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# An experience of teaching in the United Arab Emirates

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Experiences as a teacher at a women's university in one of the Persian Gulf oil states

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Not long ago I had the opportunity to teach for seven months at a new university for women in the United Arab Emirates. I knew little about the UAE, or indeed the Middle East, and was enthusiastic about a new teaching experience in an unfamiliar culture. The seven months I spent in the UAE were stimulating, memorable, and professionally challenging.

The United Arab Emirates, a relatively new nation with unique and challenging problems, aspires to be a leader in the Arab world. Two years on, I continue to be interested in these problems, and particularly the consequences of the sudden wealth brought by the discovery of oil in the region and its influence on the education of the citizens of the UAE. On December 2, 2001, the nation celebrated its 30th birthday. Only three decades earlier, the lives of the indigenous people (primarily nomadic tribes and pearl divers) changed dramatically. The phenomenal wealth that poured from the desert changed forever the lifestyles of the people. No longer dependent on oil-rich neighbors, the emirates (seven kingdoms ruled by emirs, or sheiks) formed a union. The rapid development of the UAE is attributed to the vision of one man, His Highness Sheik Zayed bin Sultan al-Nahyan, who has guided his country for the past fifty years.

## Some background: past and present

In the pre-oil days, the federation now known as the United Arab Emirates was identified as the Trucial States, lands protected by truces with Great Britain. Nomadic Arabic tribes, whose sheiks were promised protection from the rampant piracy in exchange for access to trade, inhabited this area of ambiguously

defined borders. The strategic location of the UAE, on the Persian Gulf, was of value to the British, who oversaw the steady flow of trade from India, supplying Britain with such commodities as tea and cotton. In addition, the coastal waters were rich in pearl-bearing oyster beds. Piracy was rampant. To protect economic interests, the British defended themselves against desert raiders with a series of forts, some of which, despite the harsh climatic conditions, can still be seen today in the UAE.

With the discovery of oil in neighboring Saudi Arabia, the men left the poverty-stricken area to earn money. The women were left behind to cope with the harsh desert and coastal life. The discovery of oil brought sudden, fantastic wealth to the population and the male population returned. In 1968, UAE nationals made up 63 percent of the population, but by 1975, after the discovery of oil, only 36 percent were nationals. The unexpected flow of black gold necessitated foreign expertise to manage the oil companies, and the development of the country took off.

Emiratization, the education of nationals to manage their own country, is the task set by Sheik Zayed. In 1999, 5 to 10 percent of UAE

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nationals represented the local workforce, while 90–95 percent of all employed people in the UAE were foreigners. The nationals are, therefore, severely under-employed, as conventional work is perceived as pointless and non-stimulating. The phenomenal wealth of the nation, bubbling unbidden out of the desert sands, is a gift which requires no labor or sacrifice on the part of the citizens. For what reason should they work, if not for daily support? An expatriate population takes care of that by managing civil offices, the police force, prisons, schools, hospitals, and all public services and commercial enterprises.

The UAE is one of the five members of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), which controls 60% of the known oil reserves in the world. However, the threat of oil-dependent nations discovering vast new reserves or developing energy policies that do not rely on fossil fuels looms on the horizon. Evidence that oil reserves may be renewable is currently under research at Eugene Island, off the coast of Louisiana. Inexplicably, the seemingly nearly depleted reserve surged almost overnight from 60 million barrels to 400 million.

Sheik Zayed, the President of the UAE, is concerned with this possibility. In 1953, he toured Britain and France and, inspired by the schools and hospitals he saw, returned to his country determined to duplicate those facilities to further the development of his nation. At that time, there was little money available. With the help of the British, however, he sponsored the first modern school in the Emirates.

Up to this point, schooling was available to a limited number of males, who received lessons in reading and writing by Islamic clerics. Sheik Zayed understood immediately that it was necessary for his country to make the best possible use of its seemingly limited natural resources. His experiences in guiding the first geologists around his desert domain gave him a thorough knowledge of the nomadic people he ruled. Later, this knowledge and understanding served him well in articulating his dream for the development of the UAE.

The first cargo of crude oil from Abu Dhabi, the capital, was sold in 1962, bringing in the cash he needed. In 1966, Sheik Zayed became the ruler of the Emirates and began implementing his plan for the rapid development of the region. As revenues slowly increased, he focused on public welfare by building schools,

hospitals, roads, housing, and continual work on environmental projects.

In 1968, the British announced their planned departure from the region. Seizing the moment, Sheik Zayed worked to secure the alliance of the six other emirates. The rapid transformation of the country after incredibly huge reserves of oil were discovered brings us closer to the present situation in the UAE concerning the education of its nationals. Sheik Zayed understands the need to educate the national population, who may not be able to rely on oil revenues forever.

### Education in the UAE

In 1953, the British sponsored the first primary school in the UAE. In 1954, Kuwait took over the staffing of the school, and by 1972 there were 16 boys' schools and 12 girls' schools in the newly united emirates. A constitution was established mandating compulsory education through primary school. Completely supported by the government, the school employed teachers from neighboring Arab nations. The method of instruction favored by the Syrian, Egyptian, Jordanian, and Palestinian faculty was traditional: rote memorization and frequent testing. An ineffective curriculum coupled with dull texts encouraged student collaboration so as to pass the rigid exams. With no real precedent for education in the Emirates, the task seems nearly impossible.

In a world where wealth is not an issue and all consumer goods are available, where every aspect of work can be farmed out to someone from somewhere else who really needs to earn money, where is the incentive to study? To gain what? In a secular environment, perhaps the motivation would be found in fostering a thirst for knowledge, but in the UAE, the devout find the answers and knowledge they need in the Koran. Need, interest, and curiosity in the philosophical foundations of the non-Islamic world are nonexistent.

The ruling Sheiks are interested in the acquisition of practical information and the development of skills which will enable the population to take over handling the basics of national maintenance, for example, the skill to use computers to run its own banks and hospitals.

Female graduates of colleges and universities significantly outnumber male graduates. In fact, 70 percent of students who are engaged in tertiary education are females since many

males opt for the military, flight training, or police schools. Education consultants in the UAE discuss ways of attracting male students. The children of the most progressive parents go to elite schools in such places as London and Switzerland.

Westernized in their values, these students understand the expectations and demands of foreign teachers, but the social and religious constraints that restrict the majority of the female population also shape the lives of the young women of elite families. Parents and brothers expect marriage at a young age and eagerly anticipate the first of many children. This social pressure assures that many of the female university students will marry and be unable to complete the four-year curriculum.

Furthermore, graduating women who seek employment in the public sector may well face discrimination and hostility among the predominantly male work force. Since the Islamic culture of the UAE does not accept a fluid social interchange among men and women in the workplace, female employees are often isolated, ignored, or reduced to meaningless and marginal roles. The Sheik encourages teachers to introduce independence and initiative-taking skills, values that have never been fostered before.

Students, however, are accustomed to depending utterly on others to handle their needs. For example, it was not unusual to see young women arrive at the university in chauffeur-driven Mercedes, each accompanied by a Filipino maid who carried a two-pound laptop (distributed in the first week to every student) through the guarded gates of the walled-off campus.

### **Young women at the university**

The university complex was located in a remote neighborhood. Large villas and two mosques on adjacent streets surrounded the university block. A high whitewashed wall separated the campus area from the surrounding neighborhood. A much-used airport runway ran the length of the school just across from its main entry. Jets roared over the school daily. Tapes calling the faithful to prayer late morning and mid-afternoon were broadcast at maximum volume from the nearby mosques. Behind the protective walls, classrooms, cafeteria, and administration buildings were arranged around an open rectangular court-

yard. The young women arrived at the guarded gates of the school before 8:30 AM. Some came by school bus, and many came in privately chauffeured vehicles. The women, obviously happy to be together, would chatter enthusiastically, sauntering slowly in large groups to their classrooms.

Although the stated goal of the university was to prepare students for future employment in a variety of fields, most students lacked enough English proficiency to plunge into one of the areas of study offered in the curriculum, such as business science, information technology, media sciences, family science, education, or an interdisciplinary degree offered through the Department of Arts and Sciences. For this reason, the majority of entering freshmen were required to take three classes per day in the university's intensive English program. They would spend additional class time studying Arabic and learning computer skills. All students and faculty members were provided with an expensive laptop, and all classrooms were fully wired so that each student could connect to the central server from her desk.

The sheer amount of technology at the university would have been intimidating had the faculty not undergone two weeks of training and orientation. In ironic contrast to the state-of-the-art equipment for teaching were the censored ESL textbooks. As the faculty were being initiated into a world of high tech, two or three of the support staff were diligently and attentively blacking out whole passages and dialogues from familiar ESL texts. The surprised faculty pored over the blackened boxes, trying to recall exactly what offensive words or phrases had been deleted: "Halloween," "Valentine's Day," "alternative lifestyle," "homosexual," and a reference to a "father cooking." Listening and reading passages that touched on dating, romance, teen culture, art, drama, popular music, or movies and all discussion topics that questioned the status quo vanished under the censors' thick black markers.

The removal of the usual topics that spark exchange and allow students to practice oral skills was clearly going to tax our creativity. We were reminded that sex, politics, Israel, and religion were taboo subjects. Pondering the vast dimension of restricted topics, I walked into my classroom and stared at a map posted on the wall. As I gazed at it, I noticed a couple of modifications. Carefully taped over "Persian Gulf" were the words "Arabic Gulf." Another

piece of tape stretching across Jordan and into the Mediterranean Sea substituted the name "Palestine" for "Israel."

In the first week of classes, a teacher is faced with highly exuberant *abaaya*-clad women who talk to the instructor simultaneously but not in unison. The deafening clamor that greets the teacher is only a prelude of what will follow. I had the unsettling impression that I was suddenly in the midst of a roomful of very large children suffering from attention-deficit disorder. Although it was not difficult to gain initial control of the class, it was difficult to keep students' attention long enough to introduce the course topic.

The impatient young women, unused to waiting for anything, could muster no interest at all in process, details, or explanations, and would loudly and unabashedly moan in chorus during activities. Interested mainly in the novel situation of being able to socialize freely with each other within the safe confines of the walled-off campus, students complained instantly when asked to carry out an assignment.

Never having had to search for information, analyze an issue, follow directions, or find a solution to any sort of problem, the young women were simply unable to proceed when given an assignment in which every step was not spelled out exactly and that often proved too taxing on their concentration skills. In their homes, there are rarely role models to guide their efforts or to help with homework. Usually, there is no precedent for reading a book other than the Koran or turning the pages of a fashion magazine. It is a world difficult for a Westerner to envision.

The same challenging problems faced all of us who were teaching first-year students. Reading for pleasure or information was an alien and suspect concept. Most of the women I taught did not have educated parents, and many were completely illiterate. The women could find no motivation or incentive to study. With the exception of students who had studied abroad, none had past experience in studying, reading, researching, debating, discussing, analyzing, comparing, or reflecting on any topic. In short, the educational processes and values Western education espouses were totally unfamiliar.

Difficulties arose because students were accustomed only to rote memorization and objective multiple-choice exams. Unable to understand the seriousness of plagiarizing

material, they freely copied whatever needed, shared homework, and were unwilling to work alone. Although such interaction may be identified as a cultural adaptation, where survival in an inhospitable land depended on mutual collaboration, this behavior added a further challenging aspect to our Western style teaching.

A lack of patience for process or explanation and an unwillingness to read directions necessitated that faculty members present everything orally multiple times. In addition, students were uncooperative about devoting any time outside of class hours to studying. All homework assignments were completed as a group effort during breaks with speed of completion as the goal. Accustomed to being spoon-fed, students often treated teachers as paid servants.

The campus, however, provided a safe space and an acceptable opportunity to socialize away from the watchful eyes of their male family members. Who would want to deprive these young women of this unique opportunity to explore a world that was far more stimulating than taking care of younger siblings or waiting for a male family member to escort them to one of the glittering malls?

As an added complexity, although the countless varieties of English that are used in Dubai serve the diverse population very effectively, their common usage has resulted in the fossilization and internalization of varieties of English unique to the region. Servants, caretakers, doctors, teachers, and shopkeepers each spoke a variant English. I often questioned the relevance of teaching American or British English in this environment and suspected that our true function in that sheltered environment sanctioned by the Sheik was simply to introduce Western social values to the female students.

Perhaps of greater importance, however, was the mixed message that students received from their culture about furthering their education and pursuing a career. Social constraints were pervasive. Three mosques across the street called the faithful to prayer five times a day, a constant reminder to the women of their priorities. It was impossible for them to ignore the peer pressure of the more visibly devout who insisted on praying in class.

Yet, despite these seemingly overwhelming problems and challenges and despite the general resistance to what – and how – one was trying to teach them, some of the women made steady progress and expressed their determina-

tion to play key roles in the development of their country. Their deep loyalty to Sheik Zayed and, for a fortunate few, the support of progressive family members inspire them. And the women are aware of the challenges that will face them should they succeed in completing four years of university or college.

They are eager to engage in the growth of their nation and feel only gratitude to Sheik Zayed, who recognizes their potential and fervently advises families to see to the higher education of their daughters. There is no question that the future of the UAE depends on this minority in due course taking the reins.

Sheik Zayed believes that all of the citizens of the UAE have a role to play in its development. He does not discriminate and believes passionately that both men and women are responsible for the modernization of their country. He believes that a country that relies on a foreign population to manage it is ultimately doomed. Indeed, the UAE, as the most progressive, diverse, and tolerant of the Gulf nations, offers itself as a model nation for the Arab world. It is Sheik Zayed's dream that the young develop a work ethic and never forget the labor of their parents and grandparents, who had to survive the harsh life before the discovery of oil. That his people are educated and that the youth do not squander their wealth is, in his opinion, key to the development of the UAE.

### Language in the UAE

The great diversity of population creates a linguistically and culturally unique nation. According to the census taken in 1997, the population of the UAE was 2.7 million, of which more than 75% were foreign. Since the UAE does not publish population statistics, it is impossible to present the precise figures. One fact sheet gives a general breakdown estimate with 23% of the population designated as non-UAE Arabs, 50% Asians (primarily from Pakistan and India), and 8% classified as "others." UAE Arabs make up about 19% of the total population. In 2000, UAE officials privately estimated the population to be about four million with a foreign population topping 85%. This is an issue of great concern to the government and is reflected in the financial incentives offered to UAE men to marry UAE women.

The foreign population threatens to undermine both the culture and the language of the

indigenous people and presents a serious problem for the government of the UAE. Although Arabic is the official language of the UAE, the lingua franca is English. But there was no one English. Everyone you spoke with in the outside world (that is, out of school) spoke a personal and often unique variety, depending on such factors as culture, education, and employment. Going to the mall for example, I would hear the "broken English" of my taxi driver (Hindi), and at the shop the clerk might well be French, Australian, or British. Doctors were usually Indian. Used for trade, commerce, pleasure, and daily communication, English thrives in multiple varieties that reflect the nationalities and education level of the multilingual speakers. The distinctively clipped and rapid British English spoken by the Pakistani and Indian workers is by far the most ubiquitous of the varieties heard, while Filipinos, who hold service positions throughout the country, speak an abbreviated form of English heavily sprinkled with American slang.

The hundreds of thousands of manual laborers who come to the UAE to build the skyscrapers and highways are primarily from Bangladesh. Uneducated and lowest in the hierarchy of foreign workers, they have little contact with others. Living together in shantytowns at the edge of the desert, they have little need for either English or Arabic. Their supervisors and bosses are polyglots who can communicate in any of four or five different languages. Taxi business thrives in the UAE, and the drivers, who tend to come from India, Iran, Yemen, and Oman, are skillful communicators who have mastered survival language skills in several languages. Their colorful English is an unidentifiable and personalized mix reflecting their long residence in the multicultural cities of Dubai and Abu Dhabi. The eight percent of "others" who work and live in the UAE are educated Canadians, Brits, Americans, Australians, and Europeans who usually work in the professional sectors of education or in the medical field.

Many of the unschooled house servants and caretakers of the nationals are from Malaysia, Indonesia, and Sri Lanka. It is often they who model the first English heard by young UAE children. Like speakers of Singlish (Singapore English), speakers from Malaysia do not distinguish vowel length and the resulting intonation has been compared to a firing machine gun. Used to being served by foreign South-East

Asian maids, many students were unable to free their speech of the intonation and stress patterns they had acquired from their servants. Unused to expressing much politeness with servants and untaught in the civilities of conversation, their English communication often came across as abrupt, inappropriate, and rude. Although students could express desires and needs, "please" and "thank you" were rare.

Other than English, the most commonly heard languages are Hindi, Urdu, Bengali and Tagalog. In Dubai, a contemporary Babylon, a trip to the supermarket or the mall is a linguist's paradise. Within thirty minutes, no less than ten different languages can be heard. The govern-

ment fears that the continual tidal waves of Pakistani and Indian workers are rapidly eroding the Arabic culture. Indeed, entire neighborhoods and commercial areas in Dubai are Pakistani or Indian. Government officials struggle to find solutions to the problems created by allowing such a tremendous expatriate population to manage their nation. Articles and editorials in the local newspapers argue daily for stricter laws that would correct the demographic imbalances. Many, however, feel it is too late and that the UAE has no choice but to continue to embrace the stream of internationals who come to work in their country. ■

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