

# The development of Emirati university students' intercultural sensitivity

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This study investigated the effects of an intercultural communication (IC) course on Emirati university students' intercultural sensitivity (IS).

**Design/methodology/approach** – The participants were 89 Emirati students. The course required student involvement in a variety of tasks and activities, both inside and outside the classroom. The development of the students' IS was tracked using two instruments: the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (ISS) and a reflective writing task.

**Findings** – The difference between the students' overall pre-test and post-test scores was at a statistically significant level. The data from the reflective writing papers showed that the course developed the students' IS with a particular effect on their awareness of other cultures, barriers to effective communication and self-confidence.

**Originality/value** – In an increasingly globalized world, the findings of this study highlight the importance of a course designed to enhance university students' IS and therefore intercultural competence. They also indicate the need for more experiential learning to bridge in-class and out-of-class experiences which facilitate the development of students' intercultural competence.

**Keywords** Intercultural communication, Intercultural competence, Intercultural sensitivity

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

Culture is a building block of identity. Many factors play a role in regulating and shaping culture and identity including religion, class, gender, race, nation and civilization (Cannadine, 2013). Thanks to advances in technology and increased mobility, there is now more contact between cultures and more variety in that contact. However, communication between different cultures, i.e. intercultural competence (IC), can be challenging when it takes place across groups with different values and attitudes. The challenge can be more formidable in contexts with considerable cultural diversity like the UAE, where 88.52% of the residents are expatriates with various cultural backgrounds (GMI, 2019).

This paper investigates a particular aspect of IC, intercultural sensitivity (IS), which is defined as “an individual's ability to develop a positive emotion towards understanding and appreciating cultural differences that promotes an appropriate and effective behavior in [IC]” (Chen, 1997, p. 5). IS requires people to “have a desire to motivate themselves to understand, appreciate and accept differences among cultures and to produce a positive outcome from intercultural interactions” (Chen, 1997, p. 5). IS is essential for developing IC. With this in mind, the current paper examined the effects of an IC course on the IS of a group of Emirati



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university students in an engineering course at one of the government higher education institutions in the UAE.

## Literature review

### *Teaching IC in university settings*

Recent years have witnessed a surge of interest in teaching IC at the tertiary level as a possible consequence of globalization and its impact on many universities' drive towards internationalization. Universities often open campuses in foreign countries and accept exchange students. They offer courses targeted at easing students' transition between different cultures. Evidently, these programs have proven beneficial. For example, prompted by the belief that exposure to IC alone is not sufficient for students to develop IC skills and that students need explicit instruction, Eisenchlas and Trevaskes (2003) devised a program centered upon self-reflection and the integration of student experiences into the curriculum at an Australian university with a significant number of international students. They based their teaching on the principles of cooperative learning and engaged the students in critical reflection on "the conventions and practices they usually take for granted in their own culture, before 'moving on' into a systematic and conscious cross-cultural reflection" (p. 398). Their students, most of whom were language learners, were able to establish a link between language and culture. They noticed the cultural aspects of the target language, which enhanced their language acquisition.

A similar study with language learners was conducted in Iran (Kazemian, Khodareza, Khonamri, & Rahimy, 2021). In a writing-focused educational intervention, the researchers introduced a variety of topics (e.g. cell-phone manners, gift giving) to their students and engaged them in cross-cultural comparisons aiming to raise their awareness of Islamic-Iranian cultural issues and those of English-speaking countries. The results showed that the students improved their intercultural communicative competence (ICC) in significant ways. For example, they improved their "intercultural attitudes, knowledge, and skills of interpreting and relating of spare-time activities in some countries," and "skills of discovery and interaction" (p. 31). This study provides evidence that incorporation of IC-related topics and skills can indeed improve language learners' communication across cultures while enhancing their language proficiency.

Similarly, AlTaHER (2020) taught university students to communicate in a tolerant and respectful manner so as to avoid miscommunication resulting from ethnocentrism. The students increased their understanding of the dynamics of cross-cultural communication and used their enhanced understanding in preparation for their future careers. The students remarked that the course contributed to their acquisition of empathy and problem-solving skills. They also increased awareness of barriers to IC (e.g. stereotyping). AlTaHER (2020) argued that explicit instruction is necessary for students to gain new insights into IC-related concepts.

On the graduate level, Dimitrov, Dawson, Olsen, and Meadows (2014) held sessions on cultural differences in communication styles. They noted graduate students' role as teaching assistants (TAs) requires an ability to navigate cultural differences; TAs from distinct cultures are likely to have different expectations for teacher behaviors and communication styles, and that they "may model global awareness when they teach about international or diversity-related issues. By modelling openness to different perspectives, they help their undergraduate students develop perspective taking, which is a key component of intercultural competence" (Dimitrov *et al.*, 2014, p. 88). Results revealed that TAs increased their awareness of cultural and disciplinary differences in communication and learned how to adapt their communication style according to their audiences' background. Therefore, they

engaged more effectively in cross-cultural communication with undergraduate students, globally diverse peers and faculty supervisors.

Taken together, the results of these studies support the view that explicit instruction of IC, a significant aspect of which is *sensitivity*, affects student success at and beyond school. However, relevant research in the UAE context is scant, which is surprising considering the multicultural demographic profile of the country. Whilst numerous texts can be found of the importance of cultural diversity and tolerance within the UAE, researchers of IC and sensitivity have shown little interest in demonstrating how explicit instruction could enhance students' holistic development. The current study aims to bridge this gap. Accordingly, the study asked the following questions:

- (1) To what extent can a course on Intercultural Communication help improve Emirati students' IS?
- (2) Which aspects of the course contribute the most to the development of students' IS?

### **Methodology**

The current study is a classroom intervention designed to measure the effects of an undergraduate level course in Intercultural Communication on the development of Emirati students' IS. A mixed-methods research design was employed using quantitative and qualitative data.

#### *Participants*

Based on convenience sampling, 89 Emirati students (63 female and 26 male) registered in an Intercultural Communication course (HUMA 221) across two different university campuses were involved in this study. Their ages ranged from 21 to 24 with an average of 22.

#### *The intervention*

IC is an interdisciplinary area. Accordingly, the HUMA 221 course design combined facets from linguistics, cultural anthropology, psychology and sociology. The course content was based on theoretical content knowledge and the affective elements of learning related to attitudes, norms and beliefs. Reflective practice and self-reflection were also incorporated into the course design as these are important factors contributing to students' moving from an ethnocentric to an ethnorelative stance (Holliday, 2013).

The conceptual framework for the course was largely derived from a seminal textbook by Jandt (2018), which provided a foundation for theories such as low-context and high-context cultures (Hall, 1976), Hofstede's cultural dimensions (2001) and immigration. However, the instructors were mindful of the book's limitations in considering the UAE cultural context. Therefore, additional resources, more in tune with the UAE culture, were provided. These activities provided valuable "teachable moments" and raised student awareness of the value of IS. Faculty teaching on the course had a very multicultural background and were long-time residents of the UAE.

In order to understand other cultures, it is important for students to have a nuanced awareness of their own cultures. Therefore, the first assessment in the course was an individual cultural artifact presentation where students were asked to deliver a short talk on an item that has special significance to their cultural identity. This exercise encouraged them to be self-reflective, thus using constructivist principles of building on prior knowledge and existing experience to navigate the intercultural terrain. These intercultural skills were further developed through class seminars and role-plays where students had opportunities for *praxis*, putting theory into practice (Kolb & Kolb, 2001). Each week,

students delivered seminars on a different course topic. In the process of doing that, they developed affective skills such as interpersonal skills, inclusiveness and turn-taking. The synthesis of both theoretical and affective knowledge was displayed by students during the two final assessments of the course. Firstly, in the cross-cultural analysis, where students interviewed someone from a culture different from their own and analyzed the interview in terms of the concepts they had learned during the IC course; secondly, in a final analytical task, where students reflected on how their intercultural skills had developed since the beginning of the course and gave explanations of how this heightened IS was evident in their lives.

The course was taught over 16 weeks with three hours of instruction per week. The students attended the course in five different sections but they were exposed to similar, if not identical, instructional activities, tasks and assessments as part of the course.

#### *Data collection tools and analyses*

Data were collected using two instruments: a questionnaire and a reflective writing task. The questionnaire comprised two parts. Part A included questions related to the students' demographics including their age and gender. It also asked students how often they engaged in communication with people from cultures different from theirs. Part B included the intercultural sensitivity scale (ISS) developed by [Chen and Starosta \(2000\)](#). ISS is a 24-item self-report questionnaire assessing one's level of overall IC sensitivity across five subscales: interaction engagement, respect for cultural differences, interaction confidence, interaction enjoyment and interaction attentiveness. Since some of the statements in the questionnaire are negatively-worded, they required reverse coding in calculating the scores. The higher one's score on ISS is, the higher his/her IS level is. In [Chen and Starosta's study \(2000\)](#), the Cronbach alpha reliability coefficient of the scale was found to be 0.86. In the current study, it was 0.84.

The ISS was administered to the students twice: at the beginning and at the end of the course. The pre-test took place during the second week of the course, while the post-test was administered to the same students in the last week of the course. Descriptive and inferential statistics were used to analyze the data.

Qualitative data were collected using a reflective writing task assigned to the students during class hours. The students were asked to discuss the ways in which their IS improved since the beginning of the course. They were also required to explain the particular aspects of the course they felt contributed to this improvement. They were told to consider out-of-class factors as well, if any.

The researchers analyzed the reflective writing papers of 30 students whose pre-test and post-test results differed at statistically significant levels. To this end, thematic coding was used to identify the emerging themes in the student responses. In doing so, no other aspects of their writing (e.g. grammar and organization) were considered. The individual researchers first conducted the thematic analysis manually. Then they held a meeting to compare their analysis results, discuss any discrepancies and reach a consensus across all papers.

## **Results**

In order to examine to what extent attending the Intercultural Communication course helped students improve their IS, the pre- and post-test results of the students' responses to the ICC questionnaire were analyzed. As shown in [Table 1](#), the students' scores for the pre-test ranged from 52 to 108 with an average of 91.5 (SD = 9.6). Their scores for the post-test ranged from 76 to 120 with an average of 99.8 (SD = 9), indicating a substantial increase. The paired samples *t*-test analysis showed that the difference between the pre-test and post-test scores was at a

statistically significant level ( $t(88) = 8.3362, p = 0.0000$ ). The same was the case for each of the subscales.

The study also identified the ways in which the students felt their IS had improved. To answer this question, the reflective writing tasks of the 30 students (34%) whose pre-test and post-test scores were different at a statistically significant level were analyzed. Table 2 summarizes the themes in the data set and the frequency with which each theme appeared.

The most frequently occurring theme (#10) was *the development of students' IC skills* as a result of attending the IC course. One student noted that her awareness of nonverbal communication was heightened. Another student indicated she learned how to work with people from different backgrounds and build effective relationships with them. This student highlighted the role of media in creating the wrong image of people. She said, "I shouldn't put a picture on my mind about a society because of media or because other people talk about them" (Student 12). Similarly, another student stated that she became more interested in communication with people of different cultures as a result of attending the course, while another student said she learned to fight her anxiety of talking to people from different cultures.

The next most frequently mentioned theme was *increased awareness of other cultures* (#8). This contributed to students' understanding of the differences between cultures, adopting a neutral view and learning how to accept diversity and thinking outside their own cultures. A student wrote, "I used to be a little lenient with some of the minor differences. However, now no matter how diverse the other culture is . . . , I have a justification of why and how they differ to me and I am accepting them just like any other individual" (Student 4). He also added, "I have changed my personal judgment on other religions that I used to have before" (Student 4).

Another theme mentioned by the students was *increased awareness of barriers to IC* (#7). One student said she opened her mind to the barriers. A similar comment was made by another student who wrote: "I realized I'd been judging other cultures based on my own" (Student 7). She referred to ethnocentrism and assuming similarities instead of differences as potential reasons for this. Another student indicated she avoided stereotypes, which would otherwise put a significant strain on her communication with others.

**Table 1.**  
Comparison of pre-test and post-test scores on the ICC questionnaire ( $N = 89$ )

	Pre-test				Post-test				<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
	Min	Max	$\bar{x}$	SD	Min	Max	$\bar{x}$	SD		
Interaction engagement	16	33	26	2.8	20	35	29	2.9	6.4948	0.0000*
Respect for cultural differences	14	30	25	3.4	19	30	26	2.6	3.9282	0.0001*
Interaction confidence	8	25	18	3.2	11	25	20	3.1	5.893	0.0000*
Interaction enjoyment	3	15	12	1.9	6	15	13	1.9	5.7848	0.0000*
Interaction attentiveness	5	15	11	1.9	8	15	12	1.6	3.1098	0.0025*
Whole scale	52	108	91.5	9.6	76	120	99.8	9	8.3362	0.0000*

**Note(s):** \*Significant at  $p < 0.05$

**Table 2.**  
Student perceptions on areas of IS development ( $N = 30$ )

Areas of development	#
Improved IC skills	10
Increased awareness of other cultures	8
Increased awareness of barriers to IC	7
Increased self-confidence	5

*Increased self-confidence* (#5) was also mentioned by the students. A student reported, "I feel more confident. Having physical contact with women from different countries improved my self-confidence. I also feel pleased and happy when communicat[ing] with others" (Student 15). Similarly, a student stated, "I've reached to an extent where I feel more globalized and I can communicate even with the most closed cultures" (Student 23).

In terms of the particular factors that contributed to the development of the students' IS, students identified both in-class and out-of-class factors. The list of factors and the frequency of mentions for each factors are given in [Table 3](#).

In relation to the in-class factors, the most frequently mentioned was *the interview task* (#11). The authenticity of the task was particularly important for the students. The task allowed them to compare their cultures with those of the people they interviewed. Also important to note is the students' willingness to value differences between cultures and the confidence to engage in dialog with others. One student stated, "I interviewed three people. I was open-minded, flexible, confident. I respected what they said, and the difference between our cultures" (Student 13). Another student wrote, "I understand how people of diverse cultures communicate differently through their rituals, values, and symbols" (Student 9).

The *seminars* was another frequently mentioned in-class factor. Through these, the students were able to learn about cultural values and pay attention to the use of IC skills. Their active engagement in running the seminars increased their confidence, too. In the words of a student, "I found myself very engaged in [the seminars] as they made me realize it was completely fine to have different opinions" (Student 18).

The third most commonly mentioned in-class factor was *the instructor* (#6). The students pointed to the role of the instructor as a facilitator, which was particularly useful when the students were preparing for the seminars and the interview task. The instructors also appeared to be role-models, which was clearly indicated by one of the students: "[The Instructor] taught me how important [it is] to respect each other" (Student 3). The instructors' willingness to learn about the students' local culture and engage in interaction with them was also a facilitating factor. A student wrote, "[The instructor] was interested in learning about our UAE culture. This small thing motivates [me]" (Student 25). This statement also points to the student's enjoyment in interacting with a teacher from a different culture. The personal examples provided by the instructors during discussions were also considered important for a student to understand concepts related to IC.

Although mentioned less frequently, *the coursebook* and *the research projects* were also important to note. Each was mentioned by four students. The coursebook played a key role in enhancing the students' IS through its content. Of particular interest to the students was the

Factors	#	
In-class factors	Interview task	11
	Seminars	10
	Instructor	6
	Coursebook	4
	Research project	4
	Cultural artefact presentation	2
Out-of-class factors	Traveling	14
	Media	11
	Friends	11
	Foreign language learning	4
	Family	2
	Community involvement projects (CIP)	2

**Table 3.**  
Factors contributing to  
the development of  
students' IS

chapter on Hofstede's cultural dimensions. The students also indicated that the contents regarding the barriers to IC, gender and nonverbal communication contributed significantly to their understanding and respecting cultural differences. Their increased knowledge often reflected itself in their interaction with people from different cultures. It was particularly beneficial for the cross-cultural interview task. The research projects, on the other hand, gave students insight into the meaning of culture and different cultures, encouraging them to be more attentive during interaction with other cultures.

Similarly, one of the students mentioned that his research project helped him understand how cultural orientations influence people's choice of clothing. This made him more accepting of the differences between cultures: "I used to laugh about Indian women's clothes because their saree is kind of naked clothes. Now I respect their tradition" (Student 30).

Two students mentioned the *cultural artefact presentation task* as a factor contributing to their IS. One of them wrote, "Without this activity, I wouldn't have realized that I am influenced by a different culture. My grandmother is Indian, and she really believes in luck and certain objects. We were influenced by her beliefs and thoughts" (Student 5).

There were also six out-of-class factors that contributed to the students' development of their IS. Of these, the most frequently mentioned was *international travel* (#14), which took place during the mid-semester break. It was apparent in the students' responses that their experiences of international travel allowed them to practice what they learned in class. In this way, they increased their interest in foreign cultures and reduced their anxiety; thereby improving their self-confidence. One student said, "[When abroad,] I noticed that the way I look at things around me had changed" (Student 9). The same student also stated, "This makes me more confident and less nervous with others" (Student 9). Another student noted, "Using nonverbal communication correctly when you are travelling is nice" (Student 22). There was also a remark by another student about the importance of showing interest in the local culture when traveling. Taken together, these data indicate that the students' engagement in interaction with the foreign cultures helped gain a better understanding of IC, become more attentive to cultural differences and increase their self-confidence.

*Media and friends* were two other out-of-class factors that were mentioned 11 times each. Mentions of the media mainly included the students' use of the Internet and social media such as Instagram and Twitter. One of the students remarked that the Internet gave him insight into his own unorthodox culture and connect with others of a similar culture. This, in turn, helped him "feel accepted and normal" thereby "help[ing] me fight anxiety and my personal battle against depression" (Student 16). Another student referred to her own opinions being corrected through Instagram: "I always had the idea that African countries [were] uncivilized or uncultured but after seeing their posts on Instagram I believed that we are the same" (Student 21). The students also referred to TV programs about history and geography. These helped them understand the roots of cultural orientation and how peoples' geographical locations shape their lifestyles and thought patterns. On the other hand, friends helped the students develop their IS by sharing their experiences in foreign cultures and encouraging them to engage in communication with other cultures. A female student, for example, wrote, "A roommate who lived most of her life in India introduced me to her friends and professors. I became more capable to talk with people of different nationalities without having a misunderstanding" (Student 11). Another student reported, "Being a naturally curious person, I always asked my friends from different cultures about their cultures and their history" (Student 17).

*Foreign language learning* (#4), *family* (#2) and *Community Involvement Projects (CIPs)* (#2) were also among the factors contributing to the students' IS. According to the students, the experience of learning a foreign language enabled them to learn about the native speakers' cultural values. The increased awareness of the similarities and differences between the students' native language and the target language also enhanced their willingness to interact

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with others. Family members told them about their experiences of living in foreign countries, often encouraging them to learn more about those cultures. Similarly, CIPs exposed students to different cultures within their own communities. They grew to appreciate different thinking modes of people like the elderly and People of Determination.

## Discussion

This study sought to examine to what extent Emirati students' IS improved as a result of their engagement in a newly-developed course on Intercultural Communication. It also aimed to identify the students' perceptions on the ways in which their IS had improved and which particular aspects of the course contributed to this development. The results showed that the students' pre-test and post-test scores on all five subscales of the ICC, as well as the scores for the whole scale, differed at statistically significant levels. This is a clear indication that exposing students to IC concepts and engaging them in meaningful intercultural experiences has a significant effect on the development of their intercultural communication skills and IS. This supports previous research reporting the positive impact of purposefully-developed curricula on university students' enhanced IC competence (Kazemian *et al.*, 2021; AlTaher, 2020; Eisenchlas & Trevaskes, 2003). Two of the ICC subscales (i.e. interaction engagement and interaction confidence) recorded the most improvement. The students' interaction engagement is particularly important since it is this subscale that encourages students to take the initiative to communicate with those from distinct cultures. Coupled with their increased confidence when communicating with others, interaction engagement plays a significant role in an individual's ability to notice and understand not-so-visible elements of other cultures, thus increasing their desire to actively interact and open their minds and hearts to understand each other (Duke, 2014). Furthermore, previous research has found that "self-confidence and initiative directly correlate with personal adjustment and performance" (Dodd, 1995, p. 234). Approaching the concept from the perspective of "intercultural learning", Martinelli, Gillert, and Taylor (2007) note that confidence is essential for individuals "to share different viewpoints, perceptions and feeling, [and] to arrive at acceptance and understanding" (p. 35). In the current study, therefore, our students' enhanced aptitude for interaction with others is important to note since it encouraged them to constructively engage in communication with individuals from other cultures.

In terms of the specific ways in which the students thought the course contributed to the development of their IS, the present study revealed an overarching theme: *improved IC skills*. This was mainly due to the students' enhanced awareness of other cultures and barriers to IC thanks to the IC course. The reciprocal relationship between these is noted by Rader (2018), who observed that intercultural awareness allows for IS by enhancing individuals' understanding of other people's cultures and languages and showing them that these are "important to them in the way ours are to us, and therefore should be respected" (p. 138). However, it is also important for individuals to develop an awareness of their own cultures through reflection. Bennett (2013) warns that the lack of students' mental baseline for their own cultures will cause them to face difficulties in recognizing and managing cultural differences. It causes them to project their values onto others, making them think other people do a certain thing for the same reason they would (Bjerke, 2014). Recent research also found that Emirati students' involvement in reflection helped them learn to respect viewpoints different from theirs and explore diverse cultures and worldviews (Wren, 2021).

With respect to the factors that played a role in improving students' IS, results revealed both in-class and out-of-class factors. The two most common in-class factors were the interview task and the seminars that were part of the course. The interview task enabled students to learn about not only other people's cultures and but also their own cultures. Van Manen (1990) also notes that the interview as a research method serves a variety of purposes including:



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to study ways of doing and seeing things peculiar to certain cultures or cultural groups (ethnography); to study the way individuals see themselves and others in certain situations (psychological perceptions); to study the way individuals see themselves and others in certain situations (social opinion); to study the way people feel about certain issues. (p. 66)

Conducted outside class hours, this interview task established a link between the class and real life. That is, the students practiced some of the theoretical knowledge they acquired in the course in a real-life situation. This result is similar to earlier research studies which found that the interview experience helped students gain insight into cultures and reduce prejudices and inaccurate views of differences between cultures (Ostermeier, 1992).

The student-led seminars engaged the students in extensive reading and reflection on intercultural concepts and ideas. They allowed students to merge, “academic knowledge” with “experiential learning” (March, 2010 cited in Kolb, 2015, p. xix). As a student-centered teaching/learning practice, the seminars improved our students’ IC. They often pointed to their increased awareness of intercultural concepts and skills in interacting with others, a finding in line with previous research in other contexts (e.g. Vande Berg, Quinn, & Menyhart, 2012).

Another experiential learning activity contributing to the development of the students’ IS was the group projects. They allowed students to deepen their theoretical knowledge and practice their IC skills. These findings support the literature on the benefits of experiential learning in regards to improving students’ higher-order thinking skills (Boss & Krauss, 2014), the ability to apply knowledge in solving problems (Kannan, Mahajan, & Rajkumar, 2016) and interpersonal communication skills (Ayish & Deveci, 2019; Wurdinger & Carlson, 2010).

It was also interesting to note the variety of out-of-class factors, supporting the notion that much of the learning takes place informally outside of class (Coffield, 2000). Because students in formal education settings also engage in informal learning through interaction with peers and media, it is essential that formal and informal learning experiences in and outside the class be supportive of each other (Deveci, 2020). The most common out-of-class factors mentioned by the students in our study were traveling, media and friends. When our students talked about them, they always made a connection between what they had learned in class and how that knowledge and skills helped them in their out-of-class interactions.

## Conclusion

We live in a moment of history with an unprecedented amount of interaction and contact between different cultures. Many of the facets of globalization (e.g. media, business, travel, study) point to both the significance of competence in IC and a real-world need for requisite skills and knowledge in this area. A significant aspect of IC is IS and the current study investigated the effects of an undergraduate IC course on Emirati students’ IS. Results showed a statistically significant improvement of students’ IS based on a number of different in-class and out-of-class factors.

Not only does IS require being attuned to the similarities and differences between cultures but it also necessitates behaving in appropriate and effective ways when interacting with others. Universities should pay the upmost attention to preparing students to learn and live holistically both during and beyond their college studies (Nash & Jang, 2015). Accordingly, higher education institutions should develop curricula that equip students with hard and soft skills essential for the development of their IC. The intervention designed for this study showed that students’ reflection on the course content coupled with real life-experiences create invaluable opportunities for holistic development. These findings are significant given the cultural diversity of the UAE. Upon graduation, Emirati students will take on leadership roles in business and government and will be working in multicultural environments where

IS skills are highly sought after (Meyer, 2014). They will also be in contact internationally with peers from other cultures. Having the opportunity to learn the skills they will need in an IC course specifically targeting IS is therefore important.

The course used in this study was largely designed in-house (teaching materials, pedagogy and learning and assessment activities) and could provide an easily-transferable model to be used in other educational or business environments. Many program areas such as medicine, psychology, business and sociology, naturally lend themselves to the inclusion of either threads or modular components focusing on the development of IS awareness and skills. This could be concretized through the development of parallel syllabi where students “make connections to key concepts and principles within or across disciplines, across times, across cultures or places, or in some combination of those elements” (Tomlinson, Kaplan, Renzulli, & Imbeau, 2009, p. 3).

As with most studies, this one had some limitations. While there was a gender mix in the demographics of the sample, most of the participants were female. Future studies should aim to have a more balanced as well as an increased sample size. What could be an interesting developmental research project would be to follow the students over time to ascertain if what they studied and learned during the course has been retained and consciously informs behavior.

Despite these limitations, the findings of this study provide evidence for the need for more experiential learning to bridge in-class and out-of-class experiences to facilitate the students' IC development. In an increasingly globalized world, our students will need to have tools to understand the cultural norms and conventions of others so that they may work with tact and sensitivity in their future workplaces to achieve common goals. Overall, this study has shown that a course on intercultural communication is an effective approach for improving Emirati university students' IS while building a teaching and learning environment that promotes student engagement in dialog and reflection.

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