

A SUMMARY OVERVIEW OF CULTURAL DIFFERENCES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

This paper is a summary of major cultural differences in the classroom between the United States and 11 other countries around the world. The hope is that this information will provide a means for professors to understand the educational expectations of their international students.

INTRODUCTION

Globalization is a fact for most business industries around the world. Though the focus of globalization is the business world, education is also experiencing a massive push towards globalization. This is reflected in demands for integrating concepts of International Business in many of our business courses. This by itself is not unique as many nations, especially in Europe, don't distinguish between domestic and international business, all business is inherently international. But what is often ignored is the impact of globalization within the classroom. Increasing numbers of international students attending universities in the United States (U.S.) may affect the classroom dynamic if the professor is ill-prepared for the expectations of these international students. It is not uncommon to hear professors in the U.S. say that they welcome international students into their classrooms, but insist that it is a U.S. program and thus students must meet U.S. standards. This idea provides consistency of quality for the degree program.

Unfortunately, even with a standardized instruction format, many professors are unprepared to interact with international students. In small numbers, this issue can be handled in a one-on-one environment. In larger numbers, the cultural expectations of students may not align with those of the professor, creating a more difficult time instructing the class. For example, many professors in the U.S. expect some level of interaction in the classroom during classes. This interaction may involve encouraging students to ask and answer questions, or something more experiential that may include actual student movement and interaction. When international students are integrated into this classroom, these basic expectations may go counter to

cultural norms. As shown in the following summaries, some countries discourage students from asking questions in class as it may appear as they are contesting the authority of the professor. Depending on the student, this may be a small cultural adaptation that the student might be able to address and adjust to. Other cultural norms may provide larger issues that may actually preclude normal experiential exercises. For example some cultures prohibit men and women from touching, to the extent of not even shaking hands.

The author experienced one such issue first hand when a large contingent of students from Saudi Arabia attended a course on International Business. This class also had multiple groups of students from various other countries. (In fact, there was only one student who could claim the U.S. as their home country out of a class of 50 students.) The students were asked to form groups based on their home country in order to present their native culture to the class. After organizing the class, 3 female students from Saudi Arabia requested to work with a different cultural group. Because of cultural traditions on gender differences, the males in their group refused to integrate the females as part of the team. They did, however, expect the females to do all the written work for the assignment.

The purpose of this paper is to collect the basic cultural viewpoints of education from various countries other than the United States. This overview will help the professor plan for and address potential differences in expectations between the students and the professor. Hopefully, it will, if nothing else, prepare the professor for some of the cultural expectations, so as to avoid conflicts during finals week. (It is interesting how many countries have an unofficial expectation that the student will negotiate a grade or offer a gift in order to receive extra-credit.)

Random interviews were performed with students from three Midwest universities. In order to be included in the survey, the student's interviewed must have grown up and attended college equivalent education in their home country and only entered the United States in the past 3 years for additional university level education. The interviews followed a guided survey, where they were asked to comment on major differences that the student had to adjust to when attending a U.S. university. Special focus was given to teaching methodology, student-professor

interactions, student-student interactions, and dress-codes. The following is a summary for 11 countries comprising different parts of south-east Asia and the mid-east.

EDUCATION IN DIFFERENT COUNTRIES:

East Asia:

China

In general, Universities in China are similar to American universities as they do not have any particular rules regarding dress code; however some private universities establish dress codes as no high heel shoes or tight or short dresses for girls. Eye contact between student and professor is uncommon as it is considered disrespectful behavior. The Best place to look while talking to the professor is towards the ground and it can also convey modesty and humility toward the professor. Shaking hands is acceptable between students and professors since it is considered a formal greeting gesture; however it is recommended that students take the age and position of the professor into consideration before attempting to greet them. Contacts beyond the university, such as inviting professors for dinner or lunch, are common in China. Most of the time, the main reason for having contact outside of the university is to ask the professor for extra credit. It is normal to give gifts or “greedy money” (money under table) to the professor in exchange for a good grade.

The size of classes in China is enormous with each class consisting of at least 100 students. Because it takes a long time for professors to read all the names, attendance is not important. If a professor wants to verify the number of absent students, the students can easily say “yes” in place of their missing classmate. Due to the size of the class, group work is impractical and only the professor speaks. The most common teaching tools in china are textbooks and power point slides.

Critiques and disagreements with professors are unacceptable, especially in undergraduate level. Conflicts and arguments are generally more acceptable as the student pursues higher levels of education, especially at the Ph.D. level. Professors are generally hired permanently at the university and as a result, students do not have any opportunity to effectively evaluate their professors. Universities make all evaluations of the professor without including student views in matters of retention.

Grading systems are based solely on final exams. There are no other graded assignments such as presentations or reports. Due to this lack of additional assignments, anti-plagiarism rules are rarely enforced.

Finally, students have no discretion in determining class schedules instead they are required to follow the university dictated schedule of instruction.

Japan:

Japan’s Universities do not have any rule against gender difference, nor do they have a dress code. The relationship between the students and the professors is very formal. As such, the students do not maintain eye contact with the professor, and there is no contact between the two beyond the lecture. The teaching method is a one way,

lecture teaching style, where the students do not get involved in the classroom, nor can they express any disagreement. There are no strict rules regarding plagiarism. The exams come from the lecture and textbook with the final grade based solely on the final and midterm exams. Group assignments are uncommon in Japan’s teaching system. Gifts from student to professor is not allowed. Students have the option to choose their class schedules.

Nepal:

Nepal has two different systems of universities, Government and Private. In government universities there is not a dress code for the students, whereas private universities require student to wear uniforms. In Nepal, the professors and teachers are not friends, and students should talk to them respectfully. The universities do not have any rules or regulations regarding Plagiarism.

In government universities it is unnecessary to attend classes. The students can come directly to the final exams. The exams are not held in student’s university, but instead, the government picks an exam center for all students. Exams are based solely on lecture and textbook information. In Nepal, students do not evaluate the professor at the end of semester.

India:

India’s universities do not have any rules regarding gender differences, however, the students tend to sit in separate classrooms. The students are expected to wear conservative clothing. Eye contact between students and professors is considered normal and it is a sign of paying attention, however, shaking hands, tapping on the shoulder and meeting outside the classroom is not acceptable behavior between the students and the professors. The students are also not allowed to critique the professor, and any disagreements between the students and professor are disregarded.

The professors in India tend to engage the students and encourage them to participate in the class. The professors rely only on the textbook for instruction material. Students in India work both in groups and individually, depending on the professor. Attendance is very important, and the final grade is a cumulative result of exams, quizzes, midterms, attendance and assignments. The students can approach the professor outside of class an negotiate their grades. India’s universities have strict rules against plagiarism. The university chooses the student’s class schedule for them.

Pakistan

Pakistan’s universities do not have any rules regarding gender differences, however, there are few universities for girls only. Similar to India, Eye contact between the students and the professors is considered normal and it is a sign of paying attention, however, shaking hands, tapping on the shoulder and meeting outside the classroom are unacceptable behavior between the student and the professor. Most of the professors in Pakistan tend to encourage students to participate in the class. Professors rely on both the textbook and other teaching resources in

teaching the class. Professors in Pakistan also value teamwork. Attendance is very important, and the final grade is a cumulative result of exams, quizzes, midterms, attendance and assignments. Like India, Pakistan's universities have rules regarding plagiarism. But unlike India, whether they are enforced depends upon the professor. Students are allowed to critique the professor if done politely, and in the case of a disagreement, the students talk to the professor face to face. Otherwise the students are expected to evaluate the professors at the end of the semester but the university chooses the student's class schedule.

Malaysia:

Malaysia's universities attract a lot of international students from a variety of countries. This is partially due to the multiple cultures that Malaysia has as a country. There are neither rules regarding gender differences, nor dress code rules in Malaysian universities. Respecting professors is a part of the culture allowing professors to shake hands with students or tap them on the shoulder. But meeting up outside the university, for example going to the bar together, is not acceptable. The students usually do not talk in the classroom, unless they have questions or need clarification. However, they can correct or critique the professor in a polite way. Group and individual work assignments depend on the subject, and the professor. In the case of any disagreement between the professor and the student, the student talks to the professor to resolve the problem. Attendance is also very important. If a student misses certain classes, a letter is sent to the parents. Malaysian universities have rules against plagiarism. The final grade is a combination of course work, assignments, quizzes, and a final exam. The students have the right to evaluate the professors at the end of the semester and choose their own class schedule.

South Korea

Korea's Universities do not have any rules regarding gender differences, and they do not have a dress code. Students tend to avoid eye contact with the professors and are not allowed to express their disagreements with the professor. However, shaking hands, and meeting outside the classroom are acceptable behavior between the student and the professor.

In the classroom the professor does most of the talking and students are not engaged in the classroom. The exams depend on the textbook, power points and videos that professors show in the class. Group assignments may occur depending on the major course of study and the professor. Attendance is important as it is part of the final course grade. Other parts of the final grade include course work, assignments and exams. There are no strict rules in regard to plagiarism. The students do not evaluate the professor at the end of semester but have the option to choose their class schedule.

Middle East:

Iran

Universities in Iran have strict rules regarding clothing, based on religious rules. In Iran, women must cover body

and hair and men must wear pants. Universities, though, put more emphasis on clothing. In other words, some hair/body covers might be acceptable in general society but not at the university where stricter rules apply. Indeed, there is a department at each university called "Herasat" which is responsible for enforcing these strict rules. In contrast to other Islamic countries, both male and female students can be in the same class and can be taught by male and female professors.

While professors and students in American universities are close to each other, in Iranian universities relations follow more formal attitudes. Such acts as tapping on the shoulder or saying "good job" by professors are seldom seen at Iranian universities. Eye contact is generally acceptable between students and professors; however there are a number of religious professors who only maintain eye contact with the same gender. Shaking hands is not common between professors and students regardless of the gender. Common greeting between students and professors is to simply say hello. Students should stand up upon arrival of the professor in the class. It is not common to have contact with professors beyond the university and such requests are looked upon unkindly. In addition, gift giving to the professor might be considered a request for extra credit.

Similar to U.S. professors, Iranian professors use different teaching such as power points or other references beyond the textbook. The grading system relies mostly on midterm and final exams where final exams are cumulative exams. Professors also require presentation and articles but these assignments have less impact on the final grade. Attendance is mandatory in Iran. Professors do not believe strongly in group work, and course evaluations are based mainly on individual work.

Criticizing and disagreement are not recommended because they are considered rude and disrespectful behaviors. Consequently, professors are usually the only speakers. Plagiarism is discouraged in Iranian universities but there is no enforceable rule against it. Student evaluations of professors are not included in the university evaluation of professors which is left solely up to the director of the university. As with most U.S. universities, students are allowed to make their own class schedule as long as it follows proper requisites.

Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

When it comes to Saudi universities, the rules are completely different compared to U.S. universities. Religious principles play a significant role in establishing regulations at the universities. For example, there is no university in which both male and female students study or attend class together. This can cause difficulties when hiring professors. Female professors are not allowed to teach male students and male professors can only teach female students through audio/video conferences. In other words female students can see male professors and hear their voice through a screen while the professor only can hear the students' voices. He is not able to see the female students even through the screen.

Since universities only consist of either females or males, students have relative freedom in choosing their

clothing when attending university. Nevertheless, females cannot wear short skirts or sleeveless shirts and boys must wear pants or official dress called “Dish dash”.

When the professors and students are same gender, bilateral relations are less formal. Such behavior as maintaining eye contact, shaking hand, tapping on shoulders, are common between professors and students. Though having contact beyond the university is not generally common in Saudi universities.

Although there is big difference between U.S. universities and Saudi Arabian universities in terms of dress code and gender differences, the teaching system is approximately same. High interaction exists between students and professors. Students are encouraged to get involve in the class. Group studying and group assignments are appreciated and encouraged. Students can express their viewpoint even if it is opposite to the professor’s perspective. Grading system is based not only on final exams but also consists of various assignments including papers, presentations, articles, and so forth. Students’ attendance is important, and professors take it into account for final grade. Furthermore, professors use PowerPoint and other references along with textbooks as teaching tools. Since papers and articles are important in Saudi universities, there are anti-plagiarism rules but they are not as strict as in American universities. Professors are evaluated by students at the end of the semester similar to the U.S. with student evaluation being used in retention decisions.

Kuwait:

Kuwait has two different university systems, Government and Private. Gender differences are also applied in Kuwait’s education system, where classrooms are segregated by gender. However, the male professor is allowed to teach female students and the female professor is allowed to teach male students. The students should wear conservative clothing. If students fail to meet dress code requirements, they are ask to leave the campus.

Since a lot of the professors in Kuwait earned their higher degrees abroad, the relationship between the students and professors is similar to that of students and professors in the U.S. However, physical contact such as shaking hands between different genders and student-professor contact outside the classroom is uncommon. The professors usually dominate the classroom time; however asking questions is welcomed during the class. The professor relies heavily on lectures and power points slides, while the student is expected to read the textbook. Teamwork is part of the education system in Kuwait universities.

Attendance is taken at the beginning of each class and if a student misses six classes without a valid reason, the student will fail the class. Kuwait universities have very strict rules against plagiarism. Final grades consist of a combination of exams, assignments, and attendance. Students are allowed to critique the professors, and in case of any disagreement the student can talk to the professor or escalate the matter to the dean. Gifts from students to professors are not commonly accepted. At the end of each semester the students must evaluate their professors, with most of universities using an online system which forces

the student to evaluate or they will not be able to register for their classes. Finally, students in Kuwait are allowed to choose their own class schedule.

Israel:

Although Israel is located in the Middle East, the teaching methods and the relationship between the professors and students are exactly similar to the U.S. education system. All the rules and regulations, dress code, syllabus and so on follow the U.S. system.

Palestine:

Palestine universities are different from other Arab universities. They have more freedom in terms of clothing and there is no official dress code; however it is uncommon to wear overly casual outfits such as shorts and sleeveless shirts.

Although there is no problem with eye contact for male or female professors with students, it is impolite to stare.

Shaking hands is considered a normal greeting; however some female students who cover there body and hair, which is called “Hejab”, avoid shaking hand with male professors. Students try to keep relations with professors more formal to avoid any misunderstandings. There is no contact, beyond the university, between professors and students, such as going out for a dinner or lunch.

Professors encourage students to get involved in the class and to have a more interactive atmosphere. They rely heavily on text books and slides as the only teaching tools. Professors put great emphasis on group assignments and individual attendance.

Individually, students cannot give a gift to the professors. However it is common to give professors a gift for particular events, such as a birthday, on behalf of all students in the class.

It is not allowed to criticize professors; though students can express their viewpoints freely even it is against the professors’ viewpoint.

Anti-plagiarism rules either don’t exist or are not enforced. Final course grades are largely dependent upon final exam scores. Students do not have an opportunity to evaluate professors at the end of the class but they are allowed to choose their own schedule.