

Influences of Globalisation and Culture on Motivation of Students in Higher Education in the UAE

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Abstract

This paper examines the educational environment of indigenous Gulf Arab students at a UAE institution, many from rural families and with English skills that need further development. The influences on a group of freshman Engineering students, their developing learning skills and the coaching they are given is explored. Practical methods for motivating such students to cross boundaries of world-view and sentiment are discussed, whereby a focus is maintained on their personal context and objectives whilst aiming to achieve excellence in academic accomplishment. A pre-freshman stage is introduced to fill the language void, easing the transition between High School, College and University. A personal view is presented from an educator who himself is crossing many boundaries.

Introduction

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) is a highly diverse, multicultural nation where the indigenous population is significantly outnumbered by an expatriate labour force. In such an environment, the development of a University education system could never be “one-size-fits-all.”

As a result, and influenced by the globalisation not only of industry and commerce but of education itself, universities such as Wollongong from Australia, British University in Dubai and American University of Sharjah compete to attract students and to develop the nation. The majority of overall population, and also of student intake nationally, is from the Indian sub-continent, schooled entirely in the English medium.

Students are in general motivated to develop and then study in a second language. Core values (“drivers”) which motivate students include potential future study or work opportunities in the major financial centres around the world, referencing a commerce-based ethos where the English language is the norm.

Overall, the broad cultural demographic and complicated heritage supports growth and development. However, this is not necessarily the case for indigenous students, who can struggle to reconcile sociological differences of values and morals. Business relationships and international politics appearing seemingly one-sided also have an impact. Imported textbooks may not have contextual resonance for the student; and policies of emiratization greatly influence the local population.

Background and Context of this Study

Motivation in education must be seen as one of the key factors in a student’s performance. McDonough (2007) states that motivation is the property of the learner and it involves the following four elements:

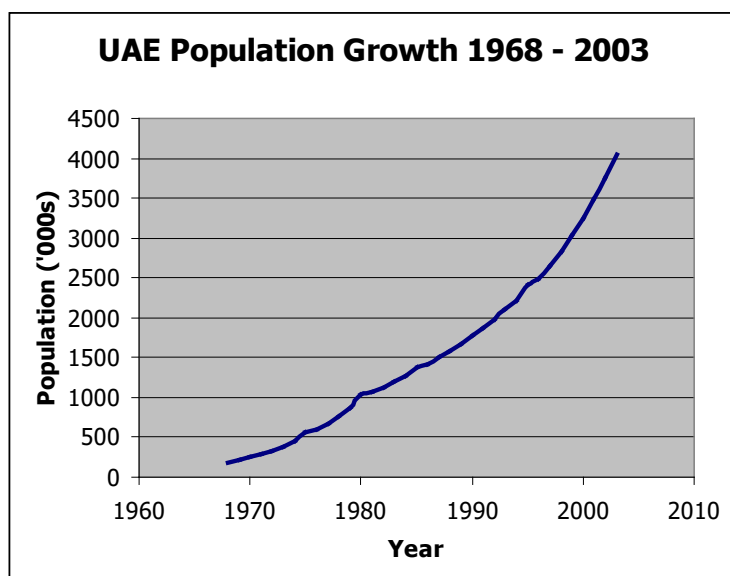
- The reasons why the students want to learn

- The strengths of the students' desire to learn
- The kinds of people the students are
- The students' estimations of what the task requires from them

After summarising the situation of the country and its population demographics, we will look at some of the current methods and rules established to advance the learning of the students. Then we will look at some of the factors influencing student motivation and behaviour. Lastly, we will review new ideas being used by some tutors to increase motivation in classes.

Before December 1971, the United Arab Emirates were known in English as the Trucial States, in reference to a nineteenth-century truce between Britain and several Arab Sheikhs. Since then the country has expanded rapidly and developed a tourism industry, international commerce and agriculture. The financial resources for this expansion have come from oil reserves; the human resource required has been flown in over the last four decades. Figure 1 shows that the official estimate of the country's population in 2003 was four million (Tedad, 2003), with three million living in the main cities. Less than 20% were citizens and just 12% were Emiratis (local Arabs). Subcontinent Asians account for over half the population. These are mainly male labourers and other workers on relatively short contracts, although an increasing number are educated and resident with their families. The remainder of the population is made up of other Arabs, Westerners and east Asians. From this population breakdown, it can be seen that the pool for higher education is relatively limited. Therefore, there are only tens of academies offering this service.

Figure 1: UAE Population Growth



A drive by the late President and founder Sheikh Zayed to educate the new generation of local Emiratis has resulted in the establishment of universities around the country, notably the national institutions UAE University (based in Al Ain) and Zayed University (in Abu Dhabi and Dubai). In parallel, organisations from abroad have established local contacts and cater mainly to the expatriate communities. As the families of the expatriate communities are not well developed, in terms of number or age range, the universities serving them are often smaller campuses. A broad distinction can thus be drawn between local and foreign universities – although many institutions are a combination, being

established by government departments, individuals, UAE-based companies or private local foundations in collaboration with institutions in other countries.

Other than the federal run universities catering almost exclusively for the indigenous 11%, the other international organisations (foreign universities) have affiliations with India, USA, Britain and Australia. The international organisations are often based on co-education; however the conservative Islamic tradition means there are many single gender campuses. The majority of students are female. Culturally, it is less acceptable for women (and especially young women) to go abroad, so the majority of students enrolling at "local" universities is female. A 3:1 ratio is suggested for the UAE University, and motivations of the two groups tend to differ (Semmar, 2006).

Most university education is in the medium of English. Educators are usually from Arab countries, USA, Europe and Australia, and others include from Pakistan and India. There is a need for educators at all levels whose origin and heritage is local – a point recognised by the students themselves (Harold, 2003).

Emirati student population

A program of emiratization has been implemented to encourage employers to hire local nationals, potentially in preference to other non-nationals. This means that most students have an excellent chance of employment after completing their studies.

Let us focus on the students in the local establishments, particularly at the UAE University. The annual intake is over 3,000 students, of whom the majority arrive from small towns and with a low proficiency in English (Semmar, 2006). During their high school years, 65% lived in small communities having less than 200,000 inhabitants. A minority are placed in the highest English Proficiency level (level 3); Fall Semester 2005 saw over half of all students were placed in the beginning levels (Fundamentals and level 1) of English language.

Historical methods at UAE University

As the learning systems in the country are generally fairly new, many traditional pedagogical methodologies are applied even at the higher education level. In terms of attribution theory (Weiner, 1974), successful outcomes are commonly attributed to the quality of the teacher rather than the motivation and effort of the learner. However, there is a reactive element also, whereby the organisation of the learning system (especially with a requirement for rapid development) is based on current pedagogical approaches, even when inappropriate. With such an intake of students and with a requirement to implement rapid change in a short period of time, some rules have arisen and are currently implemented.

For example, the University applies an absence recording system. One of the first rules that an instructor is likely to explain to students is that of absence recording, which is also used for lateness recording. For some instructors this has been interpreted as "any student arriving later than 10 minutes after the class start time will be marked absent. They then have the option to attend the class or leave." Another instructor may have the rule "arriving 5 minutes after class starts counts as a late. Every two 'lates' count as an absence." Lateness is not monitored by the system, so a mental note or a paper based system is added to the existing absence recording. A further rule of exclusion from the class is enforced, should the number of absences exceed a certain percentage.

Students receive frequent assignments. Many instructors will give assignments on a regular basis, requiring these to be submitted and then graded. There are also frequent quizzes and assessments,

often without sufficient time to review and improve understanding. Other in-class and assessments are performed on a regular basis to ensure students are keeping up with the work. For scholarship students, attendance and grades are monitored. As part of the overall grade for a course, a percentage is held for scoring the student's participation during class.

Some instructors allow reading time during the sessions for students to go through the material. Others implement a pre-quiz which tests the students' knowledge of the documentation at the beginning of a new topic, to ensure that it had been read before the class.

It can be seen that most of these motivators could be classified as pedagogical, being grade-related or a risk for the student's attendance record on a course. The majority of the students are financially well off and have good job prospects at the end of their studies, aided by the emiratisation program. Therefore financial progress does not stand out as a motivator.

Student anxiety

A study of English students at UAE University (Semmar, 2006) states that:

“Students are more likely to be motivated to learn and succeed ... when they possess both extrinsic and intrinsic goals [and] experience low levels of anxiety...”

Extrinsic goals include aspiration for a higher social status as well as wanting to show ability to family members, teachers and friends. Intrinsic orientation is identified as the satisfaction that students attain from being involved. Along with this, Semmar found that anxiety was an important factor in the motivation of students: converse to the extrinsic orientation, there was a fear that the teacher will think that students are weak or incompetent, and a fear of being ridiculed by fellow students. Test anxiety – nervousness in assessment situations – was also a factor. Further, the study mentioned that there are differences in motivation based on gender (Semmar, 2006).

There is a need to understand the students' motivations to learn, first by looking at their starting point. This means getting to know the students. Through this we can discover good “hooks” or starting points onto which our teaching can be connected. Some of these hooks are suggested below; they all represent ways in which students can be helped to build their self-esteem and to find the experience of learning an enjoyable... one.

In the higher education field, Blake and Mouton's Synergogy appears to have some potential, as it makes the most of expert knowledge as well as encouraging active learning (Coles, 2004). The nation and culture are held close by the indigenous population, perhaps particularly because they are a minority in their own land. As would be expected this comes out in the words of the national anthem:

“Live my country, the unity of our Emirates lives
You have lived for a nation...”

This is supported by the statement of student teachers mentioned earlier (Harold, 2003), that their aim is to help the country develop. Additionally, the long cultural-religious heritage of the country (in contrast to its much shorter history as a nation-state) is an important theme for many students. Although not as strictly orthodox as other Islamic nations, there is still a strong focus on the religion and way of life defined by Islam. Again, this is mentioned in the national anthem:

“Whose religion is Islam and guide is the Qur'an
I made you stronger in God's name oh homeland”

The Islamic ethos is evident in attire, segregation of sexes and demeanour as well as conservative rules.

Globalisation of brands in branches of marketing and retail such as food, vehicles and celebrity are also in the consciousness of students, usually positively. Thus, these topics also lead to increased involvement and interest.

Questions and Method

Rather than a systematic research study, what follows is an exploratory review of practice among teachers at UAEU, in the light of some of the literature on motivation. The literature described above has much to say about students studying in a non-native language, and the focus here is on those in technological disciplines such as computing, sciences and engineering.

The questions explored in this paper include:

- Is there a commonality in student motivation because of globalisation, for example due to well known brands?
- Are there motivational characteristics specific to a heterogeneous group, for example language and heritage?
- How can the instructor take advantage of these motivators in encouraging students to perform?

Instructors teaching subjects at the UAE University were interviewed. Their thoughts on the motivation and methods used for improving motivation of students who are studying in a non-native language were considered. Other areas discussed and noted were the socio-political environment within which the students live and work; the impact of religious values in the classroom and the gender-differences identified in single-gender classrooms.

Instructors were asked questions about their classes, such as class size, gender, student ages and subjects taught, summarised in Table 1 below. Further open questioning about the students related to their strengths and weakness, their interests and motivators was introduced. This then lead to discussions about specific methods employed by the instructor to motivate students.

Table 1: Instructors questioned.

Instructor	Class Size	Student Gender	Subject(s)
A	15 – 20 students	Male	Computer-Aided-Drawing
B	25 - 30	Female	Computer Programming
C	15 - 20	Female	English (for example, Report writing, Presentation skills)
D	15 - 20	Male	Measurement (Physics) Lab
E	25 - 30	Male	IT
F	25 - 30	Female	IT
G	15 - 20	Male	English (for example, Report writing, Presentation skills)

Third, the author attended classes as an observer or co-teacher. Again, the focus was mainly on engineering and computing disciplines, but also some portions of classes where aspects of teaching and learning English were considered. Particular focus was on hands-on learning in Computer Aided Design

(CAD) and Computer Programming courses and active learning sessions for these and other subjects. These are described in Randeree (2006).

Fourthly, as an observer or co-instructor, the instructor's comments and actions which were seen as of motivational intent were noted during the sessions. Where the opportunity arose, for example, after the learning session or during interviews, the instructor was asked about the reasoning behind the comments and actions.

Results

From the investigation, the following areas can be highlighted as appropriate for motivating students:

- Relating education to status and positions of responsibility
- Relating education to national development
- Relating education to heritage
- Relating education to religious duty
- Engagement through contextualisation

Relating education to status and positions of responsibility

In the classroom environment, teachers used encouragement relating to status and responsibility. Examples of such phrases are:

- "You are the leaders of the future."
- "You will have many people working for you."
- "Maybe you will be my manager."
- "When you become the head of the university, remember me!"

Relating education to national development

"Given the relatively young age of this nation, the developing nature of the education system... belief statements center on ideals related to the future development of the country and its citizens." (Harold, 2003)

Ideas relating to the growth of a nation were used by teachers to motivate students. These were along the lines of "Your country needs you." Linking to the field of study, for example, there is a need for engineers to develop the infrastructure of the country. Recognition of the individual as being of worth and beneficial to the community was seen as important.

Relating education to heritage

In a programming class, the use of pearls in an analogy related to the heritage of pearl diving (pearling) ; the concept of "text strings" being a collection of characters was compared to a string of pearls and it was noted that in the past the pearling industry had been the only real income for the people of this region.

Linking current curriculum content to the history and culture of Arabs and references to the golden age of Arab and Islamic civilisation is also a useful motivator and metaphor for the students' situation. Contributions of Arabs and Muslims are highlighted, depending on the field of learning. For example:

- The first organised hospital was built in Cairo. The Ahmad ibn Tûlûn Hospital treated and gave free medicine to all patients. It provided separate bath houses for men and women and a rich library.
- Al-Jazari developed a device for lifting large amounts of water (Mansour, 2002).
- Zero and decimal number system has Arabic/Indian origins.
- Jabir Ibn Hayyan obtained sulphuric acid by distillation of alum. He devised and perfected chemical processes such as “sublimation”, “crystallization”, “distillation”, “evaporation”, and “filtration”.
- Origins of words in common English usage such as “Algorithm”, “Chemistry” and “Algebra” are from Arabic (1001 Inventions).

Relating education to religious duty

As the students generally have a strong awareness of and identification with their religion, encouragement relating to their duty towards the faith can be motivational. In a general context, a sound education can be related to the future service of the community, as explained in a hadith (saying) of the prophet of Islam: “Abdullah ibn Umar narrates that the prophet said: Indeed Allah blesses certain people with special bounties for the benefit of other people. As long as they benefit others, Allah continues his bounties upon them” (Kandhlawi, 2006).

In the field of Ethics, being taught to engineering students, the following hadith is an example: “Jabir narrates that the prophet said: undoubtedly, amongst you the most beloved and nearest to me on the Day of Resurrection will be those having the most excellent conduct.” The development of agriculture is encouraged in these words: “Jabir narrates that the prophet said: he who cultivates a barren land has a reward thereby.” In Engineering, for example Civil Engineering, the comment “Abu Dhar narrates that the prophet said: ... removing stones, thorns and bones from the path is Sadaqah (an act of charity) and pouring water from your bucket into your brother’s bucket is Sadaqah (an act of charity)” (Kandhlawi, 2006) can be used to focus attention on water purification and distribution as well as to waste management and treatment. Resources such as <http://www.searchtruth.com/> can be used to search for particular words in the Koran/hadith, to locate quotations useful for teaching – although non-Muslims should be sensitive to the risk of misinterpreting words from these sources.

Engagement through context

Here the aim is to motivate through existing student interests. One example of this is the use of personal, first names. Students had a greater rapport with instructors when they were known by name. As well as student names, the idea of engagement through context relates to the imagery of familiar objects.

The use of physical objects which are familiar to the recipients can encourage participation. For example, in a Computer Assisted Drawing class (with male students), the task included drawing the alloy wheels found on many cars, the idea being that an alloy wheel (rather than a flange) is a familiar to the students, almost all being car owners themselves.

With globalisation came Hollywood movies, which also make a suitable context nowadays for students. A computing class learned that RAM in a computer forgets when the computer is switched off - the analogy used was that of the film “50 First Dates” where the lead actress loses her short-term memory when she sleeps. An intriguing point can be raised here, that often there is an attitude from traditional

schools that the Arab/Muslim culture is at odds with the western media and movie world. In the students, it is found that both play a part. The depth of the culture and nation-building fervour may be augmented by the English language media.

Technology

The use of technology can be expected in the technical classroom. Some of the instructors felt that the use of animation was helpful, not only in aiding the understanding of the students but also in motivating and increasing interest. Similarly, the use of email and on-line education systems (such as Blackboard) can be enhancers of motivation.

Language needs

From interviews with other instructors, it is suggested that the issue for students is not the language of instruction. This is drawn from evidence that the students do as well on tests in English as they do in Arabic. Additional English support is always available. The language issue is important during class when, for example the need to ask questions for clarification is clashing with the anxiety of asking in a foreign language (with its perceived risk of being mocked). Thus, tutors who have Arabic as a first language, although instructing in English, can take (and if necessary answer) questions using the medium of Arabic.

On occasion notes in Arabic on a specific topic were made available to students. They were directed to sources, both in English and Arabic, either on the internet or in the library. One teacher, who was not Arabic speaking, set an assignment to find useful related information sources in Arabic on the internet. These were then collated and checked by an Arabic-speaking assistant and made available to other students through electronic distribution.

Even limited use of Arabic can serve to support and “scaffold” (Wood et al., 1976) students’ understanding by reducing the cognitive load of new information. In a computer programming class, a textbook example which used variable names “hourlyrate”, “nom” (to represent name) and “message” was modified to use variable names “FuloosKulSaa”, “Ism” and “Risala” (respectively, representing the Arabic equivalent of the English phrase) which clarified the problem and gave a local context to the problem. Similarly, a problem to program the computer to toss an imaginary coin incorporated the use of the words “Dirham” and “Dalla” instead of “Heads” and “Tails”.

Use of transliterated Arabic words into English is commonplace for students, and can be assimilated relatively easily as it is becoming more common in marketing material and it is used as the lingua franca in mobile text and internet chat messaging. Transliterated Arabic is symbolic of the amalgamation of an international, commerce-based environment couched in a traditional heritage (Palfreyman and Al-Khalil, 2003).

Discussion and Application

Using the insights from this study, a possible four step approach for improving motivation of a group can be summarised as shown in Figure 2 below:

1. Identify the student grouping
2. Identify drivers (common values) for that group, such as heritage, language and culture.
3. Research related motivators, linking drivers to education or to the subject taught.

4. Incorporate ideas into the teaching.

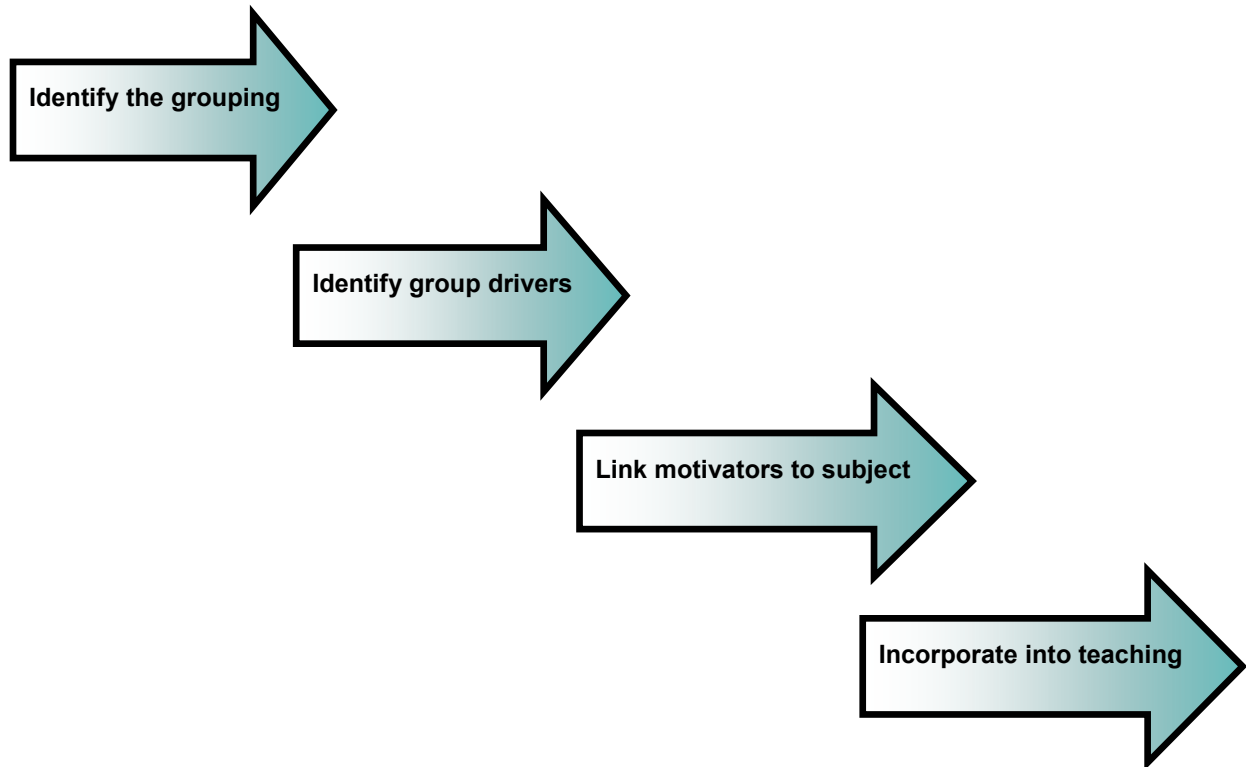


Figure 2. Process for improving student motivation

The aim is to move the education functions within what is a traditional educational establishment from purely pedagogical methods to incorporating ‘synergogistic’ approaches.

The groupings we see in this study can be summarised as shown in Table 2 below. For this grouping, extrinsic and intrinsic motivational ideas are shown in Table 3.

Table 2: Definition of the student grouping

Gender	Single gender, either male or female.
Nationality	Emirati national
Age group	Late teens
Background	Islamic tradition, many with limited experience of the language of education – being relatively proficient in Arabic.

Table 3: Incorporating driver based motivators into the classroom.

Drivers	Motivators (Extrinsic)	Incorporation into classroom (Intrinsic Motivators)
Heritage	National Anthem	Why should I learn?
Culture	Quotations of leaders	How does this relate to me?
Language	Link with first language	What is the value of this?

Peer group Religion	Branded products (e.g., cars) Context	How can I understand this concept?
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This has to be built on personal teaching characteristics to ease the student’s transition to Higher Education, and improve behaviour and motivation for learning. Qualities from Shackleton’s leadership style (Table 4, see Morrell and Capparel, 2001) are applicable here as it must be mentioned that teaching or leadership style will have an impact on motivation:

Table 4: Shackleton’s leadership model applied to education.

Praise and trust
Rewards
Focus on students’ goals and expectations
Student manages own behaviour
Builds self esteem
Empathy

Alternatively, this is summarised by Kauchak & Eggen (2005) as attributes in four areas:

- Personal teaching efficacy
- Caring
- Modeling and enthusiasm
- Expectations

Students can be engaged through contexts with which they are familiar, or which are important to them in their culture. There is however a risk of over-simplifying and stereotyping a group. There should at the same time be an awareness that in the global, technological “village” students are comfortable with novel ideas. A bridge between them can sometimes be found. For example, here transliterated Arabic is identified as a language which the students use on a daily basis.

The use of technological systems, such as animation, may aid in understanding, but the benefit in motivation may not be so clear. Kim et al (2007) suggest that there is no proven benefit to learning of the use of animations. However, the use of personal names and personal motivational emails are suggested (Kim and Keller, 2008) to improve performance.

This investigation has impacted on my personal teaching style and methods, by following the four step approach outlined above. Drivers that I have identified among my students include a desire to be leaders of the future and managers and directors of major organisations. Thus, new student assignments include an aspect of management, delegation and organisation. For example, rather than the students being required to draw a meaningless diagram as part of a CAD (Computer Aided Drawing) assignment, they are given a relevant story, contextualising that the picture represents a plan for a housing project and that sub-contractors have been hired for each system within the plan. The diagram must be drawn so that each sub-contractor can focus on their part of the overall plan. This means the students incorporate the previously-taught methods as an aid in a virtual delegation and project management exercise. Reminders about the students’ future roles as leaders and managers are used for further encouragement.

Another motivator that is observed among my male students is a passion for fast cars. Car-modifications, such as spoilers and alloy wheels (known locally as “rings”), have been mentioned earlier. To link these motivational drivers to tasks, again in CAD assignments, the meaningless drawings are now replaced with meaningful and motivating alternatives.

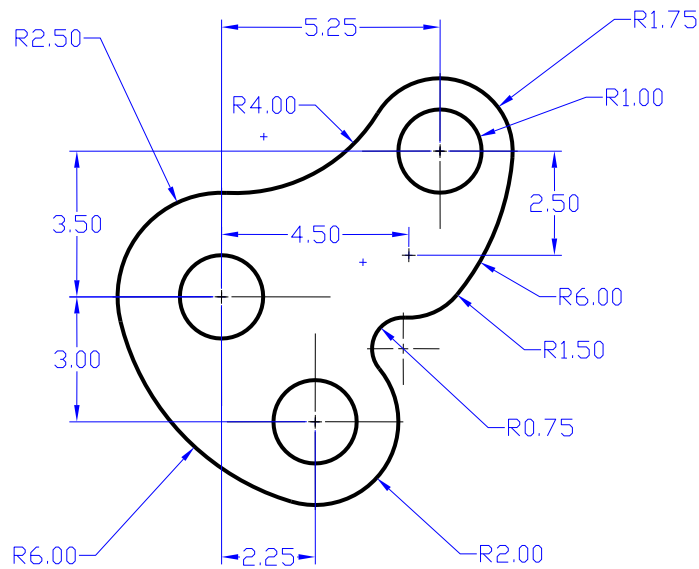


Figure 3. Mechanical component previously used for student CAD assignment

For example, the meaningless mechanical component previously used as a student assignment (Figure 3) is now replaced with a line representation of a car, such as the Ferrari shown in Figure 4, building on interests and, for many, a familiar context. The challenge project, mentioned previously, allowed students to create a drawing based on an example alloy wheel selected from pictures found on the internet, an original alloy wheel design or to copy a wheel on the student's own car.

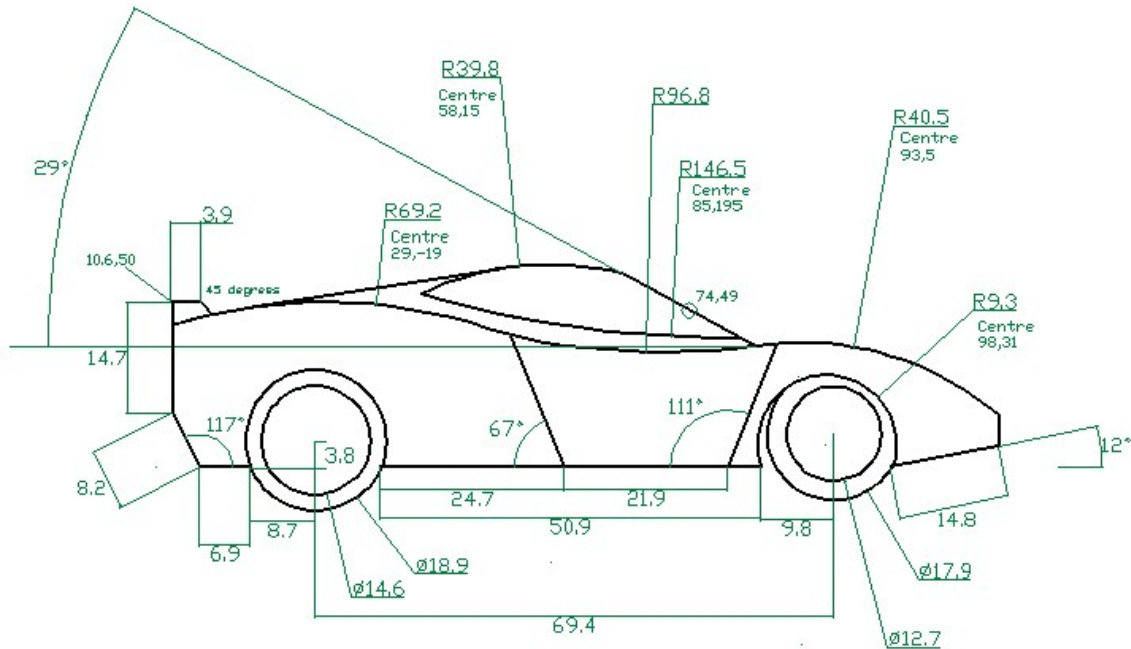


Figure 4. Line drawing of a Ferrari used for new CAD assignment

Thus, these methods are encouragement for the students, combined with praise and empathy with a rewarding and self-esteem building experience. The importance of positive relationships between instructor and student and inspiring the students to look into their futures, as discussed by Sullo (2007) is also seen.

Further steps for this ongoing inquiry include quantitative analysis for specific segments of the student population as well as application of this research to other disciplines. Identification of culture as a motivator has to be treated with sensitivity, and this is a further area for research.

Encouraging a learning atmosphere, with sympathy and awareness of learners' needs is essential in an environment where the instructor may be encountering an unfamiliar culture. Continuous learning on the part of the teacher is also key to ensure a clear understanding of goals and drivers of the participating students.

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