

Lighting the Fire: Teaching is About Learning

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Learning and Teaching in Higher Education: Gulf Perspectives 2/2

“Education is not the filling of a pail”, William Butler Yeats explains, “but the lighting of a fire”. Learning is at the crux of education, which is a two way communication and takes both the professor and student to construct. Here I show my experience of walking into a class brimful of my own expectations and coming face-to-face with a new faculty member. My idea of learning was transformed from being a state of receiving information to a more proactive stance of analysing the information and going out of the way to find information through research and other methods. It would do great injustice for me to claim I went through this journey on my own. The presence of a demanding and challenging professor has showed me not only new ways of learning, but also how to construct my learning process in a way that kindled the fire in my intellect.

Choosing elective courses is one of the many enjoyable things you get to do in university. Many factors go into the choosing process. For me, I first look at the course content and how interesting it is. The workload that a course will demand is another consideration. The professor’s personality is also important to me. A professor does create a reputation by which students get to know him/her. Dr. Daniel Crocco was famous around our campus and I had heard enough about him to tempt me to sign up for his class in Human Growth and Life Span Development. He has mastered many fields in psychology and had had great experience in areas related to child psychology, which is an arena I find fascinating. In addition, all my friends agreed that the course content was a bit hard (and heavy), and that Dr. Dan was tough about grades, but nevertheless he was fair. I am always up to a good challenge, provided the play is fair. Besides, on a couple of occasions, I proofread papers for these friends and found the topics immensely interesting. One was on child’s play and the other was a brief summary of the whole course. Those little peaks on my friends’ assignments sparked my interest to take the class. Moreover, the class had two sections both in the mornings, my favourite time of the day. I couldn’t wait to start.

Full of excitement on the first day, I marched into the class and received a massive shock. As I entered, I carried with me my own prejudices and expectations, so it was like someone splashed cold water on my face when I saw a different faculty professor who was totally new in the town. And besides, she was female! To me female faculty (most of those I had met so far) are hard to please and difficult to deal with. In general, they are strict when it comes to tests and usually accept no excuses (like when you couldn’t study for an exam because you had an ailing brother). Besides this, the ones I met so far had used a rigid style of teaching that I could not cope with. For example, they do not like their views to be debated, and want everything their way, which kills my sense of creativity. Not to say that males are better, but between the two, I would definitely choose a male professor for many of my courses. How I was full of prejudice!

First impression: leave the class with the least losses. I remember sitting in the class that first day contemplating my ways out. I didn’t have to take any electives because I was loaded with courses related to my major so I considered forgoing the idea of taking an elective altogether. On the other hand, I loved taking subjects outside the field of my study (Natural and Quantitative Sciences), because I have a diversity of interests. Meanwhile Professor Dawn McBride was telling us all about herself, the way the class will be structured and what we will learn. My thoughts were running wildly – to stay or not, find another course or concentrate on my major studies, stay, go???

At once I started to critically evaluate the situation and consider the options. The fact that Professor Dawn was new to Zayed University played in her favour. Being new meant that she hadn’t been exposed to the students yet and was, in my opinion, not tarnished. I think when teachers meet the students here, the teachers tend to underestimate us because English is not our first language, resulting in the teachers lowering their expectations from the students, a fact I found horrifying to my education. I thought taking this class would be a tough mission in terms of challenges. Mostly, the odds were against me. It was my final year, so I could take the course either now or never. Given my passion to learn about this class in particular, I didn’t have a choice to make. Besides, Professor Dawn expressed a profound eagerness to learn about our culture and to what extent the class we are taking is related to life in the Emirates and Islamic culture. Her sincerity was so evident that I felt swept into staying.

I can say that the environment that Professor Dawn constructed in the class revolved around trust, confidence and enjoyment which I think are necessary in the learning process. First, the interactive atmosphere in which students were encouraged to discuss openly what they wanted to was an open invitation which I found difficulty in resisting. Second, privacy was a main issue in which all students were made aware that whatever we discuss in class remains in class. Besides telling us in class, this statement was made clear in our syllabuses. Third, we were also made aware not to criticize or offend others, which showed respect to everyone with no discrimination. As a result of building trust and confidence, we were more ‘at-home’ in the class which helped us unwind and reveal parts of ourselves and therefore understand ourselves better. For example, I realized for the first time that I have a meticulous need to put things in order, a need which might have stemmed from my earlier teachers at school who saw this as a good behaviour. Finally, as a

student of biology, with particular interest in genetics, I have constructed many genograms for different species ranging from cats to the English Royal Family, but never once of my own family. So when Professor Dawn, in one of her earliest activities with us, engaged us in this activity I felt refreshed and stimulated. I still have my family tree hung on my wall, and there were many other fun and creative activities.

Human Growth and Life Span Development (202) was an elective course offered by the college of Family Science at Zayed University. It is a comprehensive course covering the human life "from the womb to the tomb" as Professor Dawn would say. First we covered all aspect of the baby's growth from its development as a tiny zygote to its birth and how the pregnant woman should take all precautions such eating a healthy diet and not taking medications without prior doctor consultation. Then we moved on to the child's development stages and the various factors that can strongly affect their mental development, considering the many theories proposed by thinkers such as Piaget, Bandura and Erickson. Then we covered the teenage years, friends, and problems that may arise at this stage like eating disorders and bullying. Young adulthood was covered next, and we also delved into career planning and looked at different career tests such as that offered by John Holland. Middle to late adulthood and the physical and emotional changes involved were covered. Other topics encompassed marriage, intelligence, finding meaning in life and finally death.

One of the most powerful lessons I learnt in this course is about career development. Career development was a novel idea and I had neither been to any career counsellor nor really understood what it was until we took this class. John Holland's test, for example, clarified for me some ambiguities that I had. I thought I was being pulled by different options in many directions. After, I learned that you could have many interests and that career counselling can help you clarify your dominant trait and help you construct a future. My three top traits were investigative and social then artistic. Through such tests I got to know myself better and know the jobs that I will flourish at. Thus, it is a strong tool that could be used to steer one's direction toward his/her future career and what courses to take in order to succeed in that career.

It was obvious from the way Professor Dawn constructed the class and homework that she cared about giving us an unforgettable learning experience. One of my favourite assignments was the "Life Review" mini projects where we had to relate a topic to our lives. For example, one such task was to interview my mum about my 1st year growing up and my habits such as eating habits, sleeping patterns, gross motor development etc. Besides completing a task, I enjoyed knowing more about myself, particularly an age which I can't recall. In addition, I spent quality time with Mum dredging up hilarious and forgotten memories. I keep these projects in a portfolio along with my photos.

Also, every now and then Professor Dawn will ask a roundabout question about our favourite theory, theorist or topic covered so far and to state the reason. This highly increased our critical thinking skills and also incorporated the topics to us personally. My favourites were Bandura, Erickson and the ecological theory. For example, the ecological theory states that different systems (environments) contribute to the child's development and breaks them into five main systems: microsystem (home), mesosystem (neighbourhood), exosystem (school), macrosystem (society), and chronological system (time in history, wars). I like this approach best because it explains behaviour from many points of view. For example, this approach will not condemn parents alone for raising a delinquent child; rather, it will tie in the neighbourhood the child grew in, as well as the school and his friends, and the society's tolerance towards delinquency and rules imposed as well as the time in history and if there was any major crisis happening. It ties everyone with responsibility. I also enjoyed the contribution from the whole class as it enhanced my awareness about the thoughts of my friends and colleagues with regards to the topics we were covering. Often, we'd continue discussing topics outside the class which I enjoyed because we'd involve our friends who were not enrolled in the class, and also it made me read about the topics further. A highly controversial topic, for example, is about anorexia nervosa, which I one day hope to understand. In one of our heated arguments, I blatantly blurted out that I think it occurs mostly to "rich" girls! I realized my mistake when a hurt look flash across the face of one of the students who later told me that her friend had passed away because of the disorder and she wasn't "rich". I learned two things: to be more sensitive and not judgemental, and also to find out more about an issue before formulating any ideas and blurring them out.

Student productivity, and learning, I think, is directly linked to the supportive framework that a teacher provides, which inadvertently leads to sparking students' interest. Professor Dawn was helpful, open and honest with students. Making appointments with her was very easy and she was always prompt in answering her email. Besides this, she gave us many useful tips on how to study for quizzes, like turning chapter heading into questions and converting paragraphs to points. She also went to the trouble of translating some difficult vocabulary words on handouts she gave us. She was also aware of differences in culture. For example, "having the blues" is a widely used and recognised term in English but it is not in my culture. In fact, we love the colour blue, particularly days when the sky is blue, which is the total opposite of what it implies in English. After explaining what it meant, we understood the term "having baby-blues" which happens to some mothers after giving delivery. In addition, she helped us by giving us study sheets for quizzes and minimum readings required to pass (meaning that if you were aiming for an A grade, you had to read much more than that). In my opinion that was excellent, as you got to be the master of your fate: wherever you wanted to stand on that ladder of grades, you had to work that much. These were powerful tools which empowered me as a student, even though I had only a few other courses to take before graduation. However, I'm sure to use I'll use them again someday or another.

Tests and quizzes were in a meaningful format that enhanced the process of learning instead of instilling a feeling of fear in the students and losing the meaning of learning. Professor Dawn administered quizzes which I enjoyed taking. She constantly reminded us that quizzes are a means to show her how much we understood, and she would write on the first page of the quiz "*show me what you know*". The main reason I enjoyed the quizzes was because they were meaningful. Instead of testing how much you memorized, it tested how much you understood. The format of the questions was

engaging. For example, instead of asking to state what play therapy is, Professor Dawn would ask *'describe to a parent what play therapy is – tell the parent how it works and why it is important'*.

A powerful tool given to us by Professor Dawn was the 'keep track of your grades' sheet. I totally loved that one because I like to monitor my progress. Not only do you fill in the grades of quizzes, assignments, projects, but next to each quiz you reflect on how hard you studied (scale 1-5), what you could do better in future, and what study habit worked so well that it needs to be repeated. This method worked well with me and I am passing it on to my 12 years old brother.

Students have different learning styles, and I consider a teacher to be great when s/he ignites the fire of knowledge in most students in his/her class. To me, a learning style represents a door-lock configuration that a teacher must know in order to access the student. I would comfortably say that Professor Dawn did ignite in me a passion to learn about psychology and this class. My learning style is tactile/kinaesthetic, so it is essential that I get a sense and 'touch' of the topic through my seeing, hearing and feeling senses. For example, the professor's tone, body language, use of words, etc stick in my memory profoundly. I remember, for example, when we were learning about newborn babies, Professor Dawn taught us how to pick them up and hold them. I vividly recall her playing out the role, and her voice dropping and rising. When we learned about play and its importance to the development of children, we pretended to be kids again and brought our toys from home. To make it real yet, we sat on the floor and played with each other. In addition, I learn better when I get information from multiple resources. For example, giving handouts is very important to me, because I keep my files neatly organized and use them for reference in the future, considering that at Zayed University we have to return books by the end of the semester as they are recycled. Also, by seeing the same information in different places, this reinforces it and thus not only facilitates learning but also helps me in retaining lessons. For example, upon learning about the symptoms of Alzheimer's, it was difficult for me to recall the list of symptoms. But Professor Dawn also advised us to download a video clip from the Internet of an afflicted old man and I also read a couple of stories, so that helped me remember the list of symptoms. Moreover, Professor Dawn invited guest speakers to share their experiences with us. It is always helpful for me to see the information in real-life context. For example, one topic covered was on child life specialists, and we got to meet one who worked in the field for 20 years. It was exciting for me to see how theories about child development were used in reality to help children understand what's going on with their bodies. I learned a profound lesson during this interaction when one of the students asked about what to tell children who are dying. The child's life specialist easily said the child had a right to know and she'd explain it to him/her in simple terms. Aghast, more than 75% of the class disagreed with this approach. She then told us that the class's reaction was the generally perceived one here in the Gulf area, and in most cases she failed to convince the parents of the child's right. I agree with the child life specialist's approach but cultural beliefs are fortified barriers and will take many years to come to break.

Learning doesn't occur only from a textbook or information gathering. To involve students, Professor Dawn employed a multiple of ways. One way was to request from students verbal feedback both on the material covered, as well as on her style of instruction. Not many professors welcome feedback from their students, let alone ask to be critiqued. The feedback was always constructive because an air of trust was established and we, as students, knew that the feedback would always be used as a positive way to improve the professor. Another way was that she allowed us to interact with the class topics by sharing our opinions, and personal life experiences whenever possible. Everyone in class got a fair chance to speak. If the whole class was involved, either one student volunteered to go first, or one was chosen at random, and then in turn either one of the students sitting next to the volunteer would continue the round. On many occasions, the professor did relate topics to her personal life and gave us examples which not only helped in clarifying topics, but also in helping us relate to the professor and in knowing her better. Generally, I am reserved and don't like to participate in class discussions where I prefer to listen. But in this class I was always an active participant because I enjoyed it.

In my opinion, the learning objectives are met when activities and functions outside the walls of the classroom are just as important and integral as topics covered in the classroom. Professor Dawn encouraged us to attend class-related activities outside the class, and in return, some credits were given to us. For example, she encouraged us to attend a Family Science Fair where undergraduate students showcased their graduation projects. I saw how the topics we were discussing in class came alive. We discussed bullying, for example, its causes and possible solutions to curb it, and one project did tackle the bullying issue here in the UAE, so it was interesting to see the statistics. Her perseverance in this aspect further reinforced my trust in her, thus making my learning experience with her more rewarding. This was useful to me because it sent out a message to me that we can't learn everything inside a classroom, and that the experience of being exposed to seminar talks and other functions is also important.

Walking the talk is not only an attribute of a good leader, but also of a good teacher. Finally, what made my learning experience with professor Dawn standing out was her flexibility and integrity. Many of my other teachers have tried some of what I've mentioned above but failed to get results. I think the reason was that they were rigid in their approach. Because flexibility is so challenging in many ways, especially that there is a very fine line between being lenient (and taken as a fool) and being flexible (and taken as sensitive), I think it is an art that not many people can master. To me, the teacher's flexibility symbolized an open door illuminated by sunshine. When things got too rough, the knowledge that there is an exit sent me much needed relief. One occasion I remember so vividly was the day I had to take one of my friends to the hospital. This class was scheduled at 9-10 am, and there was another section from 10-11 am. I had to leave before the 9am class and was back around 9:50. After coming back I rushed to her to explain what happened, and asked her if I can join the other section to make up for my missed class. She agreed and I was not counted absent. We had covered a topic on moral development where the theorist Kohlberg believes there are three levels: pre-conventional, conventional, and post-conventional, with the last of these being the highest level of moral development that can be attained. At this level a person acts upon the belief that rules need to change as society evolve and that the preservation of human life is more important than following rules. Most importantly, some people don't reach this level, so reaching it means a great deal,

which Professor Dawn repeatedly emphasized. By listening, and evaluating my situation, Professor Dawn showed clearly she was at stage 6 of this level; therefore she was "walking the talk". It would've crushed my spirit if she had turned me away. Last but not least, she ALWAYS had a positive attitude in class and was so sunny that you find yourself carried on her wave. That taught me that personal problems and gloomy moods are best kept outside the class. To me not only professors have to be professional in teaching, but the students, too, should be professional about receiving information, participating in class, and taking responsibility for their learning.

The day I handed back the class book was like parting with a good, solid friend. Just the knowledge that the course was over weighed down on me with enormous gravity. But everything has an ending. However, my passion to learn about the field of psychology has not died as the fire Professor Dawn stirred did not die. What is more important is how one comes out of all that. I came out victorious, over myself of course. Previously I thought I could cover the same material by reading different books and browsing the internet. Previously I thought all female professors were the same. Previously I thought there was no way I could get an A on this course. Afterwards, my soul and mind expanded into such new dimensions that I even considered changing careers. Afterwards, I became less prone to judge others and better able to understand others. Afterwards, grades didn't matter (even though I got a straight A). Finally, a teacher enlightens his/her students not by dictating their own thoughts but rather by inviting the students to help weave their learning; and my learning experience can best described by quoting Kahlil Gibran:

"The teacher who is indeed wise does not bid you to enter the house of his wisdom, but rather leads you to enter the threshold of your mind."