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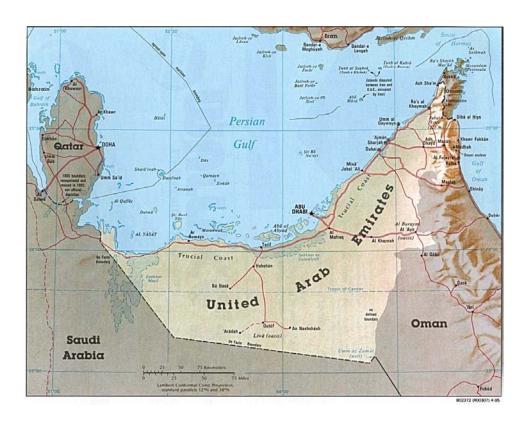
Beyond the Abaya: School reform in the Middle East

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**Teacher Education Crossing Borders:
Cultures, contexts, communities and curriculum.**

Abstract

This autoethnography focuses on a study undertaken during the writers 15 month employment in a Muslim girls' school in the United Arab Emirates. The paper outlines a school improvement project in the Abu Dhabi Emirate and the imposition of an Australian curriculum on the schools involved in this program. The teachers in these schools were exposed to regular professional development sessions as part of an informal teacher education program. While most of the teachers had a degree related to their teaching specialism they lacked any formal teaching qualifications. The professional development the teachers were required to undertake in the schools added to their daily teaching load and did not involve credit towards a degree.

School improvement strategies currently in use in Australian state education systems will be discussed in light of their recent implementation in the United Arab Emirates. In discussing the issues that schools faced implementing a new curriculum, teaching approaches, and associated school improvement strategies, it is important that the cultural context of the community and the school be explored with reference to the impact of these proposed changes in many schools across Abu Dhabi. Implementing a new curriculum and encouraging teachers to involve the students in more active learning challenged local teachers' notions of teaching and of how students learn.

An outline of my reasons for undertaking an autoethnography will be provided including the problematic nature of "cultural difference" where a western researcher is working with and observing teachers in a Muslim context. As Rosaldo (1993:202) suggests "Although the notion of "difference" has the advantage of making culture particularly visible to outsiders, it poses a problem because such differences are not absolute. They are relative to the cultural practices of ethnographers and their readers."

On-going discussions related to the western notion of school reform implementation in the Middle East continues to raise issues related to culture and long standing teaching practices that are now being challenged by those who have come from communities and cultures that have very different borders, boundaries and contexts.

The Narrative Begins

I looked again at the sliding doors. Open, sliding, shut.
I have to go through there.
I know.
It looked so final.
I was trying not to cry, he looked calm but I suspect he wasn't.
I had better say goodbye then.
He nodded and we hugged.
Why was I doing this? I said goodbye and walked towards the doors.
I only looked back once, no point in dragging it out. A deep sigh, an empty feeling and a racing heart. A few steps and the doors closed behind me.

I'd been sitting in my office at the university where I worked in rural Victoria preparing a lecture for a class of graduate diploma students all keen to be teachers. I was looking out the window at a view that I loved. A lake, green hills and lots of eucalypts. I enjoyed teaching here and was gathering my thoughts when I decided to check my email before heading off to work with these enthusiastic teacher education students.

An email from a friend in Dubai was sitting in the in box. A click and up popped
 " Nerissa, I have a job for you here in the United Arab Emirates if you are interested. You would be team leader with a group of 5 teachers from around the world and you would be mentoring the local Principal in a Muslim girls' school. You would need to come now."

Now? Sure, I'II just pop over tomorrow. Well that's a nice offer I will probably not take up. I gathered my materials for the class and left my office. I had a nice warm feeling walking to the lecture room thinking, well that's great that she thought of me. Just imagine all that I would need to consider if I took up the offer. All the organisation, my job here that I love, just too much to think about. My family would think I had gone nuts. I couldn't leave them anyway…what was I thinking.

With my box of goodies under my arm I walked through the university. I loved the atmosphere. Students of all ages, walking and chatting and calling out to me as they passed. I felt a real sense of community. I belong here, I know people and they know me and I value that. I could not leave my family and all this to go to the other side of the world. Or could I?

Introduction

This paper forms part of a more extensive narrative that is set in the United Arab Emirates in the Middle East. In this forum I will provide a brief background to the project that I was involved in and an outline of the demographics of the country. In discussing my desire to undertake research and to document my stories I have outlined the appropriateness of using autoethnography as a research methodology. I will also discuss the relevance of Pratt's (1991) and Apostolov's (2001) work in relation to the contact zone and the dilemmas that I faced while living and working in a country very different to my own.

I will also discuss the implications of my experiences in the Middle East in relation to my current role at a teacher educator. Are their lessons to be learnt for preparing teachers in Australia for their work in schools here with students from different cultural backgrounds. To what extent should we be preparing teachers to make a contribution from a more global perspective? Can we as teacher educators, in fact, ever prepare teachers adequately for work in cultural settings that are vastly different to our own?

Demographics

The United Arab Emirates is a small country in the Middle East covering an area of 82,880 sq. km, a little over one third the size of Victoria. The waters of The Gulf lie along the west coast while the country shares a border with Oman to the east and Saudi Arabia to the south and south west. The country had a population of around 4.8 million by the end of 2008.

Only 20% of the total population of the UAE are Emirati nationals. A little over 50% of the population is Pakistani and Indian workers while the remaining population is comprised of Egyptian, Bangladeshi, Jordanian, Iranian, Filipino, British, American, South African, Canadian and Australasian expatriates. Females make up only one third of the population due to the high number of male expatriate workers in Dubai, Abu Dhabi and Al Ain. The majority of the population is urban and is located in the two main centres of Dubai and Abu Dhabi. Al Ain and Sharjah are the next largest cities. 96% of the population is Muslim.

Historical Background

The country now known as the United Arab Emirates was originally ruled by a small number of families. These families owed their positions to tribal leadership and it was on this traditional ownership that the British negotiated treaties with their leaders in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Controlling or owning land became more important with the discovery of oil. These leading families quickly became wealthy and began distributing this money to family and friends. Some of this was later allocated to build schools, hospitals and roads.

"Oil revenues did not change traditional tribal ideas about leadership. New money, however, increased the influence of area leaders by giving them more resources to distribute. A new sense of identity appeared in gulf shaykhdoms and aroused a growing expectation that they should rule themselves. To do this, shaykhs had to cut themselves off from British control and protection." Library of Congress Country Studies United Arab Emirates Studies – Independence.
http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?frd/cstdy:@field(DOCID+ae0017) Accessed 21/4/2009

In the late 60's Britain decided to cease its military commitments to these Gulf States and an independent country was formed comprising the major shayhkdoms. On December 2, 1971, one day after the British officially withdrew; these six shaykhdoms declared themselves a sovereign state. Shortly after the 7th shayhkdom joined the federation to form the seven Emirates that constitute the United Arab Emirates today.

After the founding of the UAE, there was tremendous expansion of public education facilities. Section 17 of the constitution states that education is fundamental to the progress of society and is to be compulsory at the primary level and free at all levels. http://history1900s.about.com/gi/dynamic/offsite.htm?site=http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/aetoc.html Accessed 21/4/2009

In 2005 an education council was established in Abu Dhabi to work alongside the Ministry of Education to initiate reforms across the education sector. The role of this education council was to raise the standard of education and to develop relationships with private organizations to facilitate a range of reforms. The company that employed me worked closely with this education council to provide professional development for teachers and school principals in order to implement a number of changes. These teams of international teachers (consultants) were placed in schools to work closely with the local teachers.

The consultants were usually experienced teachers who had an expertise in Mathematics, Science, ICT, English or English as a Second Language teaching. It was expected that the team leader would act as a mentor for the Principal and Vice Principal in the schools where they were placed. Each team was also allocated a translator/interpreter who was fluent in English and Arabic. Most of the translators were Egyptian, Syrian or Jordanian.

Working in the school.

I arrived in the United Arab Emirates early in the morning on Monday 24th September 2007. I was greeted at the airport by the administration assistant for our company and delivered to my apartment, which was a 90 minute drive along a freeway through the sand dunes to the city of Al Ain. I was collected by my line manager the following day and taken to the school where I would be working for the next 15 months.

The school is a year 6 to 9 middle school with girls aged from 12 to 15. It is situated in a residential area on the edge of Al Ain and had an enrolment of 468 in 2007. There were 36 teachers, most had a degree in their specialism area, but very few had a teaching

qualification. The school day commenced at 8.05 and finished at 2.05. As I arrived during Ramadan school finished at 1.15 to allow the students and teachers to return to their homes to rest prior to breaking their fast at sunset. Males were not allowed to enter the school unless they had a prior arrangement with the principal, a senior teacher or with me as the team leader.

Two or three times a week the teachers would be required to meet with our team members/consultants. They could meet in grade level teams, in subject teams or individually as the need arose. The subjects taught in all middle schools included English, Mathematics, Science, ICT, Geography, History, Arabic Studies, Islamic Studies, Art, Health and Physical Education with all year 6 classes also taking music.

The board of the education council had agreed that a new curriculum would be implemented in the areas of Mathematics, Science, English and ICT during the first year of the program. This new curriculum was to come from Australia and was quite different to the text books that had been used for the past 25 years. The new curriculum was outcomes based and was modified slightly for use in the UAE. The teachers in the above subjects were instructed to commence teaching in English and it was expected that all teachers would undertake English Second Language classes either after school or during the school day.

As well as providing professional development related to this new curriculum for teachers in the above subject areas we were also given the responsibility of:

- Administering Emirate wide testing in Mathematics, Science and English at all year levels to assist in the collection of baseline data
- Developing a leadership team structure with regular meetings and minutes
- Establishing a whole staff professional development program alongside regular staff meetings
- Developing a number of excel programs for use in the school to computerise the collection of staff and student absences
- Ensuring the use of English during the teaching of Maths, Science, English and ICT
- Increasing the use of student-centred learning
- Developing and documenting a whole school behaviour management policy that outlined incentives, feedback to students and sanctions for poor behaviour
- Working with the school's leadership team to increase parental involvement in all areas of the school
- Increasing the use of ICT in the classrooms
- Improving teaching across the school with an emphasis on increased group work, clearly stated objectives for all lessons, regular feedback to students, less teacher talk and more student talk.

A monitoring agency visited the school every three months to observe the teachers and to collect documentation to provide feedback on our progress as a school improvement company and the progress of the leadership team and teachers at the school. They

observed the use of English in the classrooms and the implementation of the new curriculum.

While working to undertake the above tasks in the school we received support and encouragement from our Project Manager. He reinforced the notion of building relationships in the school and of the need to move slowly in the initial stages of the program. I was very aware of the negative impact of coming into the school as an "outsider" to implement changes that the Principal and Teachers may have been apprehensive about. I was also very conscious of being seen as an "outsider" by the staff in the school. Drinking coffee with the teachers and taking the translator with me for regular visits to faculty staffrooms allowed the teachers to see that I was interested in them and in learning about their culture and religion. This helped me to get to know what they valued as teachers and how they currently planned for learning to occur in their classrooms.

An Autoethnography

As my role at the school became clearer and I began building relationships with the teachers and the students a number of dilemmas started to emerge. I commenced writing a journal that would allow me to reflect on the daily events at the school. The idea of using my own experiences as a topic of investigation in its own right began to take shape.

I was fascinated with the notion that I could document my personal journey. I did not want to be bound by the constraints of more formal research and sought to interpret my own cross cultural experiences by investigating my own narrative. If this writing is to be of value to others intending to work for extended periods in the Middle East it needs to show the stories that make this cross cultural experience meaningful.

Denzin's emphasis on personal writing in *Interpretive ethnography: ethnographic practices for the 21st century* (1997) and Ellis and Bochner's discussion in their article *Autoethnography, personal, narrative, reflexivity* (2000) assisted me to identify the impact of personal narrative as a significant research methodology. For this research to tell a story that is worth telling, it will need to be written in the first person, in an active rather than passive voice.

This narrative will attempt to uncover the complexities of my reactions to the race, culture, ethnicity and gender of those I came in contact with during my 15 months in the United Arab Emirates. I want the reader to feel the moral dilemmas, the frustrations and the achievements that I felt while participating in the daily lives of the Muslim women I worked with. This paper will be the start of a long story that will link experiences and theory in an attempt to make personal meaning from events that I saw and from those in which I participated.

As a cross cultural researcher I am very aware of my own positioning in the narrative. Roth (2005:14) states "The stories ethnographers create are as much a reflection of their own cultural positioning as they are descriptions of the positioning of others."

These reflective stories will allow the reader to share my vulnerabilities and frustrations as I come to understand my role and the associated limitations while working at this school in Al Ain. As a Principal with 15 years experience in a state school in Victoria in Australia I had become accustomed to the authority that this leadership position held. Processes were outlined and procedures were usually straight forward. In my new role as Management Advisor in this middle school most of the processes a Principal would use here in Australia were not in place and many of these would not apply in this new setting. I had to continually ask myself: "Am I doing the right thing? What is the right thing?" I want my writing to provoke others to ask themselves "How would I have coped in that situation?" As Ellis and Bochner (2008:738) state "The self questioning autoethnography demands are extremely difficult."

By using stories as vignettes from my journal I will be able to highlight the challenges that I faced and the issues that I found myself involved in. These stories will help readers to make meaning from the situations and to gain an understanding of the settings in which the events occurred. Ely, Vinz, Downing, and Anzul (1997:70) discuss the use of vignettes when used as data for one's research. "Vignettes are composites that encapsulate what the researcher finds through the fieldwork. In every case, vignettes demand attention and represent a growing sense of understanding about the meaning of the research work." It is the stories that people connect with. How would I have coped in that situation? What would I have learnt? Could I take the risk and work in another country?

Do stories have a place in research?

Because stories are illustrative and easy to read they make the research accessible to readers. If the writer acknowledges that they are one participant's perspectives does that make it a reliable account of events? We can never write fact from another's perspective but we can relate our own experiences and what we have learnt from them. In the following extract from my journal I acknowledge that I was asking the Vice Principal do something that she did not, initially, want to sanction. It became clear that her experiences with the local Education Zone had influenced her reluctance to allow me to assist the student in question.

The following narrative is an extract from my journal written in the UAE. The Vice Principal and I had worked closely together during the semester and although she had good reason to fear the potential interference of the Education Zone our relationship was strong. She would practice her English as we greeted each other every morning and I would practice my Arabic.
She would say " Hello Daaarlink"   and I would reply "Asalam Allahkam Habibi."
The trust had clearly been established.

Journal Entry
May 2008
Muslim Girls School Years 6 to 9.

> *The end of semester exams have started. Today was Maths for some year levels and Islamic Studies for others.*
>
> *I came down the stairs from my office and noticed a year 9 student talking to the Vice Principal and one of the social workers. The student was upset and all three were speaking at once. I asked the Vice Principal what was wrong and she told me that this student had missed the bus and had just been delivered to school by her driver and was now 10 minutes late for her Maths exam. The student would not be allowed into the classroom to take the exam and would fail the subject. This would mean that she would have to repeat year 9 as students cannot progress to the following year if they fail one subject. The student began to cry as she realised the implications of being 10 minutes late for this exam.*
>
> *The Vice Principal repeated that she would not be allowed to take the exam now. I asked a few more questions and pleaded her case for her while she cried loudly.*
> *"But she will fail and have to repeat the whole year". I couldn't bear the injustice of it all.*
> *"I will take her over and explain to the teacher and will stay in the class with her for the extra 10 minutes. She will be so sad if she has to repeat year nine and all of her friends will go to year 10 to another school." I was trying not to use complex words as her English was limited.*
> *The Vice Principal explained that the school would be in big trouble if the education zone found out. I promised not to tell them!*
> *"I will take full responsibility. You are a kind women," I was pleading now and had my hands together as if praying, "I will get on my knees on the floor to beg for this student."*
> *The Vice Principal looked at me and laughed. She told me I was very funny.*
> *"Yes I know I am a silly women but let me take this student over to the class now and the Zone will never know." She nodded and waved me away. I bolted out the door with the student hoping that the teacher supervising the exam spoke English as this was going to be difficult to explain.*

I had a strong sense of purpose when I began to plead with the Vice Principal. I cannot write from her perspective but she seemed relieved that I had agreed to take full responsibility for the decision. The Education Zone is a powerful department that has many rules that must be adhered to. Forcing students to repeat a class was one of the issues that our company was attempting to change. The rules and the asserting of power was one aspect of what the teachers referred to as the "Arabic way". Stories similar to

this will be used in my research to set the scene for some of the changes that we were being asked to implement. The international team at the school all felt strongly about the issue of the school forcing students to repeat year levels. There were many other issues that were not as clear as this. The imposition of a western curriculum was just one of the dilemmas that we faced at the school.

The Emerging Dilemmas

After working every day in this girl's school in Al Ain I began to build relationships with the teachers and was able to explore the local community. A number of dilemmas began to emerge. Why were we here imposing an Australian curriculum in a country that functioned in a very different manner to Australia? Did the teachers share the Sheikh's vision to compete on a global level in regard to education? How could the teachers gain an understanding of alternative approaches to learning when their own lives held so many restrictions? How could I, as an expatriate from a Western country, gain sufficient knowledge of Islam in order to understand what motivated the women in their daily lives? What I saw as restrictions were clearly acts of devotion to a God I did not understand. Were the rules related to the roles of men and women written in the Koran or were they imbedded as traditions over a period of time? Did this warrant investigation or was it, in fact, irrelevant? Should I have been considering these issues or just getting on with the job that I was being paid to do?

These questions were central to our work in the schools and to the success of the project we were involved in. In seeking to understand what were becoming highly complex issues for me I began to step back and look at the problematic nature of cross cultural contact. Pratt (1999) uses the term contact zone to refer to social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today. Apostolov (2001) in his work on the frontier between Christian – Muslim communities uses the term 'zone of contact' when discussing the intersection between the two vastly different cultures and settings. Pratt (1999) sees a way forward when working in a cross cultural setting.

> "We are looking for the pedagogical arts of the contact zone. These will include, we are sure, exercises in storytelling and in identifying with the ideas, interests, histories, and attitudes of others; experiments in transculturation and collaborative work and in the arts of critique, parody, and comparison (including unseemly comparisons between elite and vernacular cultural forms); the redemption of the oral; ways for people to engage with suppressed aspects of history (including their own histories), ways to move *into and out of* rhetorics of authenticity; ground rules for communication across lines of difference and hierarchy that go beyond politeness but maintain mutual respect; a systematic approach to the all-important concept of *cultural mediation*(Pratt, 1999: 2)
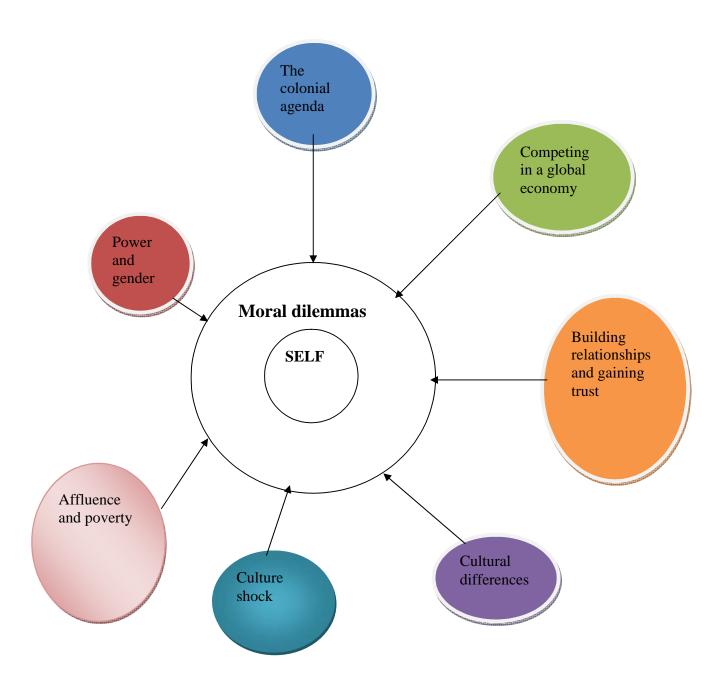
The
colonial
agenda

Competing
in a global
economy

Power
and
gender

Moral dilemmas

SELF

Building
relationships
and gaining
trust

Affluence
and poverty

Culture
shock

Cultural
differences

Figure 1.

Instinctively I had been employing many of the strategies discussed by Pratt. Mutual respect was obvious but it took me some months to realize that I had to change my approach if I was to be understood and respected. My ideas and suggestions would be met with a tactful inshallah*, at best, and a dismissive inshallah, if I was not reading the situation well. My previous experience as a Principal dominated in the initial stages as I sought to document and plan as I had done in previous schools. As I watched and observed I quickly realized that these strategies would not work. Arabic communities value oral communication rather than written and schools are in the initial stages of developing plans.

The local teachers had been very welcoming but our lack of knowledge of the culture and of the complex history behind some of the practices hampered many of our attempts to assist in making changes to their teaching practices. Their limited knowledge of English and our lack of Arabic language skills slowed our attempts to understand their frustrations and to find an entry level in regard to their understandings of how learning takes place. We began to question our own theories of how learning occurs as we observed the teachers working with the students. We held workshops to explain the new curriculum, to discuss the terms and the concepts involved. The teachers struggled to grasp the meaning of terms such as, syllabus and dimensions. They wanted the text books back that they had used in the past and where were the tests for this new curriculum? The parents were also concerned that their daughters where not bringing home text books. The monitoring agency would be sending people to the school soon to see how we had progressed with implementing this new curriculum.

So Many Questions and So Few Answers

How could we "communicate across the lines of difference" (Pratt, 1999:2) and move forward with the teachers? We were clearly struggling with common issued faced by many groups who work in cross cultural settings. The consultants and I met to discuss the issues and to brainstorm strategies that might make the process less frustrating for the teachers and for us as a team. We decided to take a step back and to meet with the teachers in small groups to chat, share stories and to find a way to bridge the gap between their expectations and ours. As we did this we realised that introducing the new curriculum within the first few weeks of the school year had been an overly ambitious move. Discussions revealed that the teachers had a very different view of learning than ours. Learning for these teachers took place in a classroom with a text book, a teacher and students who listened and worked hard, but now the leaders of the country wanted many of these practices to change. They wanted students who could problem solve; who could become independent learners who could gain entry to University and go on to lead the country on a competitive global level.

Inshallah literally means 'God Willing'. It can be used in many situations but is mostly used at the end of a conversation as a form of agreement on what will happen in the future.

We had to take a step back to discuss learning and teaching before we could progress, but not our preconceived ideas of how learning and teaching should work in the UAE. We could share some ideas but we needed to focus on what they were hearing rather than what we were trying to say. We needed to give the teachers time to discuss their ideas and strategies. To talk about stories from their own childhood experiences related to how they learnt and what they saw as "good teaching". I had to keep reminding myself that making a judgement about "good teaching" said more about me than it did about the teachers at the school. Al-Omari (2008:19) makes a specific point in regard to learning in his recent work on cross cultural issues. "A good example is rote learning. In some cultures, such as Arabic and Chinese cultures, rote learning is an integral part of the education system, whereas it has become redundant in many Western cultures. In the Arabic world, the ability to recite poetry and the need for leaders to be good orators remains strong." Clearly we had more questions to ask ourselves before trying to assist the teachers to implement the new curriculum.

Where to from here?

This autoethnography continues as I come to understand that there are many questions that will go unanswered. Will there be aspects of Arabic traditions and practices that change in order to accommodate reform within the education system? If reform continues in schools in the U.A.E how can those in the 'contact zone' work effectively together? I had build a number of close relationships in the school and was beginning to discover many strategies that allowed me to implement directives issued by our company while still maintaining the essence of how the teachers wanted to work. I often wished that I had known at the beginning of my journey what I came to know and understand after 6 months in the UAE. This is, of course, is a common reflection uttered by those engaged in the complex nature of cross cultural experiences.

Will the countries leaders see changes in schools in the near future? All meaningful school reform moves slowly as teachers discuss and reshape their practices. The real changes will occur as people work together, build relationships and share their stories. As a Westerner I came to know and understand more about my own concepts of learning and how change can be managed by observing the work of others. Through mutual respect we come to understand what is important for the people we work with on an international level. Would an intensive course on aspects of 'Arabic Culture' have assisted me with my work at the school and my general life in the UAE? Maybe some discussions from an Arabic perception would have assisted but I think there were many things that I needed to discover for myself as part of the learning process.

As I settled back into my role in teacher education in Australia I wondered about the implications of my experiences, and of cross cultural experiences in general, with particular reference to the students I am working with now. I visit schools and see our students working with children who have recently arrived in our country and with others whose parents arrived here as adults. These children are a part of smaller communities and families who have vastly different life experiences, ways of knowing and of learning

in contrast to the culture they are now seeking to become a part of. The rich background of these children and of their families is not often acknowledged in relation to how learning occurs and what motivates these young children. The classroom teachers and the teacher education students have little knowledge of the backgrounds of these students and of their priorities as families in a new country.

To have an impact on the thinking and understanding of the teacher education students I work with I need to provide the opportunity for them to investigate their own concepts of how leaning occurs before looking at learning in other settings. Exposing them to the stories and practices from another culture will hopefully allow them to view leaning as more specific to each community and how it links closely to the religion and traditions of each distinctive setting. As Pratt (1999) states, it will be the storing telling that will allow these beginning teachers to make the connections that will provide the insights into a different way of making meaning. I feel it is now my responsibility to raise awareness of many of the issues related to difference and diversity in the classroom with the hope that these new teachers will want to ask questions of these students and of their families. What are the priorities of these families who have grown and learnt in a very different way? How can we bring some of this learning into the classroom so that these students are able to make the connections with their previous experiences in order to develop and learn from their new experiences? Learning does not take place in isolation in schools. If we are to make school a positive experience for these students we need to ask questions and to have an open mind to the possibilities of how learning may occur for others.

Bringing these stories to life for teacher education students I work with will form part of my teaching in order to challenge their thinking and to encourage them to ask the questions that will allow them to consider the previous learning of the diverse classroom communities that they work in.

My experiences in the Middle East have challenged my notions of learning and of the impact of culture on the classroom.Those who work internationally usually seek an adventure, are inquisitive and seek to learn more about others. I certainly had an adventure. As Al-Omari (2008) suggests "when coming to an Arabic country pack your sense of wonder and your humour". I will continue to tell the stories that I experienced in an effort to find meaning for myself and for others who may choose to live and work in a cross cultural space.

"One who knows about oneself and about others will recognise:
Orient and Occident can no longer be separated.
To move comfortably between both worlds,
Between the east and the West, that is the best."

J. W. von Goethe

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