Article

MISSION CREEP: REPRESENTING LEARNER CAPABILITIES IN TRANSNATIONAL HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE PERSIAN GULF

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INTRODUCTION

This paper is drawn from my doctoral research on transnational higher education practice in the Persian Gulf. It is part reflection, part analysis of the curriculum development work I have been involved in for many years as it relates to the notion of capability-building for employability and the attendant privileging of certain epistemologies and pedagogies.

Prior to my recent arrival in New Zealand to take up a position at a well-established polytechnic, I had spent the previous 12 years working in higher education settings in the Middle East, most recently in an Higher Education Institute (HEI) originally set up by Polytechnics International New Zealand.

Like many educational practitioners who grapple with the somewhat contentious notion that graduate capability development should be the key driver of curriculum and that these so-called generic skills are transferable from tertiary education settings to the workplace, or from one employer to another, (Hinchliffe & Jolly, 2011; Kalfa & Taksa, 2015) skill-building is considered to be an important part of a tertiary education. Generally accepted capabilities such as highly developed communications, problem-solving and critical thinking skills are expected of graduates and form the foundations of a graduate identity (Clarke, 2017).

While many educators are sensitive to the imbrication of power and cultural ideologies in the production of curricular knowledge, in the context of transnational higher education and in particular international branch campuses of Western universities, how and why certain epistemologies and forms of cultural capital inform curriculum development and delivery remains under-researched.

To approach this question I explore, using a range of texts, the ways in which expatriate, predominantly Western, education practitioners working in the region frame the educational 'mission' of these institutions and the educational capabilities and (academic) development needs of students.

BACKGROUND

The landscape of higher education in the Persian Gulf has changed dramatically over recent years. There has been a rapid expansion in the number of English-medium public and private universities and colleges throughout the region. The Gulf is now home to over 50 international branch campuses (IBCs) of institutions in France, Germany, Australia, India, the UK and the US, the majority of which are located in the United Arab Emirates and Qatar and are housed in purpose-built, state-financed "education cities" (Wilkins & Huisman, 2012; Hall, 2018). Many branch campuses and other transnational higher education (TNHE) projects are also found in Bahrain, Oman and Saudi Arabia and Kuwait.

Transnational educational institutions and joint-venture projects have become key actors in higher education reform across the region, and are undertaken in close collaboration with government, business and industry and other international education and training institutions and the broader community. In general terms, they aim to address pressing current and future needs of economic development and the region's transition to a knowledge-based economy. This transition is driven by the contemporary rhetoric of educational excellence, employability, twenty-first-century skills (new technologies/digital literacy, inquiry/project/problem-based learning), student-centred learning pedagogies, and the development of a global outlook.

In recently published 'state of the play' articles, both De Witt (2015) and Knight (2015) argue that the question of ethics has been virtually left off the research agenda. Surveying the research field, De Witt points out that "[t]o date, there has been insufficient attention to norms, values and the ethics of internationalisation practice … the approach has been too pragmatically oriented towards reaching targets without a debate on the potential risks and ethical consequences" (De Witt, 2015, p. 354). Knight notes that while research on historical forms of colonisation on education has been a prime focus of academic research, little attention has been paid to the cultural effects of TNHE (Knight, 2015).

CURRICULUM CONCERNS

During my curriculum development work, I became aware that these narratives were rapidly becoming embedded in the institutional ethos and were having real, material effects on the design and delivery of curricula. I was attached to the Art and Design Department and began to work alongside design colleagues and students to examine the kinds of language challenges that had arisen during classes. The first issue that struck me was that the gateway course, Design History, lacked any mention of Islamic design or Islamic calligraphy. When I asked the course leader about this, he explained that (despite being recruited as an expert) he did not have a background in Islamic design and, in any case, students needed to learn about Western art history and design which, he argued, forms the basis of current visual design practice. I had a similar discussion with the convenor of a compulsory module on contemporary business ethics which contained no mention of (the long tradition of) Islamic business ethics. It was becoming increasingly clear that the so-called "internationalization at home" experience that we were providing to students was premised on clear assumptions about what knowledge was valued and what was not.

Setting aside for the moment the broader cultural effects of these decisions and the power/knowledge matrix at work here, these assumptions are in fact paradoxically at odds with the mission to equip students with job-ready skills. Subsequent research with prospective employers in the design field revealed that it was assumed that students would be trained to work with both traditions. Indeed, the most sought-after employees were those designers who understood the aesthetic and design principles and cultural symbolism and communicative power of both traditions, their differences and how they overlapped and merged – or, as one employer put it to me, how they were in constant transformative conversations.

FRAMING TRANSNATIONAL HIGHER EDUCATION PRACTICE IN THE GULF

In a response to these experiences, I began to dig into the scholarly work being undertaken on transnational and international branch campuses being set up in the Gulf region. Much of this work is based on practitioner case studies – academic teachers and researchers directly involved in programme delivery or, tangentially, in the evaluation or investigation of such programmes.

Interestingly, the first article that I happened upon was entitled "How do we 'Know' the Middle East?" Here, using the occasion of her presidential address to the Middle East Studies Association of North America, Virginia Aksan (2010) takes aim at what she sees as the problems emanating from the commodification of knowledge in academic life, exemplified by the growth of branch campuses of American universities in the Gulf that "export an idealized American education" which she sees as "a new form of missionary impulse" (p. 9).

As I read through this address, I remember thinking: "Finally someone in the field is using her position at an important event to problematise the presence of IBCs in the region." However, her central concern was not the cultural effects of importing a dozen US universities, complete with curricula delivered by US expatriate experts – many of whom had little or no experience of teaching in the Gulf region. Drawing on what I would argue are clear neo-orientalist tropes – in this instance, that Arab cultures simply buy or copy Western ideas without understanding their real value or meaning – Aksan claims that IBCs simply simulate Western institutional partners – without however, given their location, being able to promote critical questioning. This will inevitably restrict academic freedom, which she views as the heart of the social sciences and the humanities.

In direct response to these criticisms, Mehran Kamrava, the dean of the School of Foreign Service in Qatar Georgetown, claims that her university has "complete and unfettered academic freedom" both in teaching and research projects. Kamrava (2010) provides as evidence – completely unironically – that the courses on offer include The Problem of Identity in the Middle East, and The Problem of God and Islam and the West, and are taught by Jesuit faculty or by faculty "from other religious persuasions" (p. 133.) For Kamrava, not only is this evidence of academic freedom and critical inquiry, but it illustrates, despite its location, the institution's "mission of educating future generations of global citizens" (p. 134). Questions about academic freedom aside, what is troubling about Kamrava's rebuttal is that she seems unaware of the implications of the obvious cultural imperialism that it draws on: expatriate American Jesuit academics arriving in Qatar to teach Middle Eastern/Gulf Muslim students about the "problems" of Middle Eastern identities, God and relations with the West. Western teachers are somehow in a privileged and culturally superior position that allows them to explain back to their students their own cultural worlds and, having benefited from this instruction, that their students will therefore be transformed into "global citizens."

The key question to be asked here is just how pervasive is this cultural (neo-)imperialist approach in the literature on TNHE in the Gulf? What narratives are at work in constituting this particular educscape? To explore these questions, in what follows I investigate a range of case studies written by academics teaching in programmes in Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Oman and the HEIs that make up Education City in Doha, Qatar, in order to get a clearer understanding on how TNHE projects have been framed by those who work within them. Specifically, I examine how academics teaching in the Gulf frame their pedagogic mission; how they represent the challenges they face; and, crucially, how students' capabilities and educational needs are framed.

THREE BOOKS – DAHL, SAUDELLI AND MITCHELL

The title of Marilyn Dahl's (2011) book-length study of her setting up and teaching in a TNHE programme in Abu Dhabi in the United Emirates – *Failure to Thrive in Constructivism – A Cross-cultural Malady* – clearly announces the ideological pitch of her analysis: the Emirati student body is presented as being undernourished and unable to grow, despite the educational sustenance it is being fed.

To make her case for this civilising or modernising mission, writing in the narrative style of a colonial missionary discussing 'the natives,' Dahl presents orientalist caricatures of generic Emirati/Arab students whom she names Ahmed and Layla. For Ahmed, she imagines that commencing in the TNHE programme is like entering "an alien world" (p. 5) where the classroom technology – a Smartboard (instead of a chalkboard) and a laptop – will "introduce him to a world he has never before imagined" (p. 5). Unfortunately, Ahmed is not intellectually ready for this new learning context and Dahl tells us that soon "his attention begins to wander. He doesn't like having to pay attention, think, plan, discuss, or solve problems. He prefers classes where he can daydream" (p. 7). How does Dahl analyze this scene? By pathologising her student: "From a Western point of view, he seems to be immature and lazy; and perhaps he is. However, there is also a historical, cultural and epistemological basis for his seeming apathy and resistance to learning" in a Western classroom environment (p. 8).

Dahl then moves on to introduce the figure of Layla, who is presented as narcissistic and vacuous. Dahl surmises that "she has almost no knowledge of anything beyond fashion and household affairs" (p. 10) and exhibits little interest in education as she is simply waiting to be married off.

Engaging in simplistic psychologising, Dahl asks rhetorically: "What aside from basic character and personality is causing Ahmed and Aisha so much trouble with their college learning?" (p. 10), factors that would explain why they have not "progressed beyond the first level of cognitive development" as indicated by the students' writing abilities (p. 11). The answer, Dahl asserts, lies in Islam – "the profound reverence for every written word of the Quran makes it feel like a sacrilege to paraphrase or summarize anything that is written" (p. 11). This, combined with the students' low level of cognitive development, derails implementing a curriculum based on constructivist principles. Thus, Dahl claims, the obvious educational benefits are not immediately apparent, as they are with Western students for, with Arab students, "the quickening of the mind is not as spontaneous as might be expected" (p. 13).

For Dahl, this curriculum failure can be explained not just with reference to Arab students' previous educational experiences and the resultant lack of cognitive development and the effects of Islam, but also by the fact that the autocratic regime in the emirate is not conducive to constructivist learning principles: "Much of Western educational methodology is framed by democratic ideology and societal values. It presupposes a kind of individual inner motivation, organization of thought, global experience and level of awareness that has not yet developed in Arabic society" (p. 38).

Dahl also takes aim at Abu Dhabi's entire education system, "Arabic educators [sic]" and indeed the entire population of the emirate, which she claims work in concert to "stifle all independent and critical thought" (p. 20), when what is needed are educational reforms that will lead to a "quickening of initiative, thinking, inquiry, discovery and application" (p. 38). Astonishingly, Dahl dismisses these concerns, claiming that they simply represent resistance to change and merely reflect "the entrenched habits and epistemological beliefs" (p. 85) of the indigenous teachers, students and institutions of the emirate.

Mary Saudelli's *The Balancing Act: International Higher Education in the 21st Century* is a book-length account of the experiences of those she repeatedly calls "international educators" (based on the sole criterion that they have worked in HEIs in different countries). Unlike Dahl's one-person account, Saudelli's book is based on qualitative interviews with colleagues working at the Dubai Women's College in the United Arab Emirates.

Saudelli states that the purpose of the programme is to prepare young women to enter the workforce by providing a pedagogical space that "values the students' beliefs, empowers them in their decision-making process, and gives them voice in this rapidly changing developing country" (56). This, we learn, is to be accomplished through what Saudelli calls "21st century epistemologies and skills, knowledges and ideologies."

According to research participants, the purpose of the twenty-first-century programme is to "bring the world into the classroom" (p. 70) to students who are described as being protected from the real world. "We are hired here as international educators to bring the world into the classroom." (p. 70), as students "haven't got a clue what's going on around them" (p. 85). For other teachers, the mission is framed more coercively: "We have to force them to learn how to do things … we have to force them to be curious … we have to force them to take an interest in their own education" (p. 97).

The key to this much-needed transformation is critical thinking. Saudelli's teachers claim that "this is the first time they [students] have been asked to think critically" (p .94), and therefore they struggle to understand and make predictions about texts, offer opinions, identify facts, make choices or decisions, or participate in debates. These deficiencies are attributed to previous learning regimes, where rote learning and regurgitating information for exams was the norm in schools described as "incubators" or "vacuums" (p. 71). These schools not only protected students from the real world, but were places where students "have never opened or maintained a notebook" (p. 71).

Saudelli's study provides little detail about the content of the curriculum. She explains that it is designed to wake students from their passivity by means of critical thinking projects which will enable them to "get out and find out how this stuff applies in the real world" (p. 74). In part, this "stuff" consists of what is labelled "authentic" learning through the reading and discussion of newspaper articles focussed on confronting issues that "reflect what is true out there now" (p. 91) – issues that students are supposedly protected from such as divorce, crime and labour rights. According to her study participants, students have no knowledge of these issues and, once introduced to the texts, are not able to read them appropriately as they naively take news articles as fact. Therefore, they argue, learners need to be trained to read what is "missing or eliminated" (p. 74) because, in the words of another participant commenting on the same instructional material, "there is a lot of exaggeration" in media reporting in the region, and therefore students need to be able to make "an assessment of information to recognize what is true and what is not true" (p. 93) – although how teachers should go about this is not discussed.

Another curricular example offered in Saudelli's book is a research project where students undertake online research on a company based in Dubai, in preparation for site visits and interviews with key personnel. Their research is subsequently presented to classmates and teachers. By their assessment, as these students are "going from zero," the fact that they were able to research a company and present their findings was seen as a success. However, the teachers concluded that as the students struggled to respond to their post-presentation question – "What is your perception of the company from the company visit?" – their response revealed that they had a "very narrow and limited understanding" (p. 98) of the companies they researched.

My reading of these two accounts of curricular events is that, in order to intellectually rescue students, their epistemic capacities need to be framed accordingly. On the one hand, we are told that Arab students are sheltered, have inappropriate or inadequate learning histories, know little about the "real world" and, worse still, what they do know is not understood properly – that is to say, critically. Further, we learn that students struggle with tasks and pedagogical approaches that they are said to lack experience of – and yet it is their performance in these tasks that simultaneously evidences their lack of ability. It is little wonder that teachers report that students are "confused" (p. 74) and often have "blank looks on their faces" (p. 87). To me, in these instances, the curriculum and so-called critical thinking are simply wielded as instruments in the production of student failure.

In *Tocqueville in Arabia: Dilemmas in a Democratic Age*, Joshua Mitchell gives an account of his time setting up and teaching at Georgetown University's campus in Qatar, invoking and marshalling discourses of the clash of civilisations, civilising missions and the figure of the white saviour whose "coercive concern" (Jaffe-Walter, 2016) is to benevolently rescue students from their (historically explicable) ignorance by revealing the world as it really is – and what they need to do to be able to participate in this world.

Turning to discuss his curriculum, Mitchell confides that he has "grave apprehensions" about teaching Plato, Augustine, Rousseau and Marx (among other figures) who make up the Western political canon, as "students in Qatar were disadvantaged by not having had the thorough exposure to European and American history" that their Western counterparts enjoy – although this "deficiency" was somewhat compensated for by their understanding of the pervasiveness of religion. However, voicing his students' concerns, Mitchell acknowledges that students want modernisation but not Westernisation. He interprets this desire as a misunderstanding of European/Western thought that "still fills the imagination of peoples neither quite able to embrace nor repudiate the world that is now upon them."

Resorting to a kind of pop-anthropology, Mitchell argues that the effects of this inability to transition to (late) modernity is evident in Arabs' inability to voice opinions as individuals, but only as members of an extended family in which, he argues, they occupy a fixed role. The effect of this, Mitchell tells us, is that unlike his American students, who see the world as "infinite possibility" and therefore see roles as constraints, Qataris begin with a "standpoint of limitation and occasionally ponder a breach." Mitchell concludes, again ventriloquising his Qatari students, that they reject the liberation that a Tocquevillian, democratic man offers, "and they do not want it because they cannot

imagine living in a world that presupposes infinite possibilities." According to Mitchell, this explains why Americans are freer with their intimate relations, but are also concerned about global suffering. Qataris, on the other hand, are role-bound and as such their intimate lives are limited to arranged marriages – consequentially, they see their obligations as being limited to their immediate families.

Faced with such intractable issues and given that "liberty is not the metanarrative of the Middle East," Mitchell argues that the antidote is a liberal arts education, as only this form of education "draws [students] out of themselves" and can "produce thoughtful citizens who are able to think both critically and deferentially." However, when challenged by students who ask why he teaches Western canonical writers exclusively, he responds enigmatically that they, like him, will need to spend a lifetime trying to understand these texts. Clearly, this is not the kind of critical thinking Mitchell is looking for.

MISSION CREEP: WESTERN LIBERAL ARTS AS UNIVERSAL KNOWLEDGE

I now turn to a range of academic papers by education practitioners working in the Gulf region. Each of the writers of these brief case studies – which cover journalism, international relations, theatre studies, literary studies, and rhetoric and communication along with language issues in medical training – argues for the importance of what is variously referred to as "American-style liberal arts," "American and European university education," "the Western university system," "American liberal education," "American courses," "Western liberal curricula" – labels which have the effect of branding ownership, either in the name of the West in general or the US in particular. This association is further entrenched when it is seen to be coextensive with the so-called "modernising mission" of these programmes, which rhetorically frames branch campuses of prestigious American universities as culturally benign, quasi-development institutions whose presence in Qatar is explicable by a simple formula: modern states require modern citizens who therefore need a modern education. According to this way of thinking, liberal arts possess a "seemingly inextricable link to modern democracy" (Telafici et al., 2014, p. 185), the best exemplar of which is offered by the US.

Across these studies, liberal arts is presented in an unproblematic, idealised form of values-based education that universally promotes not only critical thinking – seen as the unique province of Western/American liberal arts curricula – but also promises to develop "free thinking" (Cinali, 2010) and encourage a "purity of intellectual inquiry pursued for its own sake" (Telafici et al., 2014, p. 186). It is also possessed of a "transformative power" (p. 114) that creates "rounded citizens" (Burns, 2014, p. 162) and fosters a democratic ethos described by one commentator as "the creative tension between cooperation and competition, a belief in freedom of inquiry and expression and the development of autonomy and self-reliance" (Tellis, 2014, p. 156) – a space where students become "self –driven," "self-reflexive, critical and adventurous" (p. 156).

A liberal arts education also transforms parochial outlooks into global perspectives (Kane, 2014, p. 95) by taking students out of their comfort zones (Risse, 2013) by teaching them "how to perceive, understand and navigate the world" (Woodworth, 2014, p. 174), to "speak truth to power" (Wright, 2014, p. 119) and allow them to "actualize their own humanity" (p. 118).

This idealised framing of the Western/US liberal studies curriculum underwrites, in turn, an idealised representation of disciplinary knowledge and practice in courses offered across the region's IBCs. For example, discussing his journalism course at Northwestern University's IBC in Qatar, Abusharif (2014) argues that the press as the guardian of democracy, functions to protect the public from "abuses of power" (p. 199). Although some attention is paid to the need to localise curriculum content, the course delivered in Qatar is purposefully identical to that delivered at the home campus in the US, and is proudly taught "unalloyed" (Abusharif, 2014, p. 198). As a result, although acknowledging the "temptation to narrowly reduce the universality" (p. 200) of journalistic practice, students are taught the history, contemporary practice and cultural and political contexts of journalism (including standards and ethics) of the US as the universal model of the "free press in the free world" (p. 203). However, according to

Abusharif, having advocated the universality of the journalism curriculum, the course teacher conjectures what their students will actually do with the skills and knowledge acquired during the programme, concluding that "we may harbour hope that a more open flow of information and a broader breadth of what can be covered as 'news' will be an outcome for the region" (p. 203).

CONCLUSION – CURRICULUM CONCERNS REDUX

Returning to my curriculum concerns, following the informal meeting on curriculum issues described above, and emboldened by my reading, I diplomatically expressed my disquiet to a senior executive who suggested that as I had not been with institution from the outset, I should look at the original consultation research undertaken prior to the establishment of the new university. After some digging around, I discovered the original presentation slides produced by the branding company which collated the findings of community and industry focus groups. These groups were asked what kind of institution the new HEI should be.

In fact, this material revealed that both parents and prospective students did not want the new institution simply to produce trained workers for the changing economy. They agreed that the university should contribute to nation-building and economic wellbeing through education, as promulgated in recently publicised national educational reform policy proposals. Importantly, however, this group also maintained that the students' ethical outlook should reflect their role as vicegerents of Allah, and the new university should be grounded in Islamic principles of work, understood as *amal* and *fi'l*. (Although both terms are conventionally translated as 'work' in English, they have much broader connotations. In broad terms, Islam is considered to be the ideology of practice and the practice of ideology – a religion of action, the praxis of the believers.) As originally proposed, this new institution would offer students an "holistic education" and be a model of "applied Islam," where both students and university staff would be mindful of their "national and religious obligations" and would model a contemporary, moderate voice of "faith-based development."

The findings of this market research exercise, presented to the opening team of the university, were rather different to the information highlighted during my induction six months later, which presented the university as an entirely secular institution where – by means of imported Western curricula (with embedded generic employability skills) delivered in English by internationalised educators – learners would receive an "internationalization at home" educational experience.

The changes that transformed the university as originally envisaged have now become the focus of my doctoral work.

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