

*James R. Delisle, Ph.D. and Tracy L. Cross, Ph.D.*

## There and Back Again

### The Invitation

Jim

My first reaction was simply to trash the e-mail message before reading it. Suspecting a scam akin to the request to send money to Nigeria in return for a cut of the profits from a sizeable inheritance (remember those spam?), I wondered why I would be receiving an uninvited message from Saudi Arabia. Mysterious, indeed.

But as I read further on, this invitation to participate in a 3-day workshop on giftedness sponsored by King Abdulaziz and His Companions Foundation for Giftedness and Creativity (Mawhiba) sounded legitimate. It was. So, after a flurry of e-mails between me and Mawhiba's staff about everything from my sessions' content and audience to the process of obtaining a visa for a nation that does not distribute them to individual travelers without a government sponsor, I found myself at customs clearance in Saudi Arabia. Outside, my driver was waiting, and within an hour, I was delivered to my elegant home for the next 7 nights, the Intercontinental Hotel in downtown Riyadh.

Seasoned consultant that I am, including several international ventures, I was still not sure I was prepared for what awaited me in a nation whose culture, language, style of dress, and national politics were as foreign to me as any other place I had ever visited. And yes, there was a sense of fear that I downplayed every time a colleague or family member learned of my upcoming trip. "You're going *where?*" they would

ask, incredulous that I would go to a place that most Americans associated with the darkest cloud in our nation's history, the events of September 11, 2001.

But I was not alone in my travels, as several colleagues from America were also speaking for Mawhiba. Drs. Tracy Cross and Carolyn Callahan were attending, as was a contingent of administrators from Johns Hopkins University's Center for Talented Youth (CTY). Better still, Tracy had been here before, so he would be able to inform me of what I might expect in the week ahead. I wondered then if his initial impressions prior to his first visit were filled with the same trepidation that I had right now.

Tracy

In the fall semester of 2001, I was hosting a Fulbright Scholar from Saudi Arabia named Omar Muammar. Representatives from Saudi Arabia had visited the U.S. and decided that the Indiana Academy for Science, Mathematics, and Humanities and Ball State University would be the most appropriate place for Omar to spend his sabbatical. He arrived in August, waiting for his wife and young daughter to follow. The tragic events of 9/11 occurred and Omar struggled for quite some to get his family into the U.S. Having Omar at the academy proved to be extremely valuable as our community tried to deal with the horrific events of the day and the fear and anguish that followed. To keep Omar safe, a faculty member at the academy and his wife moved Omar in with them. Over the next year, we could not have asked for a better person to help us recover.

Because Ball State University (BSU) did not have the appropriate Ph.D. program to offer Omar, he matriculated to the University of Arizona and obtained his degree. During that time I was invited to be a keynote speaker at an international conference being held during August 2006 in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. I naturally assumed that Omar had invited me. As I prepared to leave for the trip, I realized that Omar was in Arizona and would not be attending the conference. I became concerned in much the same way Jim had. Most people I talked to about the conference were very discouraging of my attending. The U.S. Department of State was also discouraging Americans to travel there. Some people offered very disparaging generalizations about all Saudis and how they were terrorists; others thought badly of me for trying to help their gifted children. Still others indicated that there are no gifted Saudi children. Fortunately, my dean had traveled to Kuwait and had a much more encouraging view about my going. That made the difference.

As it turned out, the conference became one of my best professional experiences. I made numerous friends there and started to learn about the complicated and nuanced culture of Saudi Arabia. When the second opportunity came, this time to work with Omar, I felt compelled to help as a small token of appreciation for what he had done for the academy. (I wrote about Omar in my *GCT* column [Cross, 2002].)

## The Differences

Jim

Each of our 3-day workshop sessions would have approximately 60 participants. The men would sit on one side of the room, the women on the other. A wall would divide the room

between the genders, with enough space up front so that I could see both groups and address them simultaneously. Although many of the participants would have some knowledge of English, simultaneous translation would be provided in Arabic, through headphones. Each session also would have two bilingual college students—a man and a woman—who would serve to work with the participants in small groups, helping to explain activities that I would assign.

Could I talk with the women as openly as the men? Would *either* group be willing to talk to me, to ask me questions, to share their own views and insights? On that opening day, I felt as awkward as I did at my first dance in junior high school: I was nervous, anxious, hopeful, and wanting to impress. For their sake, and mine, I wanted this to work.

Tracy

During my first visit I provided a keynote speech to approximately 2,400 people from 37 countries. I could see two groups of men, those who understood English and those requiring real-time translations into Arabic. There were two groups of women that I could not see who had been divided into two groups; again, one who spoke English and one who did not.

My 3-day workshop was divided into two groups, men on one side and women on another. Two screens were provided. Approximately half of each group could speak English fluently. The women wore black abayas and scarves, some covering their entire face. Presenting to two groups in this manner was uncomfortable, especially at first. Over time, the session went quite well and was very rewarding. I found that the quality of the discussions that I had in my sessions had never been better. I learned a great deal about the

Saudi Arabian culture during these sessions as well as during my time outside of the workshop.

## The Similarities

Jim

It didn't take long for the questions to begin: "Dr. James: Before we get started, I have to ask: 'What exactly do we mean by 'giftedness?'" This seemingly simple question is one

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whose answer has eluded me for the 30+ years I have worked in this field of study, as I have found that no one conception of giftedness includes all of the children (and adults) I would place under its umbrella. Any definition—*by* definition—imposes limits. I tried explaining this by begging for time, for I hoped that at the end of our 3 days together, my participants might be more comfortable with ambivalence than they seemed right now.

We had been asked to make our presentations very interactive, with

much time for discussion among the participants. Each of them was responsible, in some way, for implementing a summer program for gifted middle and high school students, focusing on advanced instruction in mathematics, robotics, medicine, and technology. My task was to provide some teaching strategies and methods for reaching these students through activities that moved away from the typical textbook-lecture format that seemed common in Saudi classrooms, where the average class size was between 40–50 students.

After introducing topics such as curriculum compacting, pretesting, differentiating across the spectrum—process, product, environment, content, attitude—tiered instruction and higher level thinking, the students were ready to work. And DID they! The enthusiasm of working together on projects that would have a direct impact on their students in only 8 short weeks was palpable. Keeping up with their energy and good, good ideas was a teacher's delight! Writing their responses in Arabic and sharing them with one another while I listened in on headphones, I realized that the art of teaching is one that has cross-cultural similarities; when the teacher is knowledgeable, excited, and willing to learn alongside his or her students, magic occurs.

### Tracy

A thirst for ideas to help their children was ever-present. Although sometimes based on assumptions about children that are different from our own, their insights could be quite keen, indeed. Many of the participants I worked with in both of the workshops held Ph.D.'s from American, British, or Canadian universities. They were very dedicated to having a quality education and to help provide it for the youth of their country. They were

quite serious about their work and yet displayed a respect for the U.S. that was quite impressive. On a couple of occasions, I criticized the U.S. in hopes of discussing some of the more difficult topics of the day such as suicide and cutting behavior. Surprisingly, they were willing to participate and learn about the U.S. and discuss Saudi Arabia, but they would not say anything in the slightest bit worrisome about the U.S. They were consistently very respectful of America and those of us there to provide the workshops.

## The Surprises

### Jim

Outside of the classroom, in evening discussions around sumptuous meals and strong coffee, our Arab hosts welcomed us in ways that made me feel like an honored guest. They didn't mind my naiveté about some of their customs, as the men were willing to answer any questions about both "nitty gritty" things such as the length of their thobes, the color of their ghutras, and the reason that their agals were black. Too, some more sensitive topics about the role of women in their society (men and women ate separately at our mealtimes), the Five Pillars of Islam, and the real meaning of "fatwa" and "jihad" to people, like me, who had envisioned these terms with fear, were all questions answered with honesty and clarity. As might be expected, our hosts shared a curiosity about America. Although many had traveled abroad, including to the United States, many others had not done so. They wanted to know about President Obama, while being cautious not to air their personal feelings about either our current or former Presidents. They were curious as to the average American's impression of

the Arab world, and although I did not claim to serve as a spokesperson for my countrymen, I did mention that even my ninth-grade students thought I was "crazy" to visit Saudi Arabia, even though our nations are allies, not enemies. And they wanted to know about our families, our children, and our favorite things to do when work was finished and we had time to ourselves.

Indeed, they were us and we were them: educators with a common mission to serve gifted children as best we could, for the sakes of our nations' welfare and for the children's personal benefit.

### Tracy

A wonderful surprise for me came in an unexpected event. One evening a small group of us went to the new national museum. After learning about the history of the formation of Saudi Arabia and the life of Mohammed, we left via a large urban park. It was 9:30 at night and the park was teaming with families. It was wonderful to see the young families playing in much the same way I had witnessed all of my life. In Saudi Arabia these types of activities go late into the evening. For example, shopping malls are open until midnight. As I pondered my two trips to Saudi Arabia, I really came to appreciate how much they try to protect families. Although some of the customs are still quite counter to my beliefs personally, seeing young children being nurtured made me wish that we could focus our own culture on our children. For example, the U.S. allowing young girls to be marketed so that they feel it necessary to dress and behave as "adults" (I would argue—adults in a music video) is a serious problem that plays out in numerous problems later in life. This overall tolerance of objectifying our youth to

make money is such an anathema to what one would see in Saudi Arabia, it made me think that perhaps we ought to be willing to learn from them, too.

## The Rewards

Jim

Author Kurt Vonnegut wrote on the concept of “cultural relativism,” wherein each of us lives in a place defined by its own set of customs and beliefs. No one culture is better or worse than the others, they merely differ in both obvious and unseen ways. And, he adds, if we don’t like our culture’s mores, there is nothing that says they can’t be changed, modified, or adapted. They are of man’s invention and, thus, are eminently malleable.

On my final day in Riyadh, a relaxing day, I spent it with Ahmad

al-Turaif, my student translator. We tooled around the snarled streets of Riyadh in his Honda Accord. He brought me to his favorite fast food restaurant, his college campus, his neighborhood mosque, and his favorite shopping district where tourists never tread. We talked about everything that a curious 20-year-old wants to know about a land he has never visited and a culture that was as foreign to him as his was to me. And we closed our day together with a handshake and a palm placed over our hearts, strangers 3 days before now united by a bond created when barriers are sidestepped in the name of personal growth.

This trip to Saudi Arabia made me realize the importance of firsthand knowledge as we consider ideas that may differ from our deeply held biases and beliefs. It’s a skill that I had tried to inculcate in my own students in my

years as a teacher and professor. Little did I realize just how much I needed to listen to my own advice.

Tracy

The great thing about international traveling with open eyes is one is invited to become more sophisticated. Although I have always been a proud American, I see these visitations and friendship building on behalf of our respective children to be the single best approach we have to creating peace. Let us learn from each other on our quest to help all of our children. **GCT**

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~~ment systems define “differentiation”?~~ The field of gifted education does have observation instruments that examine the important competency of “differentiation.” (See The Classroom Instructional Practices Scale [Johnsen, Haensly, Ryser, & Ford, 2002], The Differentiated Classroom Observation Scale [Cassady et al., 2003], The William and Mary Classroom Observation Scales Revised [Van Tassel-Baska et al., 2003], and the Classroom Practices Record [Westberg, Archambault, Dobyns, & Salvin, 1993].) How do the competencies in these observation instruments compare to those cited in this study?

~~When teacher performance assessments are used within school districts, they have the ability to influence the recruitment, selection, mentoring, and~~

~~professional development of teachers and ultimately change teachers’ classroom practices. Professionals in gifted education need to become involved in the identification of local, state, and national competencies and in the ways that they are assessed to ensure that best practices in gifted education are implemented.~~ **GCT**

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From the Editor