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Making it Real: Exploring Transdisciplinary Curriculum at Dubai Women's College

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ABSTRACT

Globalization has had a profound impact on educational systems across the globe; global migration means our world is increasingly interconnected, new information is accessible with the tap of a finger, and learning that is transferrable from school to the real world context is increasingly important. But, how do educators make decisions regarding the kind of learning that best suits the needs of learners. This paper describes a case study of the design and implementation of a transdisciplinary curriculum design (Drake, 2007) at Dubai Women's College through the lens of transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 2000). Data were collected during the 2008-2009 academic year from 19 participant educators and supervisors and consisted of three interviews and textual data in the form of: lesson plans, syllabi, curriculum project documents, assessments, strategic plans, and field notes. The following themes are discussed and related to transformative learning theory in context: (a) aspects of life and change for Emirati female students, (b) the transdisciplinary curriculum company visit, (b) the transdisciplinary curriculum bazaar, (c) the transdisciplinary curriculum current issues forum, (d) Emirati identity and empowerment, and (e) Emiratisation – the overriding goal. Findings reveal the nature of transformative learning in this Arab context during a period of globalization and change.

Globalization and change have had a profound impact on higher education across the globe. Merriam (2010) argues that the advent of globalization provides both challenges and opportunities for education and understandings of what is meant by meaningful learning. With a movement toward real-world transferability of learning (Lovering, 2012; Thomas, 2007), the field of interdisciplinary studies with its corresponding emphasis of multiple disciplinary contributions to a learning event

is but one curricular manifestation in contemporary adult education. Transdisciplinary curriculum is defined as the exploration of a contemporary issue requiring contributions from multiple disciplines with the result being knowledge and learning connected and transferrable to real world circumstances (Lovering, 2012). Education literature has discussed the role of transdisciplinary curriculum (Carawan, Knight, Wittman, Pokorny, & Velde, 2011; Holley, 2009). Adult education literature has linked transformational learning theory

(Bamber & Hankin, 2011; Durie & Wyatt, 2013) with globalization, societal change, international education, and new conceptions as to what it means to engage in meaningful learning (Merriam, 2010; Merriam & Ntseane, 2008; Saudelli, Mogadime, & Taber, 2013). But, what guides the decision making processes of creating and implementing a transdisciplinary curriculum? Using transformational learning theory as a framework, this case study will capture the reasoning behind the design and implementation of the Higher Diploma Year 1(HD1) transdisciplinary curriculum during the 2008-2009 academic year at Dubai Women's College (DWC), in the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

Background

The UAE is a geographically small country located at the Arabian Peninsula (Al Fahim, 1995) that has experienced profound social and economic change in the last 20 years. Dubai, an emirate in the UAE, has transformed itself into a modern metropolis with a global economic infrastructure (Davidson, 2008; Gardner, 1995). With an influx of foreign expatriates immigrating to Dubai to fulfil both professional and labour roles, today, Emirati citizens constitute a small proportion of the general population and ultimately the employment sector (Davidson, 2008).

In an effort to redress a domination of the foreigners in the workforce and economy, the ruling Sheikhs implemented a reform policy, "Emiratization" (United Nations, 2006). Emiratization refers to the governmental mandate that all businesses in the UAE, by the year 2009 are required to employ at least one Emirati citizen in some capacity (Godwin, 2006), which has had a corresponding impact on education for the

indigenous peoples of the UAE, Emirates (Davidson, 2008; Godwin, 2006).

The Higher Colleges of Technology

The government-funded Higher Colleges of Technology (HCT) exist as English-language medium, vocational institutions. The Higher Diploma program functions to prepare Emiratis to assume leadership and supervisory positions (Higher Colleges of Technology Academic Services [HCTAS], 2007). There are 16 gender-segregated campuses in the seven Emirates. DWC is one campus of the HCT system and is exclusive to female Emirati students indigenous to the United Arab Emirates. Dubai Women's College (DWC) espouses a transdisciplinary approach to curriculum (HCTAS, 2007) in the Higher Diploma Year 1 (HD1) program. The mission of DWC is:

...to provide an authentic, relevant and holistic learning environment that enables students to 'Practice the Future' by developing and demonstrating: Self Confidence, Professional Excellence, Ethical Commitment, [and] Intercultural Intelligence in preparation for leadership roles in a dynamic local economy, characterized by Emiratization and globalization." (DWC, 2010)

Central to achieving this honorable mission is the design and implementation of curriculum. The DWC HD1 program curriculum integrates the subject disciplines of Business, Information Technology (IT), Math, and English. This paper will capture the reasoning behind the design and implementation of the Higher Diploma Year 1(HD1) transdisciplinary curriculum during the 2008-2009 academic year at Dubai

Women's College (DWC), in the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

Literature and Theoretical Framework

Transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 2000) and transformative curriculum leadership (Henderson & Gornik, 2007) guide this study. Mezirow (2000) describes transformative learning theory (TLT) as learning that transforms core values, patterns of thought, frames of reference, or beliefs when they are found to be inappropriate or unacceptable in a given situation, with the ultimate goal being autonomy of thought – a goal highly Western in orientation. According to Brown, (2006), Taylor and Cranton (2012), and Henderson and Gornik (2007), a transformative approach provides opportunities for learners to meaningfully engage with andragogical strategies designed for “the examination of ontological and epistemological assumptions, values and beliefs, context and experience, and competing worldviews” (Brown, 2006, p. 700). Henderson and Gornik specifically identify curriculum leadership as integral for the inclusion of transformative approaches, which is supported by Lovering (2012). Task-based learning and interdisciplinary learning are features of transformative curriculum (Henderson & Gornik, 2007; Lovering, 2012), and are specific approaches endorsed by DWC. Task-based learning (TBL) is a strategy that focuses on the completion of a specific interdisciplinary task or sequence of tasks as the core element in curriculum (Ozan, Karademir, Gursel, Taskiran, & Musal, 2005). In TBL, the focus for the learners is an actual task that is grounded in the reality of their learning disciplines (Ellis, 2006; Lovering, 2012). In TBL, the learning is built round the task (Drake, 2007; Lovering, 2012); therefore, curriculum would focus on the aspects the

students learn from all the activities related to performing the task. Interdisciplinary learning describes “a curriculum that connects the various disciplines in some way” (Drake, 2007, p. 25). Within the field of interdisciplinary studies exist various degrees of integration of disciplinary content (Drake, 2007): multidisciplinary (disciplines distinct with each centred on a theme), interdisciplinary (concepts emphasized across the discipline areas), and transdisciplinary (emphasizing real world context and relevance for students). The degree of integration supported by DWC's curriculum is transdisciplinary with an emphasis on task-based learning approaches.

TLT has been used as a theoretical framework in several studies (Brock, & Abel, 2012; Cranton & Carusetta, 2004; Christofi & Thompson, 2007; Kovan and Dirkx, 2003; Lovering, 2012; etc.); however few studies have explored TLT and curriculum in international contexts, except for Lovering (2012), Merriam and Ntseane (2008) and Taylor (2003, 2007). Merriam and Ntseane (2008) describe TLT's use in Botswana and sought to explore how the cultural context shaped transformational learning for participants. Their findings reveal three culturally relevant factors specific to that particular context as salient to transformational learning: spirituality and the metaphysical world; community responsibilities and relationships; and gender roles. Merriam and Ntseane and also Taylor (2003, 2007) assert that many questions remain to be answered with transformative learning theory, particularly in relation to “the role of context; the nature of catalysts of transformative learning” (Merriam & Ntseane, 2008, p. 184) and call for inclusion of international studies. This study seeks to contribute to understandings of transformative learning theory and interdisciplinary curriculum in higher education in at DWC.

Discussions of transformative learning theory and curriculum design and implementation directly pertain to this research study as these aspects are integral to the graduate outcomes of the HCT Learning Model (HCTAS, 2007) that governs DWC's curriculum. The locus of this study is a Middle Eastern context. Thus, it forms a key element of this research study that contributes to knowledge in international education, interdisciplinary curriculum, and transformative learning theory in practice.

Research Design: Qualitative Case Study

According to Merriam (1998), a qualitative case study is an in-depth examination of one particular setting, one subject, or one particular event. A case study is a decision regarding what is to be studied (Stake, 2005) together with decisions regarding the variety of methods that will facilitate understanding of social, political, and cultural complexities impacting the case. The purpose guiding this case study is that knowledge can be gleaned through exploration of the design and implementation decisions of the Higher Diploma Year One (HD1) curriculum at Dubai Women's College (DWC).

Data were collected over the course of one full academic year, September 2008 through June 2009. In total, 19 participants, 4 supervisors, and 15 HD1 teachers were recruited to participate in this case study. All participants are international educators and many had been teaching at DWC for over ten years. One supervisor is an Emirati educator. All participants have taught in various geographical contexts for most of their professional careers. Data from participants were collected through semi-structured interviews at the beginning, the middle, and as a reflection at the end of the academic year. Data in the form of textual

artifacts were collected: all documents pertaining to the curriculum, syllabi, lesson plans, curriculum project documents, strategic plans, institutional policies, textbooks, and testing instruments for all four courses (Math, English, Business, and Information Technology). In addition, field notes (Creswell, 2002, 2005) were maintained throughout the process of data collection added to the data set.

Stake (1995) advocates the use of four forms of data analysis and interpretation: categorical aggregation, direct interpretation, establishment of patterns, and naturalistic generalizations. Creswell (1998) added a fifth form of data analysis and interpretation to Stake's list, "description of facts" (p. 154). According to Creswell (1998), a description of the case involves a detailed description of the aspects of the case, "the facts" (p. 154). This fifth form is particularly relevant for this case study due to the unique context that is the setting of this case study.

Data were coded followed an open coding approach (Benaquisto, 2008): data were assembled into the following categories: data that directly address the unique character of educational needs and concerns for Emirates; and data that directly address the social nature of Dubai as a multicultural and diverse Emirate. Using an axial coding approach, data were reviewed seeking principles and patterns of overlap and relationship and looking for sub-themes in the data. Using a selective coding approach, data were analyzed for subcategories for interacting patterns and themes, ultimately resulting in patterns of data specifically to the reasoning processes underlying design and implementation of curriculum.

Description of Results

The primary finding extrapolated from the data suggests that decisions regarding the transdisciplinary design of curriculum and implementation are filtered through a complex appreciation of context. All participants acknowledged the importance of understanding that all students are Emirati women living in a society that has experienced tremendous change in a very short period of time. This is exemplified throughout the data with the preponderance of participants' use of the word "here" as a means of pointing out that their comments pertain exclusively to this educational context and spatial moment. This section describes the following themes identified in the data regarding the design and implementation of the transformative transdisciplinary curriculum: (a) aspects of life for Emirati female students, (b) the transdisciplinary curriculum company visit, (b) the transdisciplinary curriculum bazaar, (c) the transdisciplinary curriculum current issues forum, (d) Emirati identity and empowerment, and (e) Emiratisation – the overriding goal.

Aspects of Life for Emirati Female Students.

Although all HD1 students are Emirati females, there is diversity in terms of their life experiences. Some students have very liberal families: they drive, go out by themselves, work, and make their own career and life decisions. Others are from conservative families: some do not leave the house, except to come to college, without their father or male guardian escorting them according to all participants. Drew¹ explained that

¹ Any identification of a name is a pseudonym. All pseudonyms were chosen as they are gender neutral. Thus, no representation of gender should be assumed by any pseudonym name.

Coming to the college is a huge transformational process for some students. They're able to explore what's happening in the real world. Many times this is the first time they are allowed to explore the Internet on their own without a brother or a father or an uncle being there watching.

All participants also noted that many DWC students have very limited contact with the large expatriate community of Dubai. All participants noted that contact with the foreign faculty is often students' first international interaction with foreigners in a sustained way. Ellis explained, "What the Sheikh has in mind is he wants to create a safe international atmosphere where the students can gently experience. We are hired here as international educators to bring the world into the classroom."

The gender of faculty and students' social restrictions can have an impact on the teaching. Nine participants articulated that few students are accustomed to interacting with men who are not in their immediate families. This is challenging for students because most the HD1 faculty are men. Parker explained:

In terms of their [prior] schooling, they only had women [teachers]. When they come to us, they are in shock when their first teacher is a man... It plays to [the reality of] going out to the workplace. Understanding that they are going to have to work with men, men are human beings, women and men can work together as equals.

According to participants most students become accustomed to male presence on

campus. As observed by Ellis, *“By the end of their year, they are usually quite comfortable to come have a bloody good argument at the desk of a man, which they were not previously.”*

All 19 participants identified that few students have work experience or exposure, an aspect that sets DWC’s students apart from other educational contexts. For example, few HD1 students, if any, prior to college life, have ever had or performed summer employment, internships, household chores, volunteer work, and so forth, due to the societal and economic privilege afforded to Emirati citizens. Thus, according to all participants, this recognition forms the basis for decisions made regarding the design and implementation of the transdisciplinary curriculum and integrated tasks.

The Transdisciplinary Curriculum -- Company Visit, Semester One

The task for learning cycle 1 consisted of a group visit to interview a supervisor at a Dubai-based company, preferably an Emirati woman. The nature of the transdisciplinary task was communicated to students through the creation of a project document entitled: *“Research, Analyze, and Present.”* For this event, students in their groups: chose a company in Dubai from a specific economic sector; make arrangements to visit the company prior to October 12, 2008 and interview someone working in a management position at that company; and collect information from the interview and visit related to that company’s fit within a specific economic sector in Dubai. Students developed an interview protocol to elicit information regarding the company, and the principles of macro and micro economics. This information was then collated into a digitally enhanced presentation that was presented to the Math,

English, and Business teachers in class and subsequently the digital component was graded by the IT teacher. All learning tasks, and learning outcomes for all four core courses, and all assessments that students would encounter during this learning cycle was outlined in this project document. For many students, this was the first time they had to go off-campus into the “real world” without a teacher, parent, or guardian as chaperone.

Five participants stated that the Company Visit presentation caused *“enormous conflict because the penny drops – this is crucial. Learn to work together now because you will have to work collaboratively for the rest of your life”* (Nat). Nat continued, with this task came students’ realization that *“if they don’t work together, if somebody in the group doesn’t pull her weight, then the whole group suffers.”* Three participants believed that this task models for students how professionals must work together to accomplish a task because it involved and was evaluated by 3 HD1 teachers, Math, English, and Business faculty modelling collaboration in their assessment of students’ work. Perry states *“The three subject teachers sit in that presentation, each evaluating a different aspect. Sometimes, that is what it takes to inform the students.”*

Interestingly, 10 participants stated that the most important learning from this task rested with giving students an opportunity to interact with Dubai as a global marketplace, something “many have never done before” (Jordan). Kelsey commented *“I feel that the real learning is in the experience—of going out and arranging, getting it wrong, getting it right, seeing the person, talking to the person.”*

Nine participants found that after the students arrived back at the college after the company visit they were inspired. *“You could see it, they grew; it was a fantastic*

experience for them. The learning from this experience was responsibility and independence” (Nat). Jaden also made this point and believed that the three main curricular tasks supported students’ development of self-directed learning: “If you can get this kind of student engagement in learning, which our curricular tasks offer, more learning takes place because it is much more memorable and meaningful for most of our students.” In addressing the implementation of a task-oriented curriculum approach, eight participants identified that the most successful approaches were those that impose:

... an external client and external deadlines. It naturally builds a lot of the framework into it. The students know on that specific date they have to be prepared for the event. If they aren’t, we are all going to look foolish and our reputation in the country will be ruined. Their external clients are going to be judging our students. Their public reputation is very important to them. (Spencer)

The Transdisciplinary Curriculum Bazaar

The primary learning task for learning cycle 2 is a campus-wide Bazaar. The Bazaar consisted of three different potential curricular tasks for students depending on their major or if they were full time day students or evening students. The nature of this transdisciplinary task was communicated to students through the creation of three different project documents entitled: “DWC Bazaar”; “DWC Bazaar Bank “DWC Career Majlis.”

The Bazaar consists of HD1 students, in groups, serving as employees for HD2 students’ on-campus businesses during

a 3-day event. The purpose of this event is to help students make a connection between their learning and real world situations in actual businesses with their Year 2 employers in Bazaar. For the Bazaar Project, HD1 students must prepare a group report which chronicles: creating a summary of the Year 2 business plan; reading their employment contracts, job descriptions, and training, and learning about their employers’ operation plan, finance, and accounting procedures; design and record their own sales and performance records and record examples of Year 2’s management; carry out assigned duties during the 3-day Bazaar event; review and understand their performance review from their Year 2 employers; prepare a performance evaluation of their Year 2 employers; and evaluate Year 2’s leadership style, conflict management skills, and decision-making skills.

For this event, specific currency is created called DWC Dhows, which has cultural significance in Dubai as the dhows are the traditional Arab sailing vessels used for the pearling industry that once dominated the economic trade for the Gulf region. Year 2 businesses created banks which handled the exchange of UAE dirhams (official currency) for DWC Dhows, the only currency allowed for the Bazaar event. Students majoring in Finance in HD1 were employed by the Year 2 banks. The purpose of the DWC Bank is to help students make a connection between their learning and real-world situations in actual financial institutions with their Year 2 DWC Bank employers during the Bazaar. For the Bazaar Project, HD1 students must prepare a group report which chronicles: a description of the DWC Bank branch assigned including assigned duties; marketing strategy and promotion strategy for the branch; discussion of method of providing customers information about Dhows and

method of ensuring that all businesses use Dhows; details of customer service, place strategy, and distribution channels; organization of staffing and plan of leadership; analysis of DWC Bank activity; numerical data for statistical analysis of the bank branch including discussion of cash auditing, transactions, Dhow exchange, and cash flow; and evaluation of individual and group Bank performance.

All participants indicated that the Bazaar task of learning cycle 2 was a curricular high point identifying it as a highly collaborative, important educational event. The entire campus was transformed into *“a huge souk. They come back to class after Bazaar changed. Our students work for HD2 students, it’s very humbling. It is a wonderful process going on: boss and employee in a quite a sheltered atmosphere”* (Ellis). Corey commented on the authentic nature of Bazaar: *“Students can be sacked. I have had students sacked and they were speechless. These are the kind experiences that they really learn.”* Taylor explained the immediacy of the hands-on experience:

They are the employees. There is no getting out of it. You [students] are going to have to walk around and try to sell to people. And, it is going to hurt. They can’t think of anything worse. One said to me ‘I have to clean the table but I don’t know how. The maid has always done it.’

HD1 had a cohort of evening students comprised of full-time employed, Emirati female students working very hard to complete their education. For this academic year, this evening cohort was larger than usual and formed two class groups. Given their working schedule and life experience, a new task was created by the HD1 team as part of the Bazaar experience. The HD1 faculty and the DWC

Career Centre collaborated and created a curricular task specifically for these HD1 evening students called Career Majlis. The Career Majlis consisted of a student-designed and decorated discussion area where students in groups created presentations and facilitated discussions with a.m. regular students and visitors about issues of working life and family life they deemed as important to Emirati working women. The topics themselves were student generated, chosen, and researched: Creating a Family Budget (all groups); Working for a Foreign Supervisor; Women’s Roles; Emiratization Issues; Globalization and Change, Tradition and Modern Life; and Work Challenges and Strategies. Thirteen participants stated the Career Majlis was an exceptional learning opportunity for students and teachers alike. Teachers had the opportunity to hear what these Emirati working women encounter in the workforce, their tensions and their ideas. Spencer asserted:

I am a better teacher because of this event. I have learned about how Emirati students in the workforce feel about authority, feminism, collaboration, and their status in both the country and the workforce. For example, I learned that my students are concerned about how colleagues will treat them due to Emiratization privileges. They are concerned that collaboration will be challenging due to resentment. These are issues that I have to encapsulate in my teaching so I can give voice to my students and we can explore these highly relevant issues together.

Addison commented *“this is the learning that matters, relevant, real, and shared knowledge that is student-driven.”* Drew commented:

Career Majlis during Bazaar was exceptional. It was a rich learning experience. I saw the groups of the morning students sitting at the majlis talking about the work place. Their eyes were opened – they were listening and learning. This is real.

The Transdisciplinary Curriculum Current Issues Forum

For semester two, HD1's curriculum contains a change. Semester 2 consisted of one curricular task, the Current Issues Forum (CIF) entitled "Global Economic Crisis: The Impact on My Career and Community." The Current Issues Forum (CIF) is a student-driven "conference" where, in groups, HD1 students are given a topic, which they must thoroughly research with primary and secondary resources, and create a presentation to be held in assigned booths that they decorate. During the 3-day, public event students are required to advertise their booth, publically present their topics, and field questions related to their topics from both faculty and visitors on campus.

Their current issue topics all related to the global financial crisis and its impact on their community and all were determined by faculty for random assignment to students. Many of these issues were controversial in this context. Thus, there are implications for both students and instructors. Drew explained that "*We are trying to get students to think at a deeper learning [level], explore, push the boundaries. Some students perceive us as imposing or pushing the boundaries too far.*" Parker explained the nature of the tensions involved in exploring controversial issues: "*Increasingly, those issues are acceptable here. Slowly. You have to have a highly attuned antennae, here.*" Morgan

elaborated on the newness of having Emirati explore these issues:

Students here do not see issues the way [others' do]. One group's topic was the "UAE Relying on Domestic Workers." Here, maids here are not covered by labour laws.... That group did an amazing job of presenting opposite perspectives. They included statistics that 50% of maids in the UAE are abused and compared that to statistics of maid abuse in other parts of the world.... Some of the current issues we deal with now could never have been approached in the past: labourer rights, Thalessemia Disease and blood testing prior to marriage.

Participants agreed that the HD1 curriculum tasks attempted to support change, but in a manner that honoured Emirati society through "*empowerment of Emirati women to be their own agents of change. Our curriculum tasks support them, their voices, their choices. Some of the topics in the CIF are controversial, but we give them the chance to speak on them, publically*" (Cassidy).

Emirati Identity and Empowerment

Ten participants spoke to the issue of Emirati identity and female empowerment, themes appearing throughout all curricular documents but particularly emphasized in the CIF task. This represents an Emirati cultural concern that was being discussed both within education and throughout the UAE in business, governmental and political realms. Because this was a concern within the nation, it became an important inclusion in HD1 curriculum. Alex identified "*You don't need confidence to sit at home and drink coffee. You do need confidence to*

interact in your world in a way where you do make a difference, contribute in some meaningful way. That is part of the reality of this part of the world.” Addison further explained:

[Our curriculum] empowers them with the fact that they need to work. Emirati women don't want to position themselves as burdens. They want to be agents of change. The idea, here, is to empower them by exposing them to their abilities and to sense, steer and guide their own career and their ambitions in life. To be effective members of their society.

According to participants, part of the reason for the emphasis on Emirati Identity emanated from the concern about loss of culture amongst Emiratis due to the changing nature of Dubai and the strong foreign presence. Corey illustrated *“There has been a lot of discussion about what makes you Emirati. We look at issues like language. The replacement of Arabic for English in schooling. Many of them feel their language is under attack.”* Eight participants discussed students' concerns in relation to themes of Emirati Identity including concerns about their loss of culture, particularly in relation to expatriate actions, beliefs, or ideas that many Emiratis find offensive. Corey specifically related the issue of Emirati identity with the fact that the UAE has a strong foreign population. *“That is why the college is important. It gives these students the environment in which they can discuss their identity, Emirati—and the fact that so much of this country is run by non-Emiratis.”* Morgan described the political debate affecting students:

We are starting to hear discussions—traditionalists and modernists; students are starting to talk about it. Emiratis are watching foreigners move in, bring in less than moral values in their viewpoints, and undesirable elements like alcohol, loud music, skimpy clothing. The strength of the community, these tight tribal family structures is being changed through exposure to the foreigners and many families do not like this change. Many Emiratis believe they are giving the country away.

In response to potential threats to loss of Emirati identity, the Higher Colleges of Technology declared 2008 as The Year of National Identity in the UAE and created a conference event at Sharjah Women's College called “Mosaic 2009—Know Your World: Proudly Emirati.” The aim was to generate dialogue and engagement with students regarding who they are as Emirati young women. Through this process, the expectation of this curricular inclusion was for students to begin the dialogue regarding their changing society, to envision Emirati place in the modern world, with values that embrace “tolerance, self-confidence, and national pride” (Emirati Mosaic, 2009). Morgan elaborated on the relation between the conference task and HCT expectations:

The year of Emirati Identity was just made a political priority in 2008. Our curriculum is about raising awareness: who they are, their country, and their place. The country has changed significantly; but our students grow up behind a wall. That is what we are trying to help them with, and that is why context is so important. They need to come to a personal understanding of

what their context is because it is not the same as their mothers, their grandmothers, or older sisters.

The HD1 curriculum responded to this UAE regional and educational dialogue regarding national identity through creation of many opportunities for students to engage with this issue. Thirteen participants discussed the inclusion of these themes as “*absolutely crucial in this time of change*” (Morgan). Inclusion of curricular content related to Emirati identity during the 2008-2009 academic year was prominent. Two of the research topics for the Current Issue Forum were: Emirati Identity, Change and the Financial Crisis; and, UAE Women—Identity, Entrepreneurship and Innovation. In English, themes of considering Emirati identity could be found integrated into lesson plans, listening activities, and articles students are required to read. The reading exam at the end of semester 2 contained two readings that were chosen by the reading team specifically because they focussed on Emirati identity: “Who Are You,” and “Whatever Their Judgements We Define Who We Are.” All participants reported that these themes are strong curricular inclusions and developed in a manner that opens the discussion, but were culturally acceptable. Cassidy feels this is crucial as “*These ladies will leave us and move society forward. Hopefully in a way that honours their culture and tradition in the contemporary world. They are the ones to define Emirati culture ... on their terms, not as defined and imposed.*” Addison articulated the reasoning behind the curriculum presentation of these ideas as

[students] need to learn how to work with a vision—a vision of themselves. They need to imagine themselves somewhere and they need to inspire themselves and motivate themselves.

They need to assume a leadership position. Events such as the Bazaar and the Majlis, everything we do empowers them. They feel valued and invested in.

A specific curricular theme of Emirati identity and female Emirati leadership was included specifically due to the nature of social and economic change that is occurring in Dubai. Female empowerment was included because of the specific need for women in this context to envision themselves as participating leaders in their world, and defined on their terms. According to participants, it was crucial for these students to think about these issues now, while they are at the college.

Emiratization – The Overriding Goal

In an effort to address the issue of students’ lack of direct interaction with the diverse nature of society in Dubai, HD1 has an overarching theme: The political mandate for Emiratization. Central to curriculum is the objective of supporting both employable skills and an appropriate work ethic for a multicultural society according to all nineteen participants. Addison explained the vision, “*The focus has to be on the big picture, their country, their home, their people, their land. The need to buy into the idea [of working], invest in themselves, and take it seriously. We need to empower them to run the show.*” Alex detailed the rationale:

HCT is about Emiratization. The focus is on globalization and Emiratization at the same time. Dubai’s leaders are ambitious for Emirates to participate – to lead. You can do that with quotas, or you can do that by turning out graduates that can compete with all these other

very able expatriates, many of whom are Arab, intelligent, driven and with fine qualifications. So the emphasis has to be on doing.

Emiratization is more than a societal issue; it is an ideological shift according to 10 participants. Often, Emiratization themes in the curricular content were focussed on changing perceptions regarding women's participation in careers, potential career options, and building enthusiasm for a career. Alex explained:

You have to have a vision based on the context, so, when this society really develops with meaningful work experiences, our graduates are out there doing things and not just occupying positions with no real responsibility, like some of their relatives. There are many UAE nationals with big sounding titles. They probably have an army of people doing the work for them. Work is not perceived as something you do, it is perceived as a place you go. To this day, that is one of the things that we here at DWC have to overcome. This idea that work is something you do and you can get excited about the challenges of work. You get even more excited when you have done something well and YOU know it.

Several required curricular components were designed to generate opportunities for students' to engage with the working world of Dubai and to build enthusiasm about students' opportunities through Emiratization such as Careers 2009. Careers 2009 is an annual event sponsored by the Dubai government. It is a massive career fair held in the Dubai Convention Centre and filled with prominent

corporations in Dubai such as: Dubai World, Tanmia, Emirates Airlines, Dubai Media Corporation, HSBC Bank, and many others from all sectors.

It was a curricular requirement that all HD1 students attended Careers 2009, discussed employment issues with companies and collected information regarding hiring practices. In addition, HD1 students were required to formulate questions for company representatives regarding the effect of the financial crisis on hiring quotas and Emiratization compliance. HD1's curricular importance of Careers 2009 was evidenced through assessment in English. For example, during semester 2 the midsemester English writing assessment asked the following question of students: "From your experience attending Careers 2009 discuss two or more company perspectives you learned that relate to: The effect of the Financial Crisis on Emiratization and hiring practices in the U.A.E. Support your answer with specific examples." Parker discussed:

It feeds into the mandate of Emirates' opportunities, and employment. Employers from every sector are represented. It is only for Emirati nationals. They submit CVs, ask questions, and find out companies' Emiratization quotas and policies. It is an eye opener for our students: (a) that there are opportunities and (b) that those opportunities require something of them. They are not going to walk into a job. They have to have something to offer.

Cassidy believed that part of the hidden curriculum is related to changing students' perceptions of the workforce. "Part of our hidden curriculum... is to reinforce that being a supervisor is not a figure head

position ascribed due to Emirati nationality. Many students think it is shameful to see an Emirati working for a foreign manager.” Parker also discussed this aspect and further elaborated:

They need to understand that Emiratization isn't about men getting jobs. It has to do with all Emiratis—working. Our female students need to see that they have a role in Emiratization. With women in this part of the world, traditionally and now, these big questions, involvement, and decision making, have always happened in the Majlis, which is an area of the house mainly for men. Part of our job is to show them how this is no longer the case and it doesn't have to be in conflict with tradition, culture, or religion.

Ellis also commented “What students have learned [in HD1] is the invisible curriculum” and is not present on any form of assessment or accountability measure, such as,

Our students can walk in a room, look you in the eye, and smile. They work well with other people. They can problem solve. They have skills and can function in a business environment with professionalism. These are classic task-based learning results. Ironically, things employers like about our students are not reflected [in assessments]: It is our students' ability to communicate and express ideas, not a 1,000-word tested vocabulary that is important here.

According to participants, promoting Emiratization through curricular content, events, tasks, and examinations, and job-

readiness skills was of crucial importance. This curricular inclusion involved more than content, it was about changing ideologies that have been dominant, and remain dominant, regarding women's roles in society.

Discussion and Implications: Snapshot of a Transformative, Contextualized Transdisciplinary Curriculum

This study explores a transformational learning theory in a contextualized model of transdisciplinary curriculum, in practice, in a Middle Eastern context. Previous discussions of transformative curriculum are based predominantly in Western educational contexts, which support learning needs that are different from this Arab context. The findings from this study capture different emphases for transformative learning theory: transforming identity and Emiratization.

A Transformative Contextually Relevant Curriculum

An in-depth consideration of context is required in order to create transformative opportunities within curriculum design and implementation. Transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 2000) promotes adult education focused on changing core values and habits of mind. Mezirow's emphasis does not translate easily to an international context as noted by Merriam and Ntseane (2008) in their call for a re-examination of transformative learning theory in international contexts.

The findings in this study indicate that decisions regarding, learning theories and curriculum design and implementation should be inherently connected to the contextualized learning needs of the

students. In this context with the rapid changes from globalization and change, Emiratization and students' conceptualizing their Emirati identity is a cogent aspect dictating the decisions regarding curriculum and learning. Students being provided with opportunities to experience and explore the tensions of the real world of working life in this global marketplace provides the force for them to transform their understandings of what it means to be a 21st century Emirati woman in their world. The foreign faculty raised the issue of Emirati female identity, provided the opportunities for students to engage in thoughtful consideration of issues related to change in their country, facilitated the real-world, authentic tasks, and provided opportunities for students to cross the boundaries of their comfort zones. Students specifically need to make connections among their learning, their future, and their roles in this rapidly changing and globalizing country. This transformative emphasis has political support at the highest levels. HRH Sheikh Nahayan Mubarak al Nahayan was quoted asserting an urgency to:

Do our part in preparing a new generation of Emiratis confident in themselves, proud of their culture and language, and able to live and work in a changing and globalized world. Teachers are expected to incorporate the theme of the event [Emirati Identity] in the curriculum and projects of the students. (Jawaher & Al Manar, 2009, p. 16)

In order to accomplish this vision, HRH Sheikh Nahayan emphasizes the need to produce graduates who “are prepared to assume their positions in the workplace

are tolerant, knowledgeable of other peoples and their cultures, and are able to function in a global environment” (2008, p. 4). It is significant, that participants connected curriculum decisions to Emiratization. Crucial aspects of learning were for these students to learn to communicate effectively in a public and non-gender segregated domains and complete real-world tasks that embodied all of the successes and tensions encountered in real world working environments.

An orientation that is supportive of labour market needs may superficially appear to be contradictory to transformative learning theory ideals of autonomy of thought against socialized values and learner independence. However, in this particular context, a transdisciplinary curriculum designed and implemented with a transformative learning theory basis that is engineered specifically for learners to envision and empower themselves to assume participatory roles in the workforce, in leadership and in their society represents a nuanced version of transformation -- one that is highly contextualized to this particular educational environment. This is the learning that counts in this changing society and for these students in this globalized society and rapidly developing country. While this is in the interest of the government and the Emirati people, it is also an act of transformation imparted through this transdisciplinary curriculum. This represents a cultural and societal change upon which these students must mediate, reflect, and define on their own terms so that they may make future decisions regarding how they will fulfil participatory roles in the workforce in the UAE and how they will address challenges they shall encounter. This indeed, has the potential to be transformative and is a salient component of transformative learning theory in this context.

Much of the HD1 curriculum focus is on appropriate work place ethics, collaboration and working within a multinational environment. The rationale behind these curricular foci is: “the totality of the UAE’s population represents one of the most racially, ethnically, religiously, and socially mixed to be found anywhere” (Heard-Bey, 2005, p. 360) and Emirati graduates must be prepared to work collaboratively in the workplace with non-Emirati people. Upon graduation from DWC, students will be working with men and women of all races, all cultures, and all religions; higher education must prepare female students. Prior to their education at DWC, in many cases, students have had little to no exposure to the real world of work in Dubai, but this transdisciplinary curriculum approach does provides this opportunity. The curriculum allows Emirati women to become erudite in a protected environment. The goal is to provide the opportunity for educated females to learn, grow, question, and make their own decisions regarding their future. This is, indeed, transformational.

Participants discussed changes in students during the HD1 year. They discussed student confidence, transferrable skills, vision changes, and empowerment. With the task-based orientation to curriculum, students are empowered with control over much of their learning. According to Gutierrez (1995) empowerment is “the process of increasing personal, interpersonal, or political power so that individuals, families, and communities can take action to improve their situations” (p. 29). Students many of whom have never had within their personal power the opportunity to perform tasks, particularly in a public domain, are indeed empowered to publically engage with the business world in Dubai through their learning. Through this

curriculum, students are engaged in the performance of authentic tasks (Ellis, 2006), together with learning from authentic resources that reflect the real-world, political and business-oriented issues and concerns directly relevant to the lives of Emirati women and the Emirati nation. It also provides learning that empowers students over their learning, and gives them a forum for their public voice. Through the HD1 curriculum, students are seen, working, leading their groups, questioning, evaluating and expressing their ideas and creativity. Their voices are heard and in many situations on highly controversial issues to Dubai. Their voices matter.

Participants in this study were enthusiastic in their beliefs regarding their roles in education, and their attempts to create and implement extraordinary learning moments for students. It is significant that participants’ comments about curriculum or implementation were prefaced or post-scripted with the word “here” indicating that the comment was relative and relevant to this context, these students, during this spatial moment. Participants in this study had a contextualized rationale guiding the *how* and *why* underlying their teaching practice and curricular decisions. Thus, regardless of the theory guiding the design and implementation of curriculum, in our postmodern and globalized world, an educator “here” must with sincerity learn about contextual factors in order to implement any educational theory or strategy.

Final Remarks

The United Arab Emirates is a fascinating and inspirational country from which we can learn a great deal. It is also a country significantly impacted by globalization and change, which has had a profound impact on education for Emirati

women. Globalization ensures that our global interactions and affiliations are part of the future of education. This study provided insight regarding some of the issues impacting higher education for Emirati women in Dubai, UAE and contributes to our understandings of educational theory in practice in international contexts. These international educators created a highly contextualized educational opportunity for students in this study. This study presented a transdisciplinary curriculum design that mediated the tensions of: controversial issues in this Arab context; transdisciplinary curriculum, ideological change and Emirati empowerment; and, the political mandate of Emiratisation. Thus, this study answers the call set forth by Merriam and Ntseane

(2008) for studies edifying transformative learning theory in practice in international contexts.

Our world has changed dramatically and nowhere is that more apparent than in the UAE. The UAE is a global society, complex, changing, and remarkably resilient. Higher education in the UAE strives to move with this change, while maintaining a respect for Emirati culture. This is honourable. Education, educational theory, and educational andragogy must also move with change as they address the learning needs of students, society, and our global community.

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