Where do I stand as a teacher of Saudis studying in Australia?

Rebecca Belchamber

Since 2005 the number of students from the Gulf States, specifically from Saudi Arabia, studying in Australia has increased significantly. Saudi academic sojourners have their own adjustment challenges, and the professionals who interact with them also have to adapt to a group of learners made up of diverse individuals.

There is a degree of negative stereotyping of Saudi nationals by some in the Australian community. Much of this attitude has arisen since 9/11 and some of the people holding negative views are those who deal with Saudis within a higher education setting. I have overheard office staff voice the fact that they used to be ‘afraid’ of Saudis before they came to know them as students; there are teachers who label Saudis as cheaters if the opportunity arises, stubborn negotiators and culturally inflexible. Rao (2008) surveyed teachers and students on perceived signals of disrespect and identified a range of concerns that affect each

---

1 Rebecca Belchamber is a PhD candidate at the University of South Australia, considering issues of identity and adjustment for Saudi students in Australia. She teaches English as an Additional Language to international students and is also a teacher trainer.

© 2011 Rebecca Belchamber
group. It is perceptions and expectations like these, often based on generalisations, that can result in conflict.

Reflecting on the academic and socio-cultural issues arising around Saudi students, it became evident that there is a fundamental tension in the higher education environment. The rhetoric promotes valuing and showing respect for difference. The reality is a different story. In assisting students from overseas, who use English as an additional language, to become oriented to university culture and be capable of functioning as academics in an English-speaking environment, along with the constraints inherent in the system, many of the ideals are overlooked or paid only passing attention. Thesen argued that, despite the focus on the individual, there is still a significant amount of determinism involved: “This determinism is sustained by an assumption that learners are reaching for “mainstream” culture, for which [Thesen] found limited evidence” (1997: 488).

If we are to meet the needs of our students in the best possible way, we should generally avoid the neat label ‘international students’ and consider them in terms of their nationality or ethnic identity. We then need to break down convenient groupings such as ‘Asian’ or ‘Middle Eastern’ students, and identify more specific categories. Beyond this categorisation, once we have a sense of what defines a Saudi student, for example, we can look for differences between those from particular areas or cities. Koehne noted that

International students are a diverse group, but they have often been spoken about in academic literature and in academic conversations as an entity, rather than as individuals with a range of personal histories and experiences, and a range of personal motivations and desires which have constructed the desire to become an international student. (2005: 104)

Recent research into international students at Australian universities reinforces the fact that such students, whatever their country of origin, need to be viewed as a heterogeneous group. Kiley (2003), Islam (2009) and Tran (2011) categorised the students’ adaptation to their new academic and/or cultural context and noted that, in each case, there was a range of responses.
Islam (2009) researched students from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh and found initiators of self-development and system compliers.

Kiley used the term conservers for ‘the students who were concerned to ensure that they did not lose their Indonesian identity by adopting negative qualities that they observed in Australians. They were also the students who went to great lengths to protect their religious and cultural values’ (2003: 353). Transformers, on the other hand, demonstrated significant changes in their learning skills and world view. Tran (2011) focused specifically on academic writing practices of Chinese and Vietnamese students and noted three modes of adaptation. Surface adaptation involves face value changes; a student’s new way of writing is not always what they believe in and feel positive about. In committed adaptation, students adopt a new writing approach that they consider to be superior. In hybrid adaptation, the students demonstrate a critical and creative connection with the requirements of their discipline and consider their first language and culture as assets to draw on.

I soon became aware that Saudi students too come from very diverse backgrounds. For example, it was a male Saudi, from the north of the kingdom, who told me that he had never experienced a community with so many females covering their face until he began studying at his language school. In his region, the women wear the cloak and veil but have their faces exposed. In coming to Australia, he learned more about his own country and in turn alerted me to the subtleties in behaviour that can be found in what is in fact a very heterogeneous group.

In addition to their varied background experiences, Saudi students respond to their new setting in very different ways. Some keep up the same religious or cultural practices they observed in Saudi Arabia while others relax them to varying degrees. I noted and became interested in these differences among students from Saudi Arabia, wondering about the effects of such a cultural shift. Being exposed to the contradictions involved in studying in Australia yet coming from a very closed and conservative society has implications for the students involved. Do they feel inhibited when surrounded by western influences, exposed to western
teaching practices and reliant on western teaching materials? Do they feel enabled, away from the social and cultural practices that have so far defined their lives? Or do they experience something in between?

Bose (2005) outlined recent changes specific to Saudi Arabia. In 1987, MERAC, TNS/NFO (a consumer research organisation) conducted a qualitative study to understand Gulf Cooperation Council citizens. The results indicated largely collective societies, holding traditional views in their daily lives, as well as in their consumer behaviour. More recently TNS/NFO conducted follow-up surveys to understand the changing GCC consumer environment. A further qualitative study revealed for the first time the appearance of four broad consumer segments. Some characteristics of these groups are listed below.

- Muhaizeen (20%): conservatives (relatively older)
- Usariyeen (30%): family oriented (relatively older)
- Mutazineen (25%): well balanced (relatively younger)
- Motamaredeen (25%): modern (relatively younger).

Similarly, Al-Abed Al-Haq and Al-Masaeid (2009) categorised the cultural orientation of Jordanian university students and found a range of responses: independent, conservative, Islamist and westerniser.

Such differences indicate a spectrum of identity responses within what is regarded as a regional or national area. However, the post-structural notion of identity is that identity is in transition rather than fixed. Norton (1997: 419–420) reflected on five journal articles and extracted some common themes relating to identity:

- Identity is complex, contradictory and multifaceted.
- Identity is dynamic across time and place.
- Identity constructs and is constructed by language.
• Identity construction is marked by relations of power.

While Saudi students in Australia, studying in a different language and setting, may experience a shift in their sense of self, the same opportunity is open to all professionals who deal with Saudis in the higher education setting.

In my early interactions with Saudi students, I drew on my limited understanding of the people and their country; I am reluctant to use the word stereotype but, if considered as a summary of characteristics, or convenient shorthand to represent this cohort of students, then that is what I did.

Viewing the students this way, it was incongruous (to my pre-conceived ideas) to see a Saudi male watching a bedroom scene from the film *Shakespeare in Love* as I wandered through the Independent Learning Centre at my workplace. Likewise, I was bewildered by students’ differing responses to sensitive topics; certain subjects were considered taboo by some students. I needed to be selective in my introduction of discussion issues or even vocabulary items.

Then there was the situation surrounding female students and the face-covering veil; how could I encourage non-verbal skills during oral presentations when much of the face was covered? What about addressing certain pronunciation problems without being able to draw attention to aspects of the mouth? Also, there was the contemporary English language teaching approach that encourages interactive, student-centred communication. How could I initiate this when certain sections of the class found it uncomfortable to work together? I had to make decisions on how much I would encourage pair or group work and when I would let the women in niqab work in their own group. At one time I arranged for the Saudi women to give their oral presentations in a closed group, when the veils came off. As a result I could assess them better and they were more audible. Over time, I consciously developed my approach to Saudi students as I tailored my responses to the diversity I ascertained across the group.
Davis and Womak (2005), writing from the perspective of literary criticism, discussed aspects of identity and empathy related to Levinas’s concept of alterity and suggested the word carries a potential for being altered. Within the term alterity there is an implication of ethics, a sense of responsibility and obligation to other beings.

Pluralism is another term that carries a sense of social or communal responsibility and is sometimes used as a synonym for diversity. Diversity in society requires us to make decisions about how we will respond to situations characterised by difference. We can resist, tolerate or embrace diversity. Such responses occur at a local, national or global level. As an example, an individual teacher can respond to diversity at any point along the continuum indicated; a centre of learning can choose from the same range of responses, as can a nation or global organisation.

I personally changed from trying to understand Saudi students as a group to attempting to accommodate their different personalities and backgrounds. Eck (2006) explained that pluralism is the vigorous quest for understanding when we encounter difference. Investigating the notion of pluralism, we are soon faced with the ethical responsibilities inherent in this approach. The quest for an ethical response leads us to the question: ‘Where do I stand – and how should I conduct myself – in relation to others?’ (Rouse 1995: 368). This can apply in the community generally as well as in a higher education setting.

Difference and diversity are attributes of any international student group and these need to be respected, and considered as the basis for responding to individual contexts, if Saudi students are to be successful in their academic sojourn.

References


