

Book review:

Enhancing teaching and learning in higher education in the United Arab Emirates: reflections from the classroom

(2012; ed. Cindy Gunn; Cambridge Scholars Publishing)

Kay Gallagher

Zayed University, UAE

One of the most welcome developments on the educational landscape in recent decades is the current focus on the practice of learning and teaching in higher education, in addition to the academy's traditional focus on research. There is a burgeoning body of literature in this emerging discipline, broadly labeled as 'the scholarship of teaching and learning' (known as SoTL), and evolving out of Boyer's (1990) pioneering work in the US. In this edited volume, among the first contributions from the Arab world to this growing field, editor Cindy Gunn (2012) brings together the practitioner research of eighteen faculty members from the American University of Sharjah in the UAE. Given the predominance of a "basically Western" knowledge base in this emerging area of study (Palfreyman, 2007, p. 2), this book is additionally welcome.

As tertiary level teaching changes gradually from a solely transmission-based model to a more participatory model, the act of teaching has become a ground in itself for knowledge-generation. Accordingly, the chapters in this volume are written from the stance of practitioner-researchers who seek to understand the meanings of their own pedagogical, curricular and assessment experiences in higher education, while adopting "simultaneously the roles of both researcher and practitioner" (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 95). The book originates from two initiatives at the American University of Sharjah: a Faculty Teaching Certificate Program, and a SoTL learning community emanating from the university's Faculty Development Centre. The book has contributions from all of the university's constituent colleges: the College of Architecture, Art and Design; the College of Arts and Sciences; and the College of Engineering. The School of Business and Management is also represented, and the library as well, revealing university-wide buy-in to the development of the practice of teaching.

The scholarship of learning and teaching has been described as

a complex and ill-defined movement which contains at the same time the notion of enhancement for the benefit of collective and individual practice, and the concerns for better rewards for individual teaching efforts. (Kreber, 2003, p. 95)

This ambiguity is noticeable in this volume, wherein some of the contributors are more successful than others in the difficult task of producing texts that combine conceptual analysis with small-scale enquiry and professional reflection (Stierer, 2008). Yet, undoubtedly all chapters add to the betterment of university teaching practice at both the individual and institutional levels.

This book sits further along an evolutionary line that started with earlier publications arising from courses of postgraduate study offered by foreign branch campuses in the region; these included the classroom-based research of school teachers studying for a University of Leeds postgraduate

qualification in Oman (Borg, 2006, 2008), the research of participants in the University of Sheffield's former Masters in Education course in the UAE (Clough & Nutbrown, 2001), and even the classroom-based action research projects of undergraduate teachers-in-training in the UAE (Gallagher & Bashir-Ali, 2007). Alongside the present journal, *Learning and Teaching in Higher Education: Gulf Perspectives*, such bodies of work serve towards the beginnings of a local knowledge base for the practice of teaching that is contextually situated and relevant. As Somekh and Zeichner (2009) state, the combination of teacher action with teacher research that characterises all such publications 'inevitably challenges the routines of the *status quo*', and allows future teachers to bring about changes that are "locally appropriate within the globalized world they inhabit" (p. 19).

Active learning is the unifying theme of the book, whether it be Dalibalta's efforts to promote active autonomous learning in a Biology course (pp. 47-57), Thomson's use of active collaborative learning in a new course in Museum Studies (pp. 33-46), El-Sakran and Mesanovics' efforts to engage engineering students in reflection on their own learning in a Communication Skills course (pp. 58-73), or the introduction of active learning techniques into Gibbs's Finance course (pp. 155-170). These contributions provide the reader with concrete and replicable examples of how traditional sage-on-the-stage pedagogies can be disrupted and usurped by more contemporary learner-centred approaches in multiple disciplines.

Considering the technologically advanced state of contemporary higher education in the UAE, the use of classroom technology is another prominent theme. Chapters include reflections on the effects of the use of personal response systems or 'clickers', the creation of video lectures online, the impact of games-based activities in a mechanical engineering course, the use of the social media site Facebook as an alternative to discussion boards in Blackboard, and the place of blended learning activities (using blogs and podcasts) in a traditional face-to-face classroom. Other chapters focus on a range of pedagogical issues, including independent out-of-class work, the use of *assessment for learning* in the form of peer formative assessment, and creating rubrics to measure literacy outcomes. Interestingly, there is a chapter addressing the little researched phenomenon of 'shadow education' or private tutoring in the UAE.

Of particular relevance is the interdisciplinary paper by Sperrazza and Vincent (2012) which opens the volume. They describe not only the ways in which a collaborative approach helped overcome the limitations for students' creativity imposed by their solitary disciplines in a Visual Design and a Writing Studies course, but also how their paired teacher-to-teacher collaboration enhanced their individual professional and academic knowledge and growth.

Culture-specific nuances provide insights into the unique climate of higher education in the Gulf, useful for those who are new to university teaching in the region, or contemplating a move there. In Giesen's chapter, for example, he notes that his students represent 22 nationalities, with no one nationality predominating, indicative of the cultural melting pot that is the norm in many UAE classrooms today. The progressive nature of UAE society is evident in his depiction of interreligious tolerance on campus:

Muslim students gather at the Zoroastrian breakfast, Persian students attend Indian Diwali festivities, Christmas Day is a university holiday and on the occasion of Eid al Fitr, which marks the end of the holy month of Ramadan, pretty much everyone joins the Muslim community in the fast-breaking Iftar meal. (Giesen, 2012, p. 26)

Nonetheless, this art history lecturer also reflects that

In cultural studies, philosophy, religion and history the learning atmosphere is charged with potential dangers. It pays to be careful in one's speech (p. 27).

Such depictions of the reality of life inside the university classroom offer invaluable insights into the often subtle parameters of faculty-student discourse in the Gulf. On the other hand, he observes that the lack of appropriate in-depth art history texts about the Arab and Islamic worlds makes it difficult to implement in practice one of the founding principles of the university, that it is “grounded in Arabic-Islamic heritage” (Giesen, 2012, p. 28).

What is particularly refreshing about this volume is that it is content-based and multidisciplinary. Most scholarly work in this field in the Gulf region tends to emanate from the TESOL perspective, and while often of similar quality, such as Gitsaki’s recent parallel volume of collected papers, *Teaching and learning in the Arab world* (Gitsaki, 2011), the broadening of the playing field heralded by Gunn’s book to include primarily content-based subject matter is long overdue. As for the naysayers who might argue that practitioner research, such as presented here, is not actually ‘research’, Stenhouse’s classic definition of research as ‘systematic enquiry made public’ (Stenhouse, 1981) is amply fulfilled by the fifteen chapters in *Enhancing teaching and learning in higher education in the United Arab Emirates: reflections from the classroom*.

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