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The Importance of Cultural Understanding in Teaching and Learning in the UAE

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A fast developing country, the United Arab Emirates is only 43 years old, and opened its first school in 1952, and its first university in 1977. UAE universities are state funded, well-equipped, and staffed with high caliber faculty from across the globe. But, as the UAE government recognizes, the high school experience has not provided Emirati students with the requisite skills to take full advantage of university education. The purpose of this paper is to examine why so many students are ill prepared for university, and to suggest ways in which the universities can remedy the situation.

The UAE, like many countries, has a national curriculum, provides set textbooks, and employs national testing. The uniform nature of the curriculum and testing almost inevitably means that in order for a school to achieve good results, education is replaced with instruction resulting in the mindless regurgitation of facts. Teachers recruited in the Middle East and Asia are all familiar with teaching by rote, and for many it is seen as a perfectly acceptable way of preparing the young.

In the Middle East, rote learning mirrors cultural aspects of society. The peoples of the Middle East, and certainly those in the UAE, have a Bedouin past that entails a strong oral heritage. Stories and poetry, passed down from generation to generation, require consistency in the telling. In addition to this, one of the most prized skills in any Islamic society is the faithful recitation of the Quran. Indeed this skill is of such significance in the UAE that prisoners have been known to walk away from life sentences as a reward for learning the holy text in its entirety.

2 http://www.khaleejtimes.com/kt-article-display-1.asp?f=/data/nationgeneral/2013/February/nationgeneral_February393.xml&section=nationgeneral “The jail terms commuted for successful inmate memorisers includes a cut of 20 years for memorising the Holy Quran in full (30 parts), 15 years against 20 parts, 10 years...
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The acceptability of reading, remembering, and repeating may also be reinforced by Western cultural influences. UAE students enjoy Western movies and music, and as Kirby Ferguson so rightly points out “everything is a “remix”, and we can see how this impacts on the attitudes of students. Different songs and riffs written by somebody else, layered on top of each other to create something new, and then claimed as the original work of the compiler. Students will have hundreds, if not thousands of examples on their iPods. But what is a “remix” if not another form of plagiarism? 3

While it may be stretching a point to say that students entering higher education in the UAE see “imitation as the sincerest form of flattery”, it is invariably true that through rote learning at school, culture, and religion, the accurate repeating of the words of others is seen by many as an admirable and acceptable practice. 4 But therein lies the problem. Learning by rote does not demonstrate understanding, nor does it promote critical thinking. This flaw, identified in the UAE by Madson and Cook, has been taken up and acted upon by the UAE leaders in their educational reforms. 5

One of the major problems with rote learning is that it promotes a vast array of “facts” as though they were some form of fixed knowledge. Natalie Hopkinson, author of “The McEducation of the Negro” argues that this is a deliberate strategy in poorer parts of the USA. The reform, she tells us, “is

4 Colton, Charles Caleb, Lacon, Or, Many Things in a Few Words: Addressed to those who Think, Vol 1, p. 114.
about learning the rules and following directions. Not critical thinking.” This method of teaching is also being resurrected in the UK by Education Secretary, Michael Gove, in his attempt to climb international league tables, and this despite academics legitimate cries against the mindless “conveyor-belt curriculum”, which consists of “a mountain of data”.

Without good critical thinking skills students are doomed to at best paraphrase the work of others, and at worst to plagiarize. Students’ efforts will be destined to show all the hallmarks of data-mining because they know of no other way of producing an essay. Responses will be narrative rather than analytical.

So, how do we get university students to unlearn the certainty with which they have embraced information delivered in the form of dogma at school? How do we convince students that for a multitude of topics there isn’t necessarily a “right” interpretation, or a “right” answer? Dugan Laird, points out that there is “resistance to, and unpleasant consequences of, giving up what is currently held to be true”, and for students in the UAE this is undoubtedly the case. That is not to say that the opinions they hold are of no value, on the contrary students can actively contribute to debate provided they understand “why” they hold the view that they do, and are not simply repeating something through blind acceptance.

Unfortunately, students will often adopt whatever position they think their professor holds and try to replicate it. In order to do this, students will search

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6 Kohn, Alfie, Poor Teaching for Poor Children, Education week, 4/27/2011, Vol 30, issue 29, p32-33
7 Garner, Richard, Education Editor, 100 academics savage Education Secretary Michael Gove for “conveyor-belt curriculum” for schools”, The independent, 19 March 2013.
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for sources that support that position, and as a result they make a mockery of the research process. They will trawl databases with key words, find an article that may or may not be appropriate, and data-mine a sentence or two. Needless to say, as no critical thinking is involved in this process, the student gains nothing intellectually and will, as soon as the course is over, return to their original belief.8

Turning rote learners into critical thinkers is a challenge, but it is an achievable one. Many of the students coming into the university, although they can recite textbooks word for word, have never really “read” anything. They have been passive absorbers of information, and have not engaged with the text. Reading the text should not be akin to a monologue but rather more like a dialogue in which the student argues for or against the main and subordinate ideas. To remedy this I ask new students preparing for their first research assignment to submit annotated journal articles that they have used in their research. Students are expected to show proof of careful reading by highlighting points of interest, making personal responses to arguments in the margins, and writing additional thoughts that occur to them. Grading the work has a significant impact on the effort they make and hopefully begins a process that becomes a habit. This activity not only encourages the students to engage in critical reading, it prevents students from data-mining, and lessens the likelihood of plagiarism as the students, having engaged with the text, find that they have something to say.

Once the students have read sufficient articles in relation to their research question or hypothesis the students are asked to prepare aesthetically pleasing posters on which they write a short abstract, a theoretical framework for the research, a conclusion, and a bibliography. The content of the poster

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should show evidence of critical reading and highlight the main points that the student wishes to use in their research. The next step is for the students to present their posters. For two separate sessions the class is divided into two with half the students standing by their posters presenting the information to the other half of the class who are expected to move from one presentation to the next asking questions, discussing the content and ideas that underpin the research, and perhaps suggesting new avenues and perspectives. The students, having been asked the same questions over and over again, become familiar with the strengths and weaknesses of their research; they also gain a level of confidence in their own voice. After the sessions the students are expected to write reflective essays on how the experience has affected their planned research process. Do they think the exercise was productive; what might they change, drop, add, and why? The very acts of discussion and reflection tend to help the students with their organizational skills, as it forces them to give considerable time to thinking about the validity, purpose, and direction of their research.

Collectively these steps provide a scaffold that will support students in moving from rote learning to critical thinking, and allow them to produce well researched papers that show a fluid train of thought, rather than the all too common patchwork of evidence held loosely together by a vague idea.
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