak up individually in class yet easily participate in small group discussions. Students sought understanding of material outside the classroom in one-on-one teacher/student conferences, instead of seeking this information during class times. Differences in teacher-student classroom expectations, language ability, and purpose and meaning of learning created further frustration and disappointment in new faculty.

Disappointment was present also because students were not prepared for a learning environment based on critical thinking and problem-based learning. They were not at the level of English proficiency for faculty to share advanced reading materials, prompting some faculty to re-write some textbook chapters so they would be accessible to students.

However, new faculty also found a sense of reward and expressed delight with the courtesy of the students, and marveled at their high degree of creativity. When assigned a project, they were excellent researchers and created professional looking presentations, even though the English language in their papers was less developed – something to be expected when English is a foreign language to students.

New faculty expressed enjoyment of interacting with students at the University and felt their teaching of these students was rewarding. Faculty were pleased to learn that their strategy of group work resulted in students focusing on the class material, and producing quality projects. They were excited when students from passive, rote learning backgrounds began to realize they were in a safe learning environment, and responded to the urging of teachers to question and to speak their minds.

Faculty expressed compassion and sympathy for the position of students in regards to English language and educational background. They rapidly responded to perceived reading difficulties by turning to visual images to teach abstract concepts and ideas. The process of selecting appropriate images was time consuming and demonstrated faculty commitment to teaching and student learning.

Little is understood about cultural norms of facial expressions and body language of students in this region. In order to clarify the use of non-verbal language in classrooms, future research should examine signals students use in the teaching and learning environment. This seemed to be one of the biggest challenges new faculty faced.

It was a concern to new faculty that students did not speak up in class. Perhaps looking into cultural norms on speaking to authorities, and pre-college educational background can contribute to a better understanding of what students need to become active participants and learners.

Previous literature describing teaching and learning in other cultural contexts (Dyer, 1998; Fitch & Kirby, 2000; Long, 1999; Shatz, 2000; Sommer & Sommer, 1991) and this study suggest that classroom challenges may be universal in nature when two cultures intersect in a teaching/learning environment. It also suggests that students' poor academic progress in a cross-cultural teaching context should not be attributed to students' lack of academic preparedness and motivation for learning before student culture, learning context, and other relevant factors are well-understood. Findings of this study call for greater consideration of students' cultural realities in the development of classroom material and the selection of teaching strategies.

The cultural intersection of West meeting Arabia can be challenging. With patience, compassion, and commitment, challenges can be confronted and difficulties can be resolved. The faculty at the study institution demonstrated these qualities and their students are showing tremendous academic progress as they move from one university level to another. Because of faculty devotion to teaching and students' newly found responsiveness, the lives of this generation of students are enriched, and the students will carry that enrichment to their families, their communities, and their nation.



Discussion/Reflection Questions

1. What cultural aspects of the classroom do educators often struggle with when they teach in foreign countries?
2. Thinking about examples from your own experience, how much do you think students' classroom behaviors are colored by cultural influences?
3. What methods can educators teaching in foreign countries use to detect and address their own and others' possible cultural biases about student classroom behavior and classroom culture?

About the Authors

Nancy Sonleitner, Ph.D., is Assistant Professor with the University of Oklahoma. She was affiliated with Zayed University, College of Family Sciences, from 2001-2004.

Maher Khelifa, Ph.D., is Associate Professor, College of Arts and Sciences, Zayed University in Dubai.

References

- Caiger, J. (1994). Perceiving Education: Australian-Asian Perceptions Project Working Paper No. 7. *Sydney Academy of Social Sciences in Australia and the University of New South Wales*.
- Chase, B., Germundsen, R., Brownstein, C., & Distad, S. (Spring 2001). Making the connection between increased student learning and reflective practice. *Educational Horizons*, 143-147.
- Crossley, M., & Vulliamy, G. (1997). Qualitative educational research in developing countries. New York: Garland.
- Dyer, B. (1998). Reflective teaching practice in cross-cultural contexts: Teaching women's studies in Japan. *Women's Studies Quarterly*, 3 (4), 152-166.
- Fitch, B., & Kirby, A. (2000). Students' assumptions and professors' presumptions. *College Teaching*, Vol. 48 (2), 47-48.
- Khelifa, M., Sonleitner, N., & Barise, A. (2004). Changing as you teach: Faculty pursuit of teaching effectiveness. *Teaching and Learning Forum, Zayed University, United Arab Emirates*.
- Leach, F. (1994). Expatriates as agents of cross-cultural transmission. *Compare*, 24 (3), 217-231.
- Long, R. (November 1999). 20/20 Hindsight: Teacher change and advice. *The Internet TESL Journal*, Vol. 5 (11), 1-11. Retrieved February 25, 2003, from <http://iteslj.org/Articles/Long-TeacherChange.html>
- Minnis, J.R. (August 1999). Is reflective practice compatible with Malay-Islamic values? Some thoughts on teacher education in Brunei Darussalam. *Australian Journal of Education*, V 43 (2), 172-185.

- O'Donoghue, T. A. (1994). Transnational knowledge transfer and the need to take cognizance of contextual realities: A Papua New Guinea case study. *Educational Review*, 46 (1), 73-88.
- Shatz, M. A. 2000. Teaching psychology in Hong Kong: Pedagogical challenges, instructional solutions, and lessons learned. *Teaching of Psychology*, Vol. 27 (2), 140.
- Sommer, R., & Sommer, B. A. (1991). Teaching psychology in Estonia, USSR. *Teaching of Psychology*, Vol. 18 (2), 107.
- Sultan, K. (2003). Corporal punishment in school. Unpublished thesis, Zayed University, Dubai, United Arab Emirates.
- Thomas, E. (1997). Developing a culture-sensitive pedagogy: Tackling a problem of melding 'global culture' with existing cultural contexts. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 17 (1), 13-26.