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**An exploration of the  
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Views presented in this working paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent views of Zayed University

# **An exploration of the contextual factors related to an English Language Program in the Gulf becoming a Learning Organization**

Wayne Jones  
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## **Introduction**

This single-case study was conducted by three practitioner researchers working for the foundational English language program at an English-medium higher education institution in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Since 2013, the department has been going through a process of transition from a general English language skills curriculum to an English for General Academic Purposes (EGAP) curriculum, which has demanded a revision of personal and institutional philosophies of language, learning and teaching. The researchers hypothesised that the major changes that have occurred in the department in relation to reframing mental models, creating a shared vision, strengthening team work practices and utilising individual expertise for common organisational goals might have influenced the department into becoming a Learning Organization (Senge, 1997). The research was designed to explore the contextual factors in the department using the LO framework as its theoretical basis. *This paper argues that the scholarly endeavour of an academic unit working on a curriculum issue provides an opportunity for professional development institutionally in terms of becoming a community of practice which displays features of a learning organisation. (Not sure if this should be in introduction)*

## **Background to Zayed University and the ABP**

Founded in 1998 by the late Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nayhan, Zayed University (ZU) is a federally funded institution based in the Emirates of Abu Dhabi and Dubai. To all intents and purposes, it functions as one university and currently has around 9,000 students across its two campuses. As articulated through its Vision statement, the university aspires to be the leading university in the United Arab Emirates, recognized globally for its achievements in a number of key areas. Furthermore, it aims to prepare graduates who will assist in building the nation through the delivery of quality programs and the creation of a supportive learning environment.

The university consists of seven colleges: Education, Business, Health Sciences, Creative Arts and Enterprises, Technical Innovation, Humanities and Social Sciences and Natural and Health Sciences. In addition, all students take general education courses during their first three semesters within University College (UC). Students who do not meet the minimum standards of English language for entry into UC are subsequently registered in the Academic Bridge Program (ABP), the aim of which is to develop students' language and academic skills to a level at which they are likely to be successful in their first-semester courses within the Baccalaureate Program.

In terms of structure, the ABP has one Director, an Associate Director in Abu Dhabi and an Assistant Director on Dubai campus. Other academic administrators include a Curriculum Supervisor and an Assessment Supervisor on each campus, as well as a

Program Supervisor for the Male Campus in Abu Dhabi. The faculty members are also led by Level Coordinators, three on each campus. The authors of this paper include the Director, one of the Curriculum Supervisors and a Level Coordinator, all of whom held these posts throughout the review and revision process.

### Background to the Curriculum Review and Revision Process

In Spring 2014, the ABP at Zayed University undertook a curriculum review and revision process. Two curriculum supervisors (CS), one in each campus, were charged with conducting the review and revision. The aim was to ensure the program was relevant and fit for purpose.

As the review and revision progressed, it became clear that an alternative approach to English language provision in the form of English for academic purposes (EAP) might offer the ABP and its students an alternative pedagogical and linguistic focus. This change in focus presented both challenges and opportunities for the unit. **Put some key literature here.**

In conducting the review and revision, the curriculum supervisors (CSs) sought to ensure faculty and the management team, as key stakeholders, were involved as much as possible through consultation and feedback opportunities. The table in Fig. 1 below outlines the different stages of the review and revision process as well as the data that was collected from stakeholders during the process. As faculty involvement was a key aim during the process, data was collected at different points during the process to assess this. These are highlighted in the table.

Time	Stage	Activities	Documentary evidence
Spring 2014	Review and research	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Select faculty for research reassignment</li> <li>· Research faculty conduct research and make recommendations</li> <li>· Produce a curriculum review report</li> <li>· Presentation on EAP to management team</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Curriculum planning document</li> <li>· Conduct focus group curriculum review with all teaching faculty</li> <li>· Focus groups/ interviews with students and UC</li> <li>· <b>*Faculty involvement survey at end of semester (Appendix)</b></li> </ul>
Fall 2014	Development of draft curriculum document	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Research faculty present on findings to teaching faculty</li> <li>· Presentation to faculty on an EAP approach</li> <li>· Curriculum colloquium:</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· <b>*Faculty involvement survey at end of semester (Appendix)</b></li> </ul>

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Principles of Teaching and learning</li> <li>Draft curriculum produced</li> </ul>	
<b>Spring 2015</b>	Development of final curriculum document	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Draft curriculum revised based on feedback</li> <li>Schemes of work developed</li> <li>Materials researched, identified and developed</li> <li>Assessments developed</li> <li>PD?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Feedback on curriculum from: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>o Management team,</li> <li>o AAC</li> <li>o <b>Faculty survey?</b></li> </ul> </li> <li><i>*Interviews with research faculty on their own practices and beliefs (Appendix)</i></li> </ul>
<b>Fall 2015</b>	Implementation of curriculum		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>*Faculty feedback survey (Appendix)</i></li> <li><i>Student feedback survey</i></li> </ul>
<b>Fall 2016</b>	2 <sup>nd</sup> Implementation of curriculum		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>*Faculty feedback survey (Appendix)</i></li> <li><i>Student feedback survey</i></li> </ul>

**Fig. 1 Stages of the Curriculum Review and Revision**  
(\* documents relating to level of faculty engagement)

### Literature Review

The concept of Learning Organizations was popularized mainly by Peter Senge (1997) thanks to his seminal work *The Fifth Discipline: The Art & Practice of The Learning Organization* although the its constructs such as group learning, experiential learning, systems thinking, and behavioural aspects of learning originally belong to several other influential scholars and have existed since 50's (Örtenblad, 2013). Senge (1990) describes LOs as "...organizations where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning to see the whole together." ( p.3). Although the concept of LO was developed for the business world in order for the corporates to continue to exist and perform well in the ever-changing social, political and economical, commonsensical aspect of it have made it popular in other fields as in HE for the last few decades (Kezar, 2005).

Higher education institutions (HEI) also struggle with external and internal challenges in our era for similar reasons, and becoming a Learning Organization (LO) is arguably a significant factor that enables units to survive in these turbulent times (Boyce 2003; Vera & Crossan, 2003; Bess & Dee, 2008).

In addition, because becoming a LO within an HEI context is a relatively recent concept, there is a gap in the literature, which further and qualitative studies may contribute to (Kezar, 2005; Lejeune and Vas, 2009).

### **EFL to EAP/ Curriculum change as an opportunity for learning**

Within the field of English language teaching (ELT), there are distinct approaches which influence both the content and the pedagogical framework of teaching and learning. Most commonly found are the general approaches of English as a foreign language (EFL) or English as second or additional language (ESL, EAL). Within an academic context there is a history of an approach termed English for academic purposes (EAP), which differs significantly from EFL (Flowerdew & Peacock, 2001b). EAP teachers tend to enter the profession as EFL/ESL teachers and the challenges of moving to teaching EAP has produced some but rather limited research (Campion 2016).

Campion (2016) outlines the reported challenges of teachers moving from an EFL to an EAP curriculum. Her small scale research identifies the range of activities and experiences that enable teachers to face the challenges: both formal and informal learning opportunities; previous experience; formal qualifications and the use of high quality materials. Her recommendations include: time for development; opportunities for informal discussion and interaction; opportunities to study for teaching EAP (TEAP) qualifications.

Within the field of language teacher professional development there is limited discussion on the potential role for curriculum work to offer an opportunity for professional development.

Both Mann (2005) and Guan and Huang (2013) have explored the phenomena of language teacher professional development. Guan and Huang acknowledge that it is a “complex process” (no pn). Mann uses the perspective of Edge (p.105) as describing continuing professional development (CPD) as bringing together, ‘different contributions at different levels; the self-development perspective (individual or group development), the management perspective (institution), and the professional body perspective’. Mann (2005) calls for further research into how language teachers develop and includes from the perspective of the institution.

Mann acknowledges the role that innovation and change play in teacher development and refers to a model from Guskey (2002) that shows how student learning improvement can result in a significant change in teacher attitudes and beliefs. In addition he acknowledges the arguments of Wu (2002) and Tomlinson (2003) in asserting changing course design and materials offer opportunities for development whilst also acknowledging the challenge these processes present. Mann also recognises the role collaboration can play in teacher development, “It is desirable to collaborate in teaching, through reflection and talk, and through research [and that] ‘Focus groups’ create opportunities for sustained concentration and discussion... such development groups can focus on teaching, materials and course design... understandings are constructed through talk. It is not a matter of simply sharing and transferring information, rather than arguments, understandings, clarifications, and interpretations are constructed through spontaneous conversation with other professionals” (p. 110-11).

*Reading List:*

*Campion (2015):*

Ding and Campion (2016)

Alexander (2012)

Post (2010)

Alexander (2007): EFL -EAP = delivery over content

Hargreaves 1994; teaching as a communal endeavour *Teaching and Teacher Education* 10, 423-438.

Steve Mann(2005):

Guskey 2002

Clarke 2003

Wu (2002)

Tomlinson (2003)

Graves (2004) community

### **Literature on Change management/ Curriculum/ HEI**

Brown (2014) acknowledges that any type of institutional change requires a change in the culture of the organization. He asserts that universities tend to ‘share a culture of managing by consent rather than by authority, in which high value is placed on dialogue and the legitimacy of critique’ and therefore ‘cultural change is best achieved through participation’(213).

Within the field of English language teaching, several authors have examined the effects of moving from teaching an EFL to an EAP curriculum.

### **Study/Methodology/Research Design**

Multiple complexities and variables interplay in educational organizations, which are also bound to constant contextual changes (Yates, 2004). Therefore, reaching ultimate truth while generating scholarly knowledge may almost always prove to be impossible. As practitioner researchers whose ontological and epistemological beliefs guide them to contribute to the ongoing professional conversations rather than testing a theory or experimenting something holding a positivist approach, we formulated our research questions based on our curiosity on recent developments (change processes) in our own context (ABP) using the LO framework.

Thus, we formulated for our research are as follows:

1. To what extent has the ABP become a learning organisation during the changes?
2. What factors have positively or negatively influenced the creation of learning organisation culture within the unit?

I suggest the following questions to replace Q1, Q2 can stay..

- 1- How have the departmental documents and practices reflected aspects of learning organizations during the change processes?
- 2- How do the members of the department perceive it as a LO?

Yin (2008) describes “... a research design is a *logical plan for getting here to there*, where *here* may be defined as the initial set of questions to be answered, and *there* is some set of conclusions (answers) about these questions.” (p.26) And what fills the gap between the two are stages of collecting data and analysing and interpreting them (Yin, 2008). Following this way of thinking, we decided that conducting a case study to inquire into these questions seemed to be the best *fit for the purpose* (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011) and our epistemological beliefs. First of all, we aimed to explore our own specific context with its clear boundaries on specific issues (Silverman, 2005; Yin, 2008; Gillham, 2000; Cohen et al., 2011) which could provide a rich description of the phenomena we wanted to focus on, the relevant data is

accessible to us and we did not want to prove or disprove a theory (Yin, 2008). More specifically, we intended to provide a detailed description of a single department based on the experiences of its members examining certain aspects of the change process it has been going through and explore whether or not the experience has influenced the creation of learning organization culture. Case studies typically analyze particular phenomenon within their real contexts intensively by collecting multiple source of evidence (Robson & McKartan, 2016; Yin, 2008). To collect evidence then we planned the following data collection stages:

- 1- Documentary analysis, which portrayed the details of relevant departmental practices such as pilot studies, training and professional development activities, some meeting minutes, surveys, and other feedback.
- 2- A validated LOS survey (Garvin et al, 2008) which was sent online to all the members of the department to see the perception of them quantitatively.
- 3- Focus group interviews, which gave us more in-depth understanding of the contextual factors that have positively or negatively influenced the creation of learning organisation culture within the unit.

*Hi Burcu: in SoEL terms is it an impact study?*

*I'm not sure- Yin says case studies answer how and why questions though- ours seem to have different Question roots. The other aspects of the study fits case study methodology. What is an impact study? Impact study ( a type rather than methodology) studies the effect of something, in this case curriculum reform. Also we are looking to see whether there is a relationship between two phenomena i.e. curriculum reform process and establishing a learning organisation. (Also could be phenomenological in methodology). I will check with my Soel stuff next week.*

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