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Introduction: cultural aspects of learning and teaching

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This special issue of *LTHE* (edited together with Kay Sanderson of Middlesex University, Dubai) focuses on cultural aspects of learning and teaching in Gulf higher education contexts. As higher education throughout the world has become increasingly globalized, culture has become noticeable in many more ways and in many more contexts than before (Palfreyman, 2007). In the Gulf and elsewhere, ideas of 'local culture' or 'Western culture' are often invoked by teachers and others in educational institutions in the Gulf; and it is worth considering what these terms mean, firstly to practitioners who use them, secondly in the context of recent scholarship and thirdly in the context of the Gulf region as part of the global scene in the early twenty-first century. In everyday discourse, 'culture' is often identified (sometimes almost as a synonym) with nationality – e.g. 'American culture', 'Emirati culture' – with the suggestion that anyone born in a particular country is 'programmed' to behave in a particular way. A broader definition of culture is:

the system of shared beliefs, values, customs, behaviours, and artifacts that the members of society use to cope with their world and with one another [...]. (Bates & Plog, 1990, p. 7)

Key points to bear in mind about this definition are that:

- a culture does not consist simply of particular behaviours or objects, but of a whole *system* of interlinked values and other *intangibles* which we can observe only indirectly;
- while there are some abstract 'cultural universals' such as the presence of some kind of family structure or leadership, the ways these elements are interpreted in practice by different cultures *varies* enormously;
- cultural systems are not 'set in stone', but often *change* with time, through intercultural contact or for other reasons.
- to say that cultural values are "shared" does not mean that every member of a society interprets these values and customs in the same way and responds to them in the same way. 'Sharing' values is often a *process*, which proceeds irregularly and piecemeal among a large group of people; people within the same society may well *vary* in how they *interpret* these values; and any one person may also *use* the values differently in different contexts, for example to suit their own 'agenda'.
- the word "society" in this definition signifies belonging to any kind of *social group*, which may be 'a society' (e.g. that of the UAE, including its local and expatriate members), an ethnic group (e.g. Arabs) or some other kind of group such as an organization, a profession or an online community.

The current context of higher education in the Gulf, as outlined in the papers in this special issue, is complex, as over the last half-century an unprecedented mix of people from all parts of the globe and all walks of life have come together in the region with very established local populations, united by the development of national (and personal) economies and by globalizing trends in media and business, while retaining or reinventing diverse cultural markers associated with places or communities where they (or their parents) grew up, or to which they aspire. This cultural complexity shapes Gulf universities and colleges in various ways (e.g. Findlow, 2006).

Within the context of learning and teaching specifically, some kind of (inter)cultural awareness is crucial, as it can help teachers to

select materials that are relevant to the students' experiences, to use pertinent examples or analogies drawn from the students' daily lives to introduce or clarify new concepts, to manage the classroom in ways that take into account cultural differences in interaction styles, and to use evaluation strategies that maximize students' opportunities to display what they actually know in ways that are familiar to them. (Villegas & Lucas, 2002, p. 18)

Biggs (2003) discusses cultures of teaching as well as cultures of learning, and proposes that we can move from expecting students to conform to our expectations ('what students *are*') to adapting our teaching to students' different starting points and approaches to learning ('what the lecturer does'). However, more helpful in the long term is to develop and implement a curriculum which focuses on 'what students can *do* (including thinking skills) and on supporting and assessing learning in (locally) appropriate ways. This "learning in context" (Biggs, 2003, p. 136) may take account of cultural or other characteristics of the local context, but this is based on an in-depth understanding of what exactly learners are supposed to learn, and what experiences the curriculum is offering to enable them to learn this.

So, what do those teaching or planning courses in a range of subjects in higher education need to know about culture? Research on cultural aspects of adult learning and teaching over the last forty years has tended to follow two different traditions: one focuses on identifying what distinguishes different cultures, often on the basis of nationality. The work of Hofstede (1980), for example, is widely cited not only in the social sciences but also by business trainers and other practitioner educators; it is based on large scale surveys of IBM employees in a range of countries and offers a small number of cultural 'dimensions' (e.g. individualism vs. collectivism) according to which national populations can be compared. Research findings from this tradition provide a way of understanding differences between countries, but may be less helpful for understanding the behavior of specific individuals or groups in specific contexts, especially where non-national cultures or intercultural contact are involved (e.g. Bond, 2002; Holliday, 2014).

Another research tradition focuses more on how individuals negotiate specific situations and contexts, drawing on cultural values to "cope with their world and with one another" (Bates & Plog, 1990 – see above). Holliday (1999), for example, highlights the ways "small cultures" emerge in smaller social groupings, pointing out that a mixed nationality group of students in the UK, for example, will tend to develop its own culture, based partly on values and habits from students' cultures of origin, but also on shared interests and aspirations which they negotiate through taking part in activities together. Research in this tradition emphasizes cultural 'fluidity' and tends to use ethnographic case studies rather than large-scale surveys; the challenge for this tradition is to generalize findings from one case to another, in a way which can be applied in teaching in a range of disciplines across cultures.

The papers in this special issue apply these considerations to learning and teaching in the context of the Arab Gulf countries. They investigate and reflect on cultural aspects of courses and learning, using data from real learners in real courses; and they make suggestions for how we can understand and support learning in this context with an awareness of our own culture(s) as well as of the students'. This involves taking a close look at language (which is intimately linked with culture), and one paper focuses on how students respond to literature across cultures. These papers have relevance for teachers in all disciplines, who work on an everyday basis with language (as the medium through which understandings are shared between teacher and students) and with the 'literature' of their field (in the

sense of writings of people in other contexts, whose knowledge and perspectives are presumed to have some relevance to the present and future lives of our students).

The first two papers in this special issue investigate aspects of learning and teaching in two different Gulf institutions. Hopkyns's paper looks at the cultural significance of the English language in Gulf higher education (which tends to be conducted through the medium of English), and delves beyond a simple concept of 'Emirati culture' by comparing data from two different groups of Emirati learners: undergraduate students and practising teachers in state schools. Hatherley-Greene's paper presents findings from a long-term study of how Emirati students succeed or fail in 'border-crossing' into the 'culture' of higher education. He also looks at the faculty side of this issue: teaching approaches which may support learners' cultural border crossings, and also faculty members' own experience at the border between their culture of origin and that of their Emirati students.

Other papers in this issue reflect on the authors' experiences in teaching and researching in the Gulf region. Diallo's and Rapanta's papers describe how contact between Western educated teachers and Emirati students plays out in practice: Diallo relates this to issues of cultural identity and tension, while Rapanta uses data from student evaluations to support practical choices and adaptations which she has made in teaching in a new cultural context. Downs & Ktiri-Idrissi's and Prowse's papers use evidence from cases where a similar course or programme is taught in different cultural contexts. Downs & Ktiri-Idrissi describe a cross-cultural experience whereby local students in Texas and Qatar read and reflected on short stories from 'inside' or 'outside' their culture; the authors draw conclusions about the value for students of reading different kinds of literature. Prowse reflects on the development of a cultural framework based on the work of Hofstede (1980) and others, and evaluates this framework using evidence from business courses on campuses in Qatar and Canada. Finally, James's paper tackles the question of transformative education and reflects on how students could be culturally challenged in a locally appropriate way.

The first of the books reviewed in this issue, *Managing and supporting student diversity in higher education*, provides an interesting perspective on different kinds of 'border crossing' into higher education, which resonates with the themes discussed by Hatherley-Greene's paper also in this issue. The other books reviewed here deal with aspects of technology: social media for academics and mobile learning respectively.

One gap in this issue, which we hope to address in future issues of *LTHE*, is the lack of a Gulf national academic's perspective on cultural aspects of learning and teaching. We hope that Gulf national readers, as well as other readers, will make their voice heard through comments on these papers; registered readers can easily do this on our website <http://lthe.zu.ac.ae> using the **ADD COMMENT** link below any paper in *LTHE* (for free registration as a reader, click the **REGISTER** link at the top of the homepage).

As well as expressing gratitude to the co-editors of this issue, I would like to thank the reviewers, including Abeer Bar, Ahmad Alhaqbani, Gerhard Apfelthaler, James Moody, Jerry Spring, John Botting, Lavious Daniels, Marion Engin, Omnia Amin, Paul Hudson, Rana Tamim and Sally Ward. Their keen reading and generous feedback has helped the authors to develop and refine aspects of these papers for publication in *LTHE*.

As always, we welcome registrations and submissions to *LTHE* at any time via our website; submissions (articles, reflections and reviews) come from educators across the range of academic disciplines, and may deal with any aspect of learning and/or teaching in universities or colleges in the Gulf region. All papers submitted to *LTHE* should include empirical evidence from Gulf further education contexts:

please see full [guidelines](#) in the **ABOUT** section of our website, then register as an Author and submit your paper through the website. The next issue of *LTHE* is scheduled for publication in February 2015.

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