The Balancing Act
International Higher Education in the 21st Century
Mary Gene Saudelli
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Why is it important to learn about higher education in international contexts? Why learn about curriculum, teaching, and learning at Dubai Women’s College of the Higher Colleges of Technology? Global education systems have remarkable contributions to make to understandings of 21st century curriculum, teaching, and learning.

Adult educators across the globe are exploring how to make learning meaningful in a world that is experiencing change, global migration, rapid development, cross-cultural communication demands, and systems with mandates for accountability and international standardized measures of quality. Dubai is an Emirate in the United Arab Emirates that has experienced these issues, which have had a profound impact on higher education for Emirati women.

The international educators who contributed to this book reveal how they designed and implemented a curriculum that represented a complex balancing act replete with recognition of local, global, religious, cultural, and societal implications. There is no other book like The Balancing Act: International Higher Education in the 21st Century. It reveals the nature of a highly devoted team of international educators who designed a contextually and globally relevant transdisciplinary, 21st century curriculum.

“Dr. Mary Gene Saudelli has tremendous knowledge and experience with delivering world class education in the Middle East. She has a deep commitment to progressive education and an understanding of global mindedness. It is wonderful that she shares her research on a wide range of topics in educational curriculum and global issues. In The Balancing Act: International Higher Education in the 21st Century, Dr. Saudelli opens the dialogue of reciprocity in learning from higher education in diverse contexts. This book honours Emirati women’s backgrounds and differences, yet cherishes the uniqueness of the international educators involved in this study.” – Kim Critchley, Dean and CEO, University of Calgary in Qatar
The Balancing Act
The Balancing Act

International Higher Education in the 21st Century

Foreword by Jennifer Rowsell

Mary Gene Saudelli
University of Calgary in Qatar
This book is dedicated to my wonderful husband, Rob Saudelli. You mean everything to me.

This book is also dedicated to my stepchildren, Eric and Erin Saudelli.
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Jennifer Rowsell

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FOREWORD

A Place to Call Home

Reading Mary Gene Saudelli’s book made me think deeply about the concept of home and what home means. That is, home is at once a simple and complicated idea. Simple, in that home should be a place of belonging and comfort; it is a visceral feeling. Complicated in that home is also varied, idiosyncratic and a composite of larger ideologies that have to do with language, religion, culture, race, and social class. In The Balancing Act: International Higher Education in the 21st Century, Saudelli depicts a world where home is paradoxically hybrid and inclusive. With candour and thoughtfulness, Saudelli gives readers an entangled sense of home and how home changes when people move across different landscapes to settle, at least for a while, in a new place.

In the book, the notion of home is informed by the stories of nineteen international educators who work in higher education in the Middle East. Home is Dubai with all of its cosmopolitan and transcultural associations. Home is Dubai Women’s College as a gender-segregated university with its own culture. Home is Islam as a religion, but also as a way of life. Home signals the original nationality of each international educator from contexts that range from Japan, North Korea, Tunisia, and Canada, just to name a few. Home is seen in the lives of Islamic female students attending the college. Finally, home can be seen in a 21st century way, in virtual homes that we create within social media to exist globally in local worlds. As a reader, I reflected again and again on how rich it is to move to very different realities and to pick up and put on varied parts of self the sum of which is a place that we call home.

There are multiple interpretations of home across Saudelli’s rich research from Izzy’s unmoored sense of ‘homeland’ to Kelsey’s desire for multiple ‘homes’ and for homelessness to Taylor’s eschewing of home for the sake of his wanderlust. In chapter four alone, there are 70 references to home and the complex relationships that participants feel in relation to home. Of particular note, Saudelli’s international educators frequently think about what it is like ‘back home.’ At times, for many of the participants, ‘back home’ seemed like less of a home as years went by. What came out strongly for me in reading about individuals like Morgan, Shane or Ellis is how they approached their new home with acceptance, without judgement, and how they adapted to new practices, rites and habits of mind. Having spent years living and working in a variety of places, the participants’ optics on home were as I said earlier, entangled with histories, cultures, epistemologies, and of course lived experiences.

A host of theorists came to mind as I contemplated Saudelli’s conceptual strands such as Dorothy Holland (Holland et al., 1998) and the idea of figured worlds or ‘as if’ realms that we create to put on certain kinds of identities. As well, I found myself thinking about the work of Alessandro Duranti and Elinor Ochs (1996) and their writings on Samoan American families and their use of syncretic literacies as
FOREWORD

‘an intermingling or merging of culturally diverse traditions that informs and organizes literacy activities’ (Duranti & Ochs, 1996, p. 2). Reading about Saudelli’s international educators recalls the work of Brian Street (1984) and his extensive field work in Iran when he forged the notions of autonomous and ideological models of literacy. Street showed how literacy is shaped by local practices and belief systems and not by top-down versions of what literacy is or should be within specific, non-Western contexts. Indeed, Saudelli offers a similar picture of educators who shape their teaching around the religion, practices and beliefs of students attending Dubai Women’s College. Theoretically, I am even reminded of the work of Henry Jenkins (2006) and his writings on the convergence culture in that Saudelli’s international educators’ lives converge in their teaching and pedagogy and this is a key piece in the efficacy of their higher education work. The international educators in Saudelli’s book unify their entangled selves into teaching methods that adapt to the very particular needs of the student body at Dubai Women’s College.

With the ubiquity of social media and the web, being a local who exists globally is relatively easy nowadays. However, to my mind, what is much less easy is living globally while maintaining and respecting local roots. When I think about the stories and reflections of Saudelli and her nineteen higher education professionals, I marvel at the ways that they listen to the nuances of culture, language, and class stratification and quietly reshape their pedagogies and principles in respectful, even gentle ways. To conclude the foreword, I offer a quote from the T. S. Eliot poem *Four Quartets*, “Home is where you start from” and to me this refrain certainly connects with Saudelli’s underlying message in the book about teaching from a listening, respectful pedagogy.

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REFERENCES


MODULE 1

EXPLORING THE CONTEXT AND THE THEORIES
CHAPTER 1

SETTING THE STAGE

Introducing Dubai Women’s College and the United Arab Emirates

Future generations will be living in a world that is very different from that to which we are accustomed. It is essential that we prepare ourselves and our children for that new world. (HRH Sheikh Zayed, 2005, cited in 2007)

We will strive to develop in our students the values, the qualities, and capacities to be leaders in their communities” (HRH Sheikh Nahayan Mabarak Al Nahayan, 2007)

INTRODUCTION

Consider the following scenario: I am a Canadian, postsecondary educator who walks into my classroom at Dubai Women’s College (DWC), in Dubai, United Arab Emirates (UAE) enthusiastic to teach academic English to first-year, gender-segregated, Muslim, female Business and Information Technology students. I encounter a cluster of women, covered from head to toe in long, elegant, black robes (abbayahs) and beautiful, black scarves (shaylahs), which not only cover the hair but for some also veil the entire face from sight. Observation and consideration of each other is reciprocal: As much as I am engaged in an appraisal of them, they too are engaged in an appraisal of me. I imagine they wonder: What kind of “Western” woman am I? As I gazed at the figures cloaked in black, I thought about the curriculum I was about to implement, the team of international educators with whom these learners were about to interact on a daily basis, and the interesting interplay of culture, curriculum, and constructivism that would be part of our lives for the next year as students and educators in the Higher Diploma Year One (HD1) of the Business and Information Technology (IT) program at DWC.

Interestingly, in this age of globalization and mass flow of human movement, from my experience with people in Canada and overseas, knowledge is somewhat limited of people in other lands, especially the Middle East, except for information extrapolated from various media sources or brief tourist visits. I make this observation about interactions occurring in my Canadian homeland about “over there in the Middle East,” and also in relation to my role as an international educator and researcher, in various countries throughout the world.

Particularly relevant is this lack of understanding about the Middle East, which is a complex location that seems mired with mystique, misinformation, and misunderstanding. This location often conjures a multitude of visions that may or may not have a basis in reality for a context as diverse and dynamic as the Middle
East. Further, for inhabitants of the Middle East, mention of the word “Western,” a term that commonly refers to cultures and nationalities typically associated with countries such as Canada, the United States, United Kingdom, Australia, and some European countries, equally conjures a multitude of visions that may or may not have a basis in reality. Understandings about each other appear to be veiled.

This book is designed to chronicle the experiences of international educators, working, teaching and living in Dubai, United Arab Emirates. They taught or were supervisors at Dubai Women’s College and designed and implemented one of the most interesting curricula I have ever seen or had the pleasure and the pain to deliver.

The student body was unique as it comprised exclusively Emirati, female students. The team of international educators was unique as its members are from all over the globe who had taught in many contexts for most of their professional careers. The curriculum was unique as it was highly attuned to who these students were and their specific needs in this fast-paced, globalizing and rapidly changing society.

My Role as an International Educator and Researcher

For 5 years, I was employed as an educator in the UAE: first in a private, tertiary institute, and from 2005-2009 at DWC. Although I am a Canadian citizen, born, bred, and educated, most of my teaching experience has transpired in international contexts, in Istanbul Turkey, Hong Kong, Afghanistan, and the UAE. After my experience in Dubai, I returned to Canada for five years at taught in a university in Ontario. Currently, I am an Assistant Professor and Director of Teaching and Learning at the University of Calgary in Doha Qatar, the Middle East.

My educational background provides a strong influence on the philosophy of education that I embrace. My educational background depicts an overwhelming interest in sociology, psychology, religious and cultural studies, and educational philosophy, particularly in relation to curricular emphases. This fascination with these disciplines provided the catalyst for my decision to experience other cultures, not as a tourist, but as a contributing member of society in an international context. Hence, I enrolled and graduated from a TESL Canada program as an English as a Subsequent Language (ESL) teacher. Years of living an international life have not quelled the fascination for me; in fact, I continue to embrace this adventure of living, learning and loving life as an educator in international contexts.

After several years, my identity evolved from being a Canadian English teacher, working overseas, to being a Canadian international educator. This evolution in identity represents a function of how my worldview has evolved due to my international experiences and through the amelioration of both Western and Eastern life circumstances. When I first went overseas, I believed I was “bringing” education in the form of English to “the other.” Now, I, like many of my colleagues, see myself as an amelioration of influences from both my Western identity and as a part of an international, educational community. In essence, I have become an “other” of myself, a concept identified as Third Space Theory
Bhabha, 1990, 1994), which occasionally results in tensions related to national affinity, cultural dissonance, and conflicting allegiances.

I have a close affiliation, a carefully maintained bridge, with my Canadian life while concurrently deeply valuing and maintaining a very different life formerly in the UAE and now in Qatar, collectivist, Islamic Arab nations where, I live, teach, and learn. Frequently, I find myself occupying a space in between two very diverse, often conflicting, polarities of ideas related to my two worlds, the “others” within my lived experiences, and the “other” I encounter in me when I experience dissonance. When I am in Canada, I often feel that I must explain or defend misunderstandings regarding my life in the Arab world, even amongst the most educated, worldly, and respectable peers, colleagues, or acquaintances. In Dubai, I felt that I must explain or defend misunderstandings regarding my Western life, again, even amongst some of the highest, most educated and respectable members of society.

Misinformation, misunderstanding, and the ease with which others are spoken of in a manner that implies fact but is actually merely biased opinion based on ignorance results in tensions that exist amongst those of us who choose to learn about and live amongst the “other,” whoever that other may be. This is a tension I encounter regardless of the country where I am. However, this is also a challenge that provides intellectual stimulation, and confers a sense of responsibility to engage in research that will contribute to knowledge globally that has the potential to challenge assumptions in both of my current worlds. With time, experience, and growth, I have learned how to adjust to this space, and accommodate my worlds, as many international educators do.

My educational background, my professional international experiences, and my own philosophy of education contribute a very definable theme, a wariness of strict allegiance to extremes in thought, behaviour, depictions, theories or ideals. In fact, I reject the notion of strict allegiance to extremes or universal dogmas: Western or Eastern, religious or atheist, intelligent or dim-witted, dominant or passive, constructivist or objectivist. There are far too many variables in relation to our human condition and contextual circumstances for me to ascribe to these kinds of universal labels, particularly in relation to educational issues.

In terms of my educational philosophy, I believe that understanding the context of the educational event is crucial to any discussions of theory and practice. I attribute my success as an international educator and scholar to my willingness to learn. In my years in the Arab world, I have attempted to develop insight through reading the Holy Qur’an, the Hadith (reporting of the life and sayings of the Prophet Mohammed, peace be upon him), Arab folk stories, and regional, historical texts. I also participate in religious and social celebrations, such as Ramadan, Eid al Fitr, Eid al Adha, and Iftar. Ramadan requires waking before dawn for Sahoor (food and water) followed by Fajr prayer (first prayer of the day) after which complete and total abstinence from food or water is required until Maghrib, the fourth prayer of the day. After Maghrib, the fast is broken by Iftar (feast in gratitude to Allah). During the fast, individuals are expected to consider
the plight of those less fortunate and be grateful for whatever prosperity one enjoys, no matter how humble.

My participation in these events has been beneficial in a number of ways. First, I understand and appreciate the self-discipline required of learners during Ramadan. As well, I highly respect and value the message that underlies this particular religious event in addition to other religious events. My participation in the religious experience, although I am not a Muslim, has been a consciousness-raising experience regarding the beauty of Islam as a faith and a way of life. As an international educator, I believe these experiences provide social, cultural, and religious insight, which aids in honouring diversity and promotes positive cross-cultural contact. As many of my international educator colleagues have discussed, insight and contemplation regarding the nuances of culture and religion impact educational events and have an effect on the classroom dynamic the educator initiates. Further, I believe that awareness of context provides insight into curricular content and instructional methods that facilitate relevance and the meaning-making process for students.

The Context: Dubai, United Arab Emirates

Geographically, the UAE is located at the littoral of the Arabian Peninsula, commonly referred to in the West as the Persian Gulf, but usually referred to as the Arabian Gulf by society in this Gulf region. Prior to 1971, the UAE functioned as a British colonial protectorate known as the Trucial States (Al Fahim, 1995). The Trucial States consisted of seven core gulf tribal regions which were often feuding over territory and resources. Although politically they were a British protectorate, the people of the Trucial States received little support from Britain, or any other international region, to intervene politically for peace or to provide the people of the Trucial States with basic health care, education, food, or clean water (Al Fahim, 1995; Davidson, 2008). In fact, as recently as the 1960s, the Gulf region was “one of Britain’s poorest and least developed protectorates” (Davidson, 2008, p. 31).

On December 2, 1971, the tribal regions of the Trucial States federated and became the seven Sheikhdoms of the UAE: Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Fujarah, Ajman, Ras al Khaimah, Sharjah, and Umm Al-Qaiwain (Al Fahim, 1995; Kazim, 2000). Complete transformation of society occurred within the next 20 years; the UAE went from existing as an impoverished Bedouin society under British control to becoming an independent country with the world’s highest per capita income (Gardner, 1995). In fact, the UAE is the second-richest country in the Islamic world (Patai, 2002). Dubai is the commercial and economic centre of the UAE and, arguably, is the most developed Emirate (Davidson, 2008; Gardner, 1995; Patai, 2002). In turn, this development has led to a complete social transformation affecting every aspect of the lives of Emirati people, but particularly education for women.

Contrary to common perceptions regarding women’s status and role in Islamic nations, education for women in Dubai is publicly promoted, government
supported, (Salloum, 2003; UNESCO, 2003; Whiteoak, Crawford, & Mapstone, 2006) and socially desired (Al Fahim, 1995; Salloum, 2003). Today, a highly educated woman is considered to be a national symbol of social strength, prestige, and family honour (Salloum, 2003; Nashif, 2000; Whiteoak et al., 2006). However, this philosophical stance is not represented historically in the UAE, nor is it widely accepted throughout the UAE in general (Godwin, 2006; Salloum, 2003; Whiteoak et al., 2006). Rather, it is a cultural repositioning emanating from rapid transformation that has particularly affected the larger Emirates, such as Dubai.

To a degree, this social prestige afforded an educated woman is cosmetic because undercurrents of traditional thinking persist. To illustrate, young Emirati women are expected to attain higher education, but accept the norm of cultural restrictions and conform to traditional roles after graduation (Godwin, 2006). These are roles that many Emirati women are questioning as modern thought and traditional thought suddenly and forcefully collide in an andragogical extreme that they encounter. This is but one of the challenges that arose from the UAE’s fast-paced social and economic transformation, inherently caused by the rapid influx of financial wealth from oil and development. This wealth rapidly transformed this society from a tribal nation to one that desires a cultural identity that maintains its Islamic religious beliefs and Emirati cultural norms within a modern framework (Gardner, 1995). All of this affects higher education for women, particularly in relation to curriculum at DWC because the HCT Learning Model (HCTAS, 2007) and DWC’s curriculum explicitly encourage a participatory role for women in society and in the workforce after graduation, and include discussions of Emirati female empowerment and identity, while also acknowledging cultural expectations and restrictions on women’s behaviour and activities.

For example, two curricular events for HD1 curriculum are publically open; however, entrance is restricted to Emirati learners’ families, the ruling members of society, and some media. Strict rules regarding student behaviour and appearances are in place regarding the events. Every year, the president of DWC and the supervisors hold an assembly wherein behaviour rules and appearance rules are reiterated to students; for example, students are specifically reminded to ensure they wear their abbayahs and shaylahs, not be overly made up with cosmetics, wear their hair too high on their head, no “boyish” behaviour, and no music or dancing is allowed anywhere on campus.

As well, the campus is not open for students to arrive or leave at their will. In fact, our female students are barred from leaving campus at all unless they are chaperoned by a teacher, are picked up by a parent or guardian, or have special written permission granted by their legal guardian and the president of DWC. Thus, the curricular focus is on women’s participation in the work force and Emirati female leadership and empowerment, while simultaneously restricting their movement due to cultural expectations and restrictions on women, which adhere as stridently as in years past and with veracity that belies challenge or change (Godwin, 2006).
Dubai Women’s College, Higher Colleges of Technology

The government-funded Higher Colleges of Technology (HCT) opened in 1988. These exist as English-language medium, vocational institutions and function to prepare Emiratis for three purposes: (a) to work in technological, technical, and professional occupations (Diploma program); (b) to build skills to enter university (Higher Diploma program); or, (c) assume leadership and supervisory positions (Higher Diploma program) (HCTAS, 2007). There are 16 gender-segregated campuses in the seven Emirates, with DWC widely regarded in the UAE as a premier educational institution (Macpherson, Kachelhoffer, & El Nemr, 2007).

At its inception as a higher educational facility, HCT operated with no formal, federal, quality model of educational standards or quality assurance (Burden-Leahy, 2005). Each educational facility developed its own framework and policy regarding institutionalized standards and quality assurance, which led to significant variation throughout colleges and educational programs. In 2002, the introduction of the HCT Learning Model (HCTAS, 2002) articulated a framework for measuring student performance across the college system and incorporated International English Language Testing System (IELTS) as a graduation requirement.

The HCT Learning Model was later updated; all of the graduate outcomes articulated in the updated HCT Learning Model (HCTAS, 2007) demonstrate a profound conceptual shift from traditional orientations of education (rote learning, passive learning) toward a constructivist ideology that endorses a task-based, experiential curriculum. The updated HCT Learning Model identifies the following eight Graduate Outcomes (GOs) as essential to students’ holistic development:

- Communication and information literacy (GO1);
- Critical and creative thinking (GO2);
- Global awareness and citizenship (GO3);
- Technological literacy (GO4);
- Self-management and independent learning (GO5);
- Teamwork and leadership (GO6);
- Vocational competencies (GO7);
- Mathematical literacy (GO8). (HCTAS, 2007, p. 8)

Higher Diploma Year 1 (HD1) is actually most students’ third year or fourth year of college at DWC. Due to the fact that most students seek entrance to higher education, but fail to meet the minimum entrance requirements (Nowais, 2004, 2005), the first 2 years are referred to as Foundations and the focus is for students to achieve passing grades on the Common English Proficiency Test (CEPA English) and CEPA Maths tests created by the National Admissions and Placement Office of the Ministry of Education, UAE. The CEPA English test is not an internationally recognized test of English proficiency, nor is it geared for academic English proficiency. It is not designed as an Arab equal to Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) or IELTS Academic. Its purpose is to determine placement of low level, Arab users of English in governmental higher educational facilities in the UAE and is a required standardized test administered during the last year of secondary schooling.
Upon successful completion of Foundations, students can enter the Higher Diploma program with their first year being HD. Upon successful completion of HD, students may proceed to HD1, the year that is the focus for this study. HD1 is comprised of an integrated approach to the four core curricular subject areas of: Business, Information Technology, Maths, and English. All instruction is exclusively taught in English.

**Defining Terms**

For the purposes of this body of work, given the unique context, definitions of culture, society, and religion are necessary as these aspects permeate every facet of 21st curriculum, teaching and learning in this context. The discipline of educational sociology distinguishes culture and society.

According to Hofstede (1997), culture and tradition refer to collectively learned habits, norms, values, aspects of life, and meanings attributed to these concepts that “distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another” (p. 7). DWC is a higher-educational facility, which at the time of this study was exclusive to Emirati, female students. Any reference to culture in this study specifically refers to either aspects of life or circumstances that pertain to Emirati people, or issues and observations affecting Emirati people specifically as they are the indigenous peoples who trace their ancestry to Arab regional tribes of the former Trucial States (Kazim, 2000).

The sociological conception of society refers to a grouping of people who “occupy a particular territorial area. … Loosely, it refers to human association or interaction” (Scott & Marshall, 2009, p. 715). Society in Dubai demographically is constructed of a multitude of people from diverse cultures, nationalities, and political affiliations, who interact on a daily basis and through many different facets of behaviours and relationships. For the purposes of this study, any reference to society refers to the multicultural, multipolitical, and multireligious peoples who reside in Dubai, including Emiraties (Davidson, 2008).

Religion is defined as “a set of beliefs, symbols, and practices which is based on the idea of the sacred, and which unites believers into a socio-religious community” (Scott & Marshall, 2009, p. 643). In this study, any reference to religion, unless otherwise specifically stated otherwise, refers to the religion of Islam, which is the religion of the UAE.

**Limitations of This Book**

It is important to consider limitations in any body of work and this research is no different. There are three specific limitations to this research that I acknowledge: transferability of information, limitations to data sources, and my role as researcher and educator at DWC.

This study is subject to the typical limitations inherent with case study research such as generalizations. This study was designed for the purpose of understanding the design and implementation of HD1 curriculum, in depth for this geographical
context. According to Stake (2005), case study researchers “seek out both what is common and what is particular about the case, but the end product of the research regularly portrays more of the uncommon” (p. 447). Thus, the intention of this case study is not to generalize results or apply them to another situation. The purpose is to conceptualize and illustrate a thick description of this particular educational context and during this specific moment in time, the 2008–2009 academic year.

As the context of my study was Dubai, UAE, this research is limited in terms of those with whom I could recruit as data sources. The President of DWC and my supervisor in HD1 granted me access to all textual materials related to curriculum including syllabi, assessments, lesson plans, objectives, strategic plans, and I was granted permission to recruit participation from educators and supervisors within HD1. Although students’ voices would add significantly to this case study, I requested but was not granted permission to access student information or recruit participation from the HD1 student body.

A further limitation arises from my dual role in this study as both researcher and educator at DWC. The dependability of responses at the interviews was member checked through provision of transcripts to each participant for their addition, deletion, revision, clarification, and further contribution. As well, a copy of preliminary findings, which provided a basis for conclusions, was provided to participants for comments. This research study endeavoured to balance and respect the relationship of participants’ roles as colleagues, and me in my role as both researcher and educator at DWC. Through member checking, we revisited and clarified interpretations drawn from patterns in the data in order to assess significance of events, instead of merely relying of isolated interpretations from me in my dual role of teacher and researcher.

Outline of the Book

This book has been organized into three modules. The first module is entitled “Exploring the Context and the Theories” and contains three chapters. Chapter 1, entitled “Setting the Stage: Introducing Dubai Women’s College and the United Arab Emirates” is designed to provide the background information that a reader will need to understand the locus of the research that guided this body of work. The research that guided this book emanates from my doctoral dissertation entitled Beyond the Veil: A Case Study of Context, Culture, Curriculum, and Constructivism at Dubai Women’s College (Lovering, 2012). This introductory chapter outlines how I came to Dubai, introduces a brief history of Dubai and the United Arab Emirates, and provides a framework for understanding the Higher Colleges of Technology and Dubai Women’s College. Chapter 2, entitled “Constructivist Learning Theory and Contemporary Debates” presents an historical overview of the constructivist learning theory and includes a discussion of what is colloquially referred to as the ‘Paradigm Debates.’ Constructivist learning theory and experiential learning are the guiding premises for how DWC envisions teaching and learning. Chapter 3, entitled “Adult Learners and Change Theories” presents adult learning and transformative learning theories. As the UAE is a
SETTING THE STAGE

country and a society experiencing profound change, sociological and change theories contribute to the theoretical frameworks guiding this book. This module is intended to present the background and the theoretical framework to guide the later modules which disclose details related to decisions made by international educators in relation to the design and implementation of the 21st century curriculum at DWC.

The second module is entitled “Presenting the Educators, Learners and Curriculum.” I believe that this particular study centred on a very unique situation. It involved a unique group of international educators, teaching to a unique group of learners, in a unique place, and a unique 21st century curriculum that was designed specifically to meet these learners where they were and take them forward to envisioning their future as they define it and on their terms. Chapter 4, “Introducing the International Educators” presents the 19 international educators that were involved in this body of work. Chapter 5, “21st Century Curriculum Design and Emirati Learners” outlines the nature of 21st century curriculum and introduces readers to the nature of Emirati learners. Chapter 6, “Making Learning Meaningful: Trans-Disciplinary 21st Century Curriculum” presents the details of the trans-disciplinary curriculum and assessment including a description of the teaching and learning tasks. Aspects of this chapter have been published in “Making it real: The role of authenticity in interdisciplinary curriculum” (Saudelli, 2014).

The third module is entitled “Delving in the Learning Context, Religion, Culture, Society, and Language.” This module explores in depth the international educators experience teaching the 21st century curriculum and becoming engaged with aspects related to Islam, Emirati culture, Dubai as a rapidly changing society, and English as a global language. Chapter 7, “Encountering Islam in the Classroom” shares how the international educators understood the role of religious faith and the implications for teaching and learning. Chapter 8, “Balancing Issues and Exploring Boundaries: Emirati Culture and 21st Century Curriculum” presents the international educators’ experiences with teaching for cultural relevance at DWC. Chapter 9, “Globalization on Steroids: 21st Century Curriculum and Societal Change in Dubai” shares how these educators incorporated globalization, multiculturalism, and societal change into their teaching and learning practices. Chapter 10, “English – A Global Language” presents educators’ perceptions regarding the role of English as the medium of instruction, international English proficiency tests and making teaching English relevant for Arab learners. The final chapter, Chapter 11 “Capturing 21st Century Curriculum Design in Practice: What Can Be Learned from Higher Education at DWC” revisits the theories and contextualizes educational theories and practice in relation to international 21st teaching and learning at DWC. The chapter concludes with the author’s final thoughts.
CHAPTER 1

How to Think about and Use This Book

This book should be used as a way to think about how we approach internationalization in education. Currently, internationalization efforts form part of many universities’ and colleges’ strategic plans. New international branch campuses are opening throughout the world. Recruitment efforts to bring international students to a host country and educational institution are pursued and international students are taking advantage of opportunities across the globe. But, how well thought out are these internationalization efforts? How well do internationalization efforts balance the needs of learners and educational mandates? How is 21st century educational approaches integrated in these internationalization efforts? How will educational theories evolve as a result of internationalization efforts and new understandings? Do educators recognize how their teaching practices can and should change to embody consideration of 21st century knowledge and skills while recognizing the impact of religion, culture, society, and language needs in relation to contexts and changing learner demographics?

Anecdotally, from teaching in higher education in Canada and various other countries across the globe, I have personally witnessed international branch campuses close due to unrealized tensions and unrealistic expectations. I have heard conversations among faculty in Canada about international students such as: “they can’t reflect,” “they plagiarize,” “they can’t critically engage” and I often wonder how these faculty would survive and thrive if they were moved from their comfort zone to attend a learning facility in a different country, taught in a different language, with different styles of teaching, different understandings of successful achievement, and different religious, cultural and social understandings?

As you read through this book, I ask you to think about the content from your own personal lens of beliefs, philosophies, understandings, values and judgments. I ask you reflect on your own educational background and how that contributes to your personal belief systems and ways of being and knowing. Then, I ask you to try and think of how different you may be, how you might change, if you went international for an extended period of time. You will encounter many aspects in this book that may challenge your belief systems but I ask you to think about this not only from your own personal lens, but to try and embrace an international lens. How do you think you might change if you went international? What would compel change and why? What would cause tension and what would you appreciate? How would you accommodate or not?

This book is intended to explore difficult questions in this age of internationalization. How much of international education merely represents educational colonization? Are educational learning theories meant to be applicable across geographical, cultural, religious boundaries? Do we need to begin considering theory differently in this 21st century time of increasing internationalization of education? I do not presume to provide a definitive answer, but I do wish to present a detailed study that has elements of all three of these
complex questions embedded within and will contribute to this important discussion.

CONCLUSION

This chapter sets the stage for the rest of this book. I began with a discussion of how I came to be interested in the field of international education and shared my background as an international educator. As it is crucial to understand the context of this body of work, I also provided information about Dubai, the United Arab Emirates, and Dubai Women’s College as one campus of the Higher Colleges of Technology educational system. Subsequent to this is an outline of the modules and chapters of the rest of the book and a discussion of how this book should be read were presented. All of this sets the stage for the rest of this book. Enjoy the journey ahead.
CHAPTER 2

CONSTRUCTIVIST LEARNING THEORY AND CONTEMPORARY DEBATES

INTRODUCTION

Educational theory into practice is a crucial factor to consider in the teaching and learning process. Theories of teaching and learning guide decision making processes in relation to teaching practices and, in turn, practices that embrace educational theories impact conceptualizations and re/conceptualizations of education theories. Hence, the process is cyclical. The advent of globalization of education as a contributing factor to 21st century teaching and learning has added a new area of inquiry in relation to educational theory and practice – the voices of international educators in international contexts, currently an under-explored area of knowledge. This chapter will introduce constructivist learning theory, the dominating teaching and learning theory that guided the design and implementation of 21st century curriculum at DWC. Subsequent chapters will revisit discussions of constructivist learning theory and situate the conceptions of this learning theory in practice.

Constructivist Learning Theory

Historically, the dominating classifications prominent in discussions about constructivist learning theory are: cognitive constructivist theory based on Dewey’s (1934/1980) assertions and social constructivist theory based on Vygotsky’s (1978, 1986) assertions. These theories have largely been discussed in relation to children’s learning processes, but in the past few decades connections between constructivist learning theory and adult learning theories (Chapter 3) have gained in prominence. Generally, the essence of constructivist learning theory is that “individuals learn best when they actively construct knowledge and understanding in light of their own experiences” (Santrock, Woloshyn, Gallagher, Di Petta, & Marini, 2007, p. 282). The actual mechanisms of how construction of knowledge occurs has been debated among lines of cognition, social interaction, or a combination of both.

Cognitive Constructivist Learning Theory. Constructivist theory of learning, based on individuals’ constructions of knowledge through experience, has an historical context that von Glasersfeld (1990, 1996) attributes to Jean Piaget (1952). However, earlier, James (1890) discussed learning as the acquisition of “Habits” and “Will.” James believes that daily existence results in habitual activity: “All our life, so far as it has definite form, is but a mass of habits – practical, emotional, and
intellectual – systematically organized for our weal or woe” (James, 1992, p. 750). James considers systemizing of habits a virtue and exhorts educators to inculcate habit as an educational ideal. Will is the student’s enactment of strategies and effort expended to complete a task despite difficulty or distractions: the internal fortitude to press on. Thus, according to James, thought and action are linked through a sequence of events. An action, or habit, must first be triggered from an idea in the mind which is the catalyst for firing an activity. Thus, with “the firing of action A (the first action of a habitual activity) action B is triggered, and so forth until the entire sequence has been activated and implemented” (Fox & Riconscente, 2008, p. 377). James’s discussion regarding Habit and Will provide a backdrop for Piaget’s (1952) later discussion regarding children’s use of schema as a framework for learning.

Piaget (1952) is considered a cognitive constructivist because he emphasized the importance of cognition in the construction of knowledge. Another influential, cognitive constructivist assertion by Piaget (1952) concerns his belief that learning proceeds via restructuring mental concepts to understand and interpret information. Schema, or the plural schemata, refers to these mental concepts or frameworks as existing “in an individual’s mind to organize and interpret information” (Santrock et al., 2007, p. 41). Thus, a student’s construction of knowledge involves linking new information with prior learning experiences, or schemata.

Piaget (1952) argues that two schematic processes are involved in the construction of new information: assimilation and accommodation. According to Illeris (2002), assimilation is learning by addition. Students learn when new information “is linked to a scheme or pattern already established in such a manner that it is relatively easy to recall and apply” (p. 84) when called upon to do so. Sternberg and Williams (2010) describe assimilation as a process of incorporation of new information or knowledge into existing schemas. Accommodation refers to information that is “difficult to immediately relate to any existing scheme or pattern” (Illeris, 2002, p. 84) and the learner must either adjust the new information or adjust the schemas to suit the knowledge environment (Santrock, 2007) or “create new schemas to organize the information that he or she cannot assimilate into existing schemas” (Sternberg & Williams, 2010, p. 42). During the accommodation process, also known as “transcendent learning” (Illeris, 2002, p. 84) construction of new knowledge occurs. The educator’s role is to provide a forum and the opportunity for individuals to discover knowledge. Both learning processes clearly incorporate the concept of individuals’ active construction of knowledge through their previous and existing experiences as the mechanism for learning acquisition. But, what is the nature of experiences and how can educators in the 21st century use experience pedagogically?

Experiential Learning. Prominent educational philosopher John Dewey (1934/1980) contends that knowledge and learning, by their very nature, are experiential. Knowledge gleaned through every day experience provides the basis through which to understand new knowledge and new learning. Dewey (1938/1997) critiques the polarity in philosophy in education: traditionalists who
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emphasize curricular content over content and process, and progressivists who
endorse freedom in education as the oppositional response to traditionalists.
Dewey’s opposition to this polarity is well before its time and certainly has
credence today. According to Neill (2003a, 2003b) and Guisbond and Neill (2004),
this debate continues to wage in educational philosophy to this very day:
structured, disciplined, and didactic orientations to education against student-
directed, free exploration, and progressive education. This debate is also manifest
in educational emphases of “standards” vs. “relevance” (Drake, 2012) that is well
known among curricular specialists, policy makers, and educators. This debate is
commonly linked to curricular tensions between accountability measures in
teaching and learning often in the form of large scale mandated assessment
standards and the construction of curriculum supportive of a 21st century and
constructivist approach (Drake, Reid, & Kolohon, 2014).

Dewey (1929) believes that it is necessary to link the constructivist theory of
education with the nature of human experience. He argues that we must understand
how experience occurs in order to design and conduct education for the benefit of
individuals in society both in the present and the future. He believes that educators
are responsible for providing students with experiences that are immediately
valuable and enable their contribution to society. In order to do so, educators must
endeavour to understand students’ characteristics, and behaviour, in addition to
their environment in order to understand existing experiences.

Dewey believes that experience appears as a result of continuity and interaction.
Continuity refers to the premise that any experience an individual has will have a
positive or negative impact on that person’s future. Interaction refers to awareness
of situational influence on one’s experience. Therefore, according to Dewey, a
current experience is understood in light of past experience and the current
situational context and has both internal and social components. The educator’s
role in this is to understand experience and then engage in organizing content in a
manner that incorporates students’ past experiences while providing them with new
experiences which will aid their intellectual growth and promote their ability to
contribute to society. Dewey claims that students should be given control over their
experiences, which will increase their perceived value of those experiences, and
ultimately nourish learning. Dewey (1916) claims that the “intelligent element of
our experience” (p. 146) is actively cultivated through intentional efforts to realize
specific connections between actions and effects, or experiences and outcomes. It
is important to understand that Dewey emphasized the need for educators to
understand the subjective quality of students’ experience, which depends on social
interaction between students and educators.

In order to achieve deep learning from experience, reflection is crucial (Dewey,
1934/1980). Joplin (1995) states that “Experience alone is insufficient to be called
experiential education, it is the reflection process which turns experience into
experiential education” (p. 15). Reflection on experience is the process through
which personal and social meaning can be extrapolated to interact and become
through interpretation. It is produced through the meanings given it. Interpretations
CHAPTER 2

of lived experiences are always contextual and specific” (p. 10). These premises are supported by Zhenhuan (2010) and by Bergsteiner, Avery, and Neumann (2010), who state: “Learning is a cognitive process involving constant adaptation to, and engagement with, one’s environment. Individuals create knowledge from experience. … Conflicts, disagreements and differences drive the learning process as learners move between modes of action, reflection, feeling and thinking” (p. 30). Therefore, in the discussion of experiential learning, reflection, context, sentiment, and interpretation are salient considerations in understanding the potential for learning and learners’ constructions of knowledge.

The influential scholar David Kolb developed a prominent model of experiential learning that draws from Piaget, Jung, and others. His seminal book Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development (1984) provided a framework that describes four definite learning styles (accommodating, diverging, assimilating, converging), which are connected to a four-phase progressive learning cycle. Kolb believed that all learners have a learning style preference from among these four. The “accommodating” style prefers hands-on engagement (often connected to tactile or kinesthetic learning). With the “diverging” style learners are sensitive and appreciate considering things from various perspectives. In the “assimilating” style learners appreciate logical and concise, systematic approaches to learning. Lastly, with the “converging” learning style is pragmatic. Converging learners prefer problem-solving types of learning approaches. His framework provides a way to think about different learners’ individual learning preferences in addition to an explanation of the cyclical nature of learning from experience.

Kolb’s model works on two levels: a four-stage cycle and the above described four-type definition of learning styles. Kolb’s “Experiential Learning Cycle” consists of: (1) ‘immediate or concrete experiences’ (CE) which are the foundational experiential moments. For learning to occur, these experiences provide a basis for (2) ‘observations and reflections’ (OR). These observations and reflections are then assimilated and refined to form (3) ‘abstract concepts’ (AC). Ultimately, abstract concepts develop to form new implications which can involve (4) ‘active experimentation’ (AE) – thus creating new experiences. Ideally, an educator can create teaching and learning moments where the learners engage at each point in the cycle, thereby experiencing, reflecting, thinking and acting in an ongoing cycle of learning.

Kolb’s work, while influential, has been critiqued. For example, Rogers (1996) highlights that “learning includes goals, purposes, intentions, choice and decision-making, and it is not at all clear where these elements fit into the learning cycle” (p. 108). Other scholars question the role of informal learning (Bergsteiner, Avery, & Neumann, 2010), negative experiences, and cultural and languages differences in relation to experience (Kelly, 1997), from a feminist perspective (Michelson, 1996) and from an ecological/environmental perspective (Seaman, 2008).

Regarding the model, Kolb (2007a, 2007b) himself indicated what he sees as a poignant limitation, which is that the learning output is solely based on the way learners perceive for themselves. Ratings by virtue of standards of behaviours,
skills or knowledge, are not incorporated into the framework or in his learning style inventories. However, Kolb’s contribution to exploring experience as the basis for learning and presenting a framework to explore the nature of experience in a “scientific form” (Kelly, 1997) has “helped move educational thought from the locus of the instructor back to the learner.” This influence has ensured that the nature of experience as a construct of learning is a viable topic of discussion and reconceptualization for educational theorists such as Brookfield, (2006), Jarvis (2012, 2010), Merriam (2007) Merriam and Bierema (2013) and many others. For this purposes of this book, learning through experience is defined as:

a combination of processes throughout a lifetime whereby the whole person – body (genetic, physical and biological) and mind (knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, emotions, beliefs and senses) – experiences social situations, the perceived content of which is then transformed cognitively, emotively or practically (or through any combination) and integrated into the individual person’s biography resulting in a continually changing (or more experienced) person. (Jarvis, 2012, p. 4)

Social Constructivist Learning Theory. An influential theorist in the history of constructivist learning theory is Vygotsky (1978) who also believed in the individual’s active construction of knowledge as the mechanism for learning. Vygotsky viewed learning and development as “historically situated and culturally determined” (Fox & Riconscente, 2008, p. 383), emphasizing the impact of both experience and social interaction in the learning process. Vygotsky believes that knowledge, and the tools for constructing knowledge such as language, have a social historical context at the core (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky’s argument suggests that an educational context and particular culture hold conceptualized beliefs which are passed forward generationally. These beliefs represent a social historical conception of knowledge and acquisition – learning. Vygotsky (1986) believes that this social historical conception impacts the social customs and discourses of the community through the language of communication:

Any function in the child’s cultural development appears twice, or on two planes. First it appears on the social plane, and then on the psychological plane. First it appears between people as an interpsychological category, and then within the child as an intrapsychological category. (p. 163)

According to Vygotsky, the acquisition of knowledge and the development of intellectual capacity are “socially and culturally defined,” as opposed to “individually constructed” (p. 163). The educator’s role is to generate opportunities for students to learn from interaction “with teachers and more-skilled peers” (Santrock et al., 2007, p. 52). Accordingly, Vygotsky’s sociocultural learning theory epitomizes a paradigm of learning where social interactions and social cultural history are essential in knowledge construction.

Rogoff (1998, 2003) expanded Vygotsky’s discussion regarding social cultural theory to argue that knowledge construction transpires on three planes: the individual; others within the community with whom the individual interrelates; and
the social cultural context that defines how this community engages in the processes of knowledge construction and communication. Development, then, “is a process of people’s changing participation in the sociocultural activities of their communities” (Rogoff, 2003, p. 52). Therefore, knowledge construction is characterized and determined by social cultural history, culture, and context of the place where the knowledge originated, and in accordance with particularized goals and values in relation to the cultural context from where this knowledge originated. Foundationally, social constructivist curriculum builds on the importance of students’ social interactions, social cultural histories, and social cultural contexts in the processes of learning (Altun & Büyükduman, 2007). However, if social constructivism is premised on the recognition of social interactions, social cultural histories, and social cultural contexts, what are the implications for globalization in teaching and learning in the 21st century?

Constructivism – A Western Learning Theory? Higher educational facilities across the globe are internationalizing: new campuses are opening across geographical borders, new ideas are being shared with a wider audience, and educational theories and practices are being promoted in new contexts. The driving force of internationalization efforts in education predominantly consists of Western higher education institutions promoting their programs in international contexts. This results in either international students enrolling in Western degree or diploma programs in Western countries, or with whole campuses opening in various localities across the globe for form an International Branch Campus (IBC). For example, in the United Arab Emirates, campuses from New York University, the Sorbonne, George Mason University (now closed), University of Waterloo (the Engineering program – now closed) and Wollengong universities exist.

With the advent of educational internationalization, there is a corresponding concern regarding the transference of “Western” theories (Bleakley, Brice, & Bligh, 2008; Garson, 2005; Halbach, 2002; Hoppers, 2009; Richardson, 2004) and practices with “embedded Western values into foreign countries” (Garson, 2005, p. 322). This debate extends across educational disciplines, methodological approaches, and geographical boundaries. According to Halbach (2002), “exporting methodologies” (p. 243) is problematic because this “ignores the importance of personal and cultural factors in learning” (p. 243). Due to recognition of different belief and value systems, this is a valid concern. However, several theorists (Grange, 2004; Kalupahana, 1986; Kamis & Muhammad, 2007; Merriam, 2007; Sim, 2009; Sun, 2008) have made connections between elements of constructivist learning theory and various international philosophies and religious tenets related to learning.

The term “Western” describes Constructivist Learning Theory and related curriculum (Clarke & Otaky, 2006; Grange, 2004; Richardson, 2004), but concepts such as lifelong learning, reflection, critical thinking, and experiential learning inherent in the constructivist curricular model, connect to other, non-Western philosophies, ways of knowing, and religious traditions. Kalupahana (1986) has written about the comparisons between Buddhism and the epistemology of William
James, and Ames (2003), Cheng (2005), Chinn (2006), Grange (2004), Kee (2007), Sim (2009), and Sun (2008) have written comparing the ideas of Dewey and Confucius. These comparisons have been critiqued in terms of the theories and ideas being absolutely interconnected, divergences between the theorists, faiths and philosophies exist. For example, Sim (2009) discusses Dewey’s and Confucius’s philosophies:

There are definite affinities between these thinkers’ emphasis on the social … but there are also drastic differences that surround their visions. … These differences pose a challenge to the wholesale appropriation of Dewey’s democracy and his education for democracy for Confucius and Confucian societies. (p. 98)

Thus, caution in this regard is warranted. It is not wise to advocate that these thinkers, believers and faith systems, and philosophers offer an absolute comparison in terms of ideas and belief systems. But, thinking about their visions of knowledge opens the door for exploring commonalities as well as differences in discussions regarding construction of knowledge, educational theories, and the educational context, which is relevant for balanced discussions of teaching and learning in our globalized and interconnected world.

Dewey and Vygotsky believe that individuals are social beings and schooling is integral to our learning processes. “Dewey holds that multiple social relations are prerequisite to human development” (Sim, 2009, p. 85). Confucius as well emphasized the salience of social relations. “Human life is never simply individual, in the Confucian view” (Sim, 2009, p. 85). In Confucianism, a being is always a member in a complex web of social relations and defined roles within those relations (Cheng, 2005; Sim, 2009). Dewey believes that learning, thinking, and believing are inherent in experiencing and all are the product and process of interacting with the world. As Dewey (1938) states,

Experience … includes what men do and suffer, what they strive for, love, believe and endure, and also how men act and are acted upon, the ways in which they do and suffer, desire and enjoy, see, believe, imagine – the processes of experiencing. (p. 18)

For Dewey, a learning experience is a continual interaction with humanity, and the elements of our environment. He believed that there was no conscious experience devoid of inference. Inference is the process of guiding behaviour within the experience itself.

Dominant faiths such as Confucianism, Buddhism, and Islam support respect for education. Confucianism endorses the belief that all in society should be educated and supports a learner-centred epistemology (Kee, 2007; Sim, 2009). Kee (2007) states that in Confucianism, learning “cannot be separated from one’s daily experience. True learning is being constructed by learners through the inner self interacting with nature” (p. 156). Chinn (2006) notes that adult learning must entail both experience and reflection, concepts that also are inherent in the religious faith of Buddhism (Chinn, 2006). The ancient learning philosophy described by Al
GHAZZALI IN *KITAB* (TRANSLATED BY FARIS & ASHRAF, 2003) SPEAKS OF BOTH OF THESE CONCEPTS IN ADDITION TO ENDORSING RESPECT FOR TEACHERS BECAUSE THEY HAVE ACQUIRED VAST KNOWLEDGE THROUGH VARIED EXPERIENCES.


AL GHAZZALI IS A PROLIFIC ISLAMIC THINKER WHO WROTE THE *KITAB AL-ILM* (BOOK OF KNOWLEDGE) IN THE 11TH CENTURY. ACCORDING TO A TRANSLATION BY FARIS AND ASHRAF (2003), THE QUEST FOR KNOWLEDGE AND LEARNING “SHOULD BE A LIFELONG ENDEAVOUR AS WELL AS HUMANITIES TRUEST ACCOMPLISHMENT” (P. 33). ACCORDING TO THE KITAB AL-ILM, AS TRANSLATED BY FARIS AND ASHRAF (2003), THREE PRINCIPLES EXHORTED IN THE BOOK OF KNOWLEDGE EXEMPLARY THIS IDEAL: A CRADLE TO GRAVE ETHOS, BORDERLESS LEARNING, AND ACQUISITION OF KNOWLEDGE FOR BOTH GENDERS. THIS MEANS THAT ACCORDING TO THIS EARLY ISLAMIC PHILOSOPHER, LEARNING SHOULD BE A LIFELONG QUEST FOR KNOWLEDGE THAT IS SHARED AND TO THE BENEFIT OF ALL IN SOCIETY. THE QUEST FOR LEARNING SHOULD CONTINUE REGARDLESS OF WAR OR CRISIS. ONE SHOULD SEEK LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES FROM WHEREVER THEY MAY BE. AS WELL, BOTH WOMEN AND MEN ARE OBLIGATED TO SEEK LEARNING AND KNOWLEDGE. IT APPEARS THAT THE RELIGION AND PHILOSOPHY OF THE ISLAMIC WORLD CONNECT TO SOME PRINCIPLES OF CONSTRUCTIVIST LEARNING, DWEEY’S AND CONFUCIUS’S DISCUSSION OF THE EXPERIENTIAL AND SOCIAL NATURE OF LEARNING, AND LEARNING FOR ALL.


**PARADIGM DEBATES IN CONSTRUCTIVISM.** CONTEMPORARY DISCUSSIONS REGARDING CONSTRUCTIVISM OFTEN FOCUS ON A PARADIGM WAR: INSTRUCTIONAL DESIGN IS EITHER OBJECTIVIST OR CONSTRUCTIVIST (CRONJE, 2006). ACCORDING TO JONASSEN (1991), “THE TWO THEORIES ARE GENERALLY DESCRIBED AS POLAR EXTREMES ON A CONTINUUM FROM EXTERNALLY MEDIATED REALITY (OBJECTIVISM) TO INTERNALLY MEDIATED REALITY...
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(constructivism)” (p. 8). Further, “constructivism is completely incompatible with objectivism” (Bednar, Cunningham, Duffy, & Perry, 1992, p. 91). This opinion, and the classification that underscores the opinion, is problematic because it requires educators and curriculum designers to decide between the two extremes (Cook, 1993; Lebow, 1993; Phillips, 1995; von Glaserfeld, 1996), negating regard for learning contexts and programs that contain features of both approaches.

Cronje (2006) argues that this paradigm war has been protracted partially because the terms “objectivist epistemology” and “constructivist epistemology” are vaguely defined, a position mirrored by Terhart (2003) and by Jonassen (1991). For the purposes of this research, reference to objectivist epistemology incorporates the following set of world views as discussed by Cronje (2006). Objectivism epistemology views the world as a collection of entities that can be categorized on the basis of commonality: Reality is a construct that can be “modelled and shared with others” (p. 390); symbols are representations of learning that are only meaningful “to the degree that they correspond to reality” (p. 390). The brain processes these symbols and human thought is a process of “symbol-manipulation [that] is independent of the human organism” (p. 390). Thus, meaning has an external, objective and independent existence from the human being. Constructivism epistemology views the world as constructed, cognitively and socially, from our interactions, and this construction forms a collection of multiple realities modelled upon the way human beings construct their reality. Thus, symbols are “products of culture” (p. 390) that the human mind perceives, interprets and ultimately results in a construction of reality dependent “on the experience and understanding of the knower” (p. 390).

According to educational theorists (Cronje, 2006; Reeves & Harmon, 1994), differences between these two philosophies in terms of instruction and curriculum can be noted. Objectivism is an epistemology that endorses a standardized form of instruction to meet specific, sharply focused goals. The role of the educator is directive and didactic. Educational content is highly structured with minimal learner control. Student motivation is usually external (often in the form of standardized measures on testing instruments and grades), and the educational concern is focused on errorless learning. Constructivism is an epistemology that endorses a form of instruction geared toward students’ construction of meaning from experience. The role of the educator is facilitative, with an emphasis on learning from the experience. Educational content is flexible, with an emphasis on experiential and collaborative approaches. Cultural sensitivity is necessary and student motivation is intrinsic.

Further, complicating the discussion of constructivism are the multiple forms of constructivist models: radical constructivism, moderate or trivial constructivism, and pseudo-constructivism, all of which operate on a continuum with radical constructivism representing one end of the spectrum, pseudo-constructivism representing another, and moderate constructivism, also known as trivial constructivism, falling somewhere in the middle (Cronje, 2006). According to von Glasersfeld (1996), radical constructivism claims that knowledge emanates from internal, cognitive processes of the brain. This discussion appears to be influenced
by Piaget’s (1952) cognitive constructivist learning theory. Von Glasersfeld further argues that the process of learning is self-regulatory, and, because knowledge is a construct rather than a collection of acquired information, the degree that knowledge reflects reality of a specific individual is hard to understand. Moderate constructivism (von Glasersfeld, 1990) refers to the meaning-making process undertaken by the student through experiences generated and facilitated by the educator. For the purposes of this research, any reference to the constructivist curriculum as taught at DWC will refer to moderate constructivism as the theory that underpins the curriculum and curricular outcomes.

Moderate constructivism is a theory of learning (Unal & Akpinar, 2006) and, therefore, teaching. Inherent in moderate constructivism are claims that knowledge acquisition is an active, developmental process involving physical growth and social interaction (Altun & Büyükduman, 2007); thus, learners construct and interpret their own reality filtered through the lens of their consciousness and experience within the social existence. Inherent in constructivism is the belief that students’ knowledge is a direct manifestation of their prior experiences, schemata (Piaget, 1952), and the mechanisms employed to decipher those experiences, assimilation, and accommodation (Piaget, 1952). Fox (2001) claimed that, “conceptual growth comes from the negotiation of meaning, the sharing of multiple perspectives and the changing of our internal representations through collaborative learning” (as cited in Altun & Büyükduman, 2007, p. 31).

CONCLUSION

This chapter presents Constructivist Learning Theory as an educational philosophy of learning and therefore teaching. The historical legacy of constructivist learning theory has been presented including cognitive constructivist, social constructivist, and contemporary debates particularly in relation to constructivism as a “western” theory and paradigm debates related to conceptions of constructivist learning theory. As a movement in educational philosophy, this learning theory generally dominates with connections to what many curricular scholars refer to as “relevance” in curriculum design. A consistent theme in discussions of constructivist learning theory emphasizes polarities of thinking: Cognitive constructivist, social constructivist; Western or Eastern; objectivist or constructivist. It is important as we continue through this book to think less in terms of polarities, and more in terms of balancing ideas and contextualizing theories and approaches into curriculum, teaching and learning processes.

Regardless of the philosophical debates, many educators, curriculum designers, higher education administrators, and scholars regard their approaches to their instructional design as constructivist in orientation. Twenty-first century orientations to teaching and learning support the role of constructivist orientations regardless of whether the locus of instruction is elementary, secondary or post-secondary education. Thus, elucidating how constructivist learning in an international, post-secondary context is designed and implemented gives another lens for which to consider this learning theory. The following chapter explores
adult and transformative learning and curriculum theory and sociological theories of education. These theories are integral to understanding teaching and learning in higher education in a rapidly transforming and globalizing country such as the UAE.