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Addressing Academic Integrity: Perspectives From Virginia Commonwealth University in Qatar

Nancy Fawley

ABSTRACT

Understanding the cultural aspects that affect a student's ability to appropriately use resources is important in developing outreach and instruction in multicultural settings. Differences in educational philosophies, students' previous scholastic training and cultural differences in individual motivation are all factors that may affect a freshman's ability to understand an American university's idea of academic integrity and can inadvertently cause problems where independent work and critical thinking are required. At Virginia Commonwealth University in Qatar (VCUQatar), a branch campus of the American university in the Middle East, a special class on academic integrity and ethical behavior was integrated into the freshman introduction to the university course. The class focused on fictional case studies that addressed each of the six violations of the university's honor code in situations that reflected the school's diverse student body.

INTRODUCTION

In an attempt to address cultural differences that affect a student's understanding of a university's honor code in a branch campus of an American university in the Middle East, a special class was integrated into the freshman introduction to the university course. This class, co-taught by a librarian and a writing center instructor, focused on fictional case studies that addressed each of the six violations of the university's honor code in situations that reflected the

school's diverse student body. The aim was to provoke a conversation and encourage the students to think critically about the choices they will make in their academic career and beyond.

THE INSTITUTION

Virginia Commonwealth University in Qatar (VCUQatar) is a branch campus of Virginia Commonwealth University's School of the Arts in Richmond, Virginia, and was established in 1998 through a partnership between VCU and the Qatar Foundation for Education, Science and Community Development. The mission of the university is to provide a high level of design education for the citizens of Qatar. VCUQatar offers Bachelor of Fine Arts degrees in Communication Arts and Design, Fashion Design and Merchandising, and Interior Design. A Painting and Printmaking program was recently added as well as an M.F.A. program in Interdisciplinary Design. It is a small university with 231 students and 40 teaching faculty, with an average freshman class of approximately 70 students. Fifty-seven percent of the student population is native Qatari. Thirty-three nationalities are represented at the school, but students hail primarily from the surrounding Middle Eastern countries. The language of academic instruction is English and most of the students speak English as a second or third language. A TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) score of at least 550 on the paper-based test is a requirement for admittance and students' scores range from around 500 to over 600 out of a possible 677. As a result, the school has students with a wide range of English language skills, which affect their ability to use the library and to successfully complete the necessary coursework for their degrees.

[Insert Fawley_1]

[Caption: VCUQatar Freshman class of approximately 70 students]

EDUCATION IN QATAR

Qatar is a small peninsula approximate in size to the U.S. state of Connecticut and is bordered by Saudi Arabia and the Arabian Gulf. The population of Qatar is 1.7 million people and most reside in the capitol city of Doha (Qatar Statistics Authority 2010). Only about one-fourth of the population is native Qatari; the remainder is made up of expatriate workers, the majority of whom are low-wage laborers from the Indian subcontinent. Before independence in 1971, Qatar was a British protectorate and its main industry was pearl diving. Oil and natural gas have created great wealth and made Qatar one of the fastest growing countries in the world. According to the CIA World Factbook, Qatar boasts the world's second highest per-capita income.

Qatar is committed to nurturing "brains before oil wells" and to moving from a reliance on natural resources to a knowledge-based society (Hanley 2007). To facilitate this shift, the Qatari government has launched ambitious educational reforms at all levels, including the improvement of post-secondary educational opportunities. The Qatar Foundation, a private, non-profit organization founded in 1995 by the current Emir of Qatar, His Highness Sheikh Hamad Bin Khalifa Al-Thani, is primarily responsible for sponsoring these reforms. The purpose of the Qatar Foundation, headed by the Emir's consort, Her Highness Sheikha Mozah Bint Nasser Al-Missned, is to create a network of educational centers devoted to progressive education, research and community development. The organization's flagship project is Education City, a 2500-acre campus situated on the outskirts of Doha that houses, among other knowledge institutions, six branch campuses of American universities: Carnegie-Mellon in Qatar, Georgetown School of Foreign Service in Qatar, Northwestern University in Qatar, Texas A & M in Qatar, VCUQatar and Weill-Cornell Medical College.

The state also has a goal of “Qatarization,” an initiative to bring more Qataris into employment in the private sector. Foreigners make up most of the workforce in the private sector industries such as petrol, finance and higher education; the challenge has been to hire qualified and motivated locals for these positions. In order to achieve the state’s goal of becoming a knowledge-based society, Qataris must be able to obtain the education and achieve the test scores to be admitted to the elite American universities in their country. As a result, the state has also embarked on an ambitious project to reform the K through 12 curriculum. In 2002, a new ministry, the Supreme Education Council, was established to oversee the independent schools and strengthen the curriculum in English, science and mathematics.

The Education City universities are unique in that they are coed and men and women attend classes together. In Qatar, local customs strictly prohibit any interactions between men and women who are not related or married. The local university, Qatar University, has separate men’s and women’s schools and separate libraries, as do all the local schools, with the exception of international schools. Furthermore, most local women are not allowed to travel abroad without a father or a brother as chaperone. Thus, the American university branch campuses enable them to get an American university degree without leaving their homes and families. Men are able to go abroad without permission, but there is always the chance they may not want to return home.

CULTURAL CONTEXT

Developing an understanding of the educational system of students’ home countries is essential in developing outreach and information literacy instruction. In the Middle East and Asia, many libraries have closed stacks, while some libraries are reserved for scholars to use, not students (Leki 1992, 74). In Qatar, for instance, many local schools do not have a library, and those that

do may have a closed-stacks policy where only teachers and library staff can access the collection. Many of the library staff in these schools have a high-school diploma or a bachelor's degree and little formal training in public services and information literacy. As a result they play more of a "keeper of the library" role, discouraging students from touching the collection, rather than engaging and instructing them in the use of the library and its resources. Furthermore, notions of access and service for everyone regardless of their social standing is not always accepted in highly segmented societies such as those in the Persian Gulf (Wand 2010).

English language proficiency, especially the understanding of discipline-specific terms, can be a challenge for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students and is probably one of the main reasons they plagiarize or unintentionally misuse sources. International students reading and writing in English, as a second language may not feel confident using their own words. Communicating original thoughts involves selecting and organizing words and phrases that may be beyond their level of language development. They may plagiarize simply because they do not have the necessary vocabulary or language skills to complete the assignment.

Cultural differences in educational philosophies are one aspect that relate to the notion of academic integrity that universities stress. In many countries in the Middle East and Asia, teaching is by rote memorization and imitation. The only book used in class is a textbook and students are expected to memorize and repeat it verbatim in an exam. Critical thinking and problem solving are not required or expected. In Hong Kong, another region that historically teaches by rote, students had few opportunities to write essays and were primarily required to take exams, which tested the knowledge of the course book through memorization (Pennycook 1996, 223-224). Memorizing text in one's native language then, does little to prepare a student to think critically.

Furthermore, good students do not challenge their teachers or authorities, but faithfully copy and reproduce them (Sowden 2005). In many cultures memorizing the writing of ancient scholars, or the Quran in Muslim cultures for example, is a way of showing respect and honoring the creator and is an important part of scholarly and religious training. Copying another person's work is also seen as a sign of respect. Conversely, writing one's own thoughts may seem "immodest and presumptuous" (Leki 1992, 71). In Arab societies where there is a deep attachment to their language, (Hamady 1960, 19), students may copy simply because they like the way the words are written. Changing them might imply that the student thinks he could do better.

Attitudes towards private property and ownership differ throughout the world and are another aspect to keep in mind when working with international students. Countries with a tradition of writing develop ideas of intellectual property rights (Leki 1992, 71). In traditionally oral Arab culture, the information comes from wisdom, poetry, and songs and folk stories, not books. In this respect, information is essentially in the public domain. Repeating someone else's words is part of the oral tradition and is a way of passing information from one generation to the next.

Another characteristic of the traditional nomadic Bedouin society is that it is group-oriented; the focus is on the family or tribe, not the individual. The Arab proverb, "one hand alone cannot applaud," expresses this idea of mutual interdependence (Hamady 1960, 28). Cohesion and conformity to the group's codes were necessary for survival in the desert and goals were set based on the improvement of the fate and position of the family (Patai 2002, 83). Personality traits, such as independent thinking, that did not strengthen the group were not encouraged and were punished; independent needs were subordinate as well. This conflicts with

the individual, performance-related goals Western culture prizes. Sincerity, loyalty and devotion to the family are character traits that still exist today.

In group-oriented societies there is also pressure to help the weaker members succeed. In this instance, helping a friend or a relative is not considered cheating but a moral obligation (Leki 1992, 72). Working together as a group, even when the assignment is to be done individually, is not considered cheating. Different cultures have different ideas as to what constitutes appropriate collaboration and this creates a conflict in a Western university setting where there are distinct rules as to what is considered acceptable in this situation.

THE INITIATIVE

At VCUQatar, freshmen are required to take a one-credit *Introduction to the University* course that introduces new students to the expectations and purposes of a university education and focuses on the skills needed to have a rewarding and successful academic experience. The course is taught by university counselors and combines lectures with visits from guest speakers to introduce students to the resources available to them during their academic career.

A class on academic integrity is included in the course, and the library and writing center collaborated to develop the guest lecture for the class. Violations of academic integrity are a concern to all universities, but for VCUQatar freshmen this might be the first time they have learned that these actions are not acceptable and may result in academic probation, or suspension from school. Plagiarism is the violation that is most well known to the students. The other five violations are cheating, facilitating academic dishonesty, abuse of academic materials, stealing academic materials, and lying related to academic matters.

These violations should be obvious to those who have studied at Western institutions, but might be foreign concepts for those educated in another culture. It was important that the class addressed all the possible violations, but at the same time did it in an engaging and non-threatening manner. The aim was to develop an interactive learning situation that would facilitate discussion on each violation. Six fictional case studies were written, each addressing one violation of the honor code (Appendix A). The aim was to make them interesting, relevant and easy for second language learners to comprehend. The discussion would focus on alternatives and solutions for students who might find themselves in a similar situation. The case studies reflected situations that occur in the region, such as hiring someone to complete assignments or helping a relative with course assignments, and were relevant to a design school. Our fictional characters were given names common to the region and we created avatars that reflected the diversity of our student population.

The case studies were intentionally ambiguous to force the students to think critically about the situation and the potential consequences. Ostensibly, students could make these violations without suffering the consequences, so we also wanted them to think about the ethical implications of making right and wrong decisions regardless of whether or not one gets caught. There are no clear-cut solutions to these situations; they are related to the personal choices one makes. The aim was to help students make the choices that would enable them to have a positive academic experience.

To address this, the class started with a brief, 10-minute lecture on ethics, integrity and values and how these qualities relate to the principles of right and wrong. The lecture linked ethical behavior to the mutual trust between professors and students, and linked integrity to the courage to act with sincerity and honesty. Personal values were also linked to religious beliefs. In

Qatar and other countries in the region, there is no separation of church and state. It is understandable that raising the issue of personal religious beliefs in a university course may seem inappropriate to those raised in societies where the two are separated by law. Admittedly, it was risky to discuss this, but the concept resonated with the students and helped them to better understand the complex ideas we were discussing.

We used different approaches to the student participation portion of the class. Initially we talked about each case as a group. The class would debate the morality of the situation, and discuss what might drive a student to do this. This topic would then lead to a conversation of who might also be affected by the actions of the student in the case study. Finally, the class discussed strategies for avoiding similar situations, where one might get help, and alternate choices of actions. In case study two, for example, two friends are in the same animation class. James, the struggling student, hires a professional to complete his assignments and is suddenly excelling in class. The class might start by discussing the alternative options James could pursue to get help in the class and the course of action his friend, Ahmed, who knows about his cheating, could take. The students also discuss the affect this has on the others in the class who are doing their own work, and how this will affect James as he moves onto more difficult animation courses and eventually a career. The discussions are fluid and not highly planned. The direction the conversations take are dictated by the students comments, although there are always certain points we want to make about each case. The solutions we discuss are related to the roles the library and writing center play in the university, plus the help students can get from their faculty and the university counselors.

More recently, we have experimented with breaking the class up into six groups and assigning each group a case study. They have ten minutes to talk amongst themselves; then share

with the class one reason why the scenario is ok and one reason why it is not. Again, the aim is to get students to think critically about the situation and the possible consequences. Both approaches worked equally well, although the students had more difficulty staying on task when they were in groups. As instructors who have taught this class for over three years, we appreciated the opportunity to try a different approach. It keeps us fresh and interested in the instruction as well.

The concepts learned in this class are followed up by four research methods workshops, titled “Work Faster and Get Better Grades,” which focus on the plagiarism violation of the honor code. These workshops were a response to complaints from faculty on the quality of writing first-year students produce in their freshmen composition classes. The first workshop addresses plagiarism, but is taught from the point-of-view that most students unintentionally plagiarize, or misuse sources, because of careless or inadequate use of citing and an inability to take adequate notes and paraphrase properly. Instead of dwelling on the problem, each subsequent class focuses on a separate solution: paraphrasing a source, summarizing a source, and directly quoting a source. And, rather than focus on the definitions of these solutions, the students spend much of the workshops writing and practicing these techniques. The logic is that students will learn more by doing, in this case by paraphrasing a paragraph, than by listening to a lecture on how to do it.

Each workshop follows a similar structure; the first 15 minutes is a lecture where the concepts are explained and questions answered. It is helpful when lecturing to a class of EFL students to think back to when you learned a foreign language and remember how difficult it was to understand someone when they spoke quickly. Speaking slowly may seem like obvious advice, but it is easy to forget and even easier to speed up your speech when you are nervous, or

enthusiastic, about instruction. Also, choose words carefully and use a simple sentence structure; avoid library specific jargon and opt for more commonly used terms. At the same time, do not simplify the content you are teaching so much that you appear to be condescending. Use active learning techniques rather than a straight lecture format; ask students questions and listen carefully to their answers. This keeps them involved in the class and their learning and helps you to know whether or not the students understand the content.

The rest of the hour the students spend writing, first in groups and then later on their own. Group work was included in the workshop to engage the students in the task and to allow those with weak language skills to benefit from their more proficient peers. After the class reviews the group assignment, students complete another short writing assignment on their own. Both assignments involve paraphrasing a short paragraph and citing it properly. The challenge was finding a suitable paragraph at a reading level that would not discourage and frustrate the students. We also prefer to use design-related topics that are relevant to the curriculum and of interest to the freshmen. We also listed any unusual or difficult words with their meanings and synonyms on the handouts. All individual assignments are reviewed and the first part of the subsequent class is spent addressing any problems the students had completing the assignment and any questions they asked on the feedback form.

CONCLUSION

In universities with large international student populations, it is important to develop library instruction that addresses the cultural differences that may affect students' abilities to succeed academically. International students come from a variety of different educational systems that

may place value on attributes such as memorization and group work that are at odds with critical thinking and independent work expected at their host schools.

At VCUQatar, we have the luxury of working with a small group of students and faculty that allows us to spend more time with outreach and instruction. Small student class sizes also enable us to engage the freshmen in more intimate class discussions and group work. The activities described here address cultural differences, but they also reflect the changing role of librarians, where at many institutions it is simply not enough to teach bibliographic instruction. Librarians must also work collaboratively with their peers in student services and the writing center to prepare students for a successful academic career.

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Appendix A

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY CASE STUDIES

CASE ONE

As Sara was writing her works cited page for an art history paper she realized she forgot to make a note of where she found some of the information she cited. The information was too important to not include it, plus if she deleted it the paper would be too short. Instead, she found a website with similar information and cited that one instead.

Is this OK?

CASE TWO

Ahmed and James are best friends who are majoring in Graphic Design. Whenever possible, they schedule their courses together, and this semester both are taking a special topics course in animation. Ahmed seems to be especially talented in developing animation: his characters display interesting three-dimensional personalities, and the movements they use convey even more information than their dialogues.

At first James seems to be struggling in this course. His characters seem flat and one-dimensional, although he does have a talent for composing snappy dialogues. By the middle of the semester, James is earning a “C” in the course and is worried about his grade point average, so he hires an animator in Dubai to help him improve his grade by completing the animation projects that he starts.

His professor notices that James’s work has suddenly become quite polished and is very suspicious. When he asks James what happened, James just says that he finally “got it” about animation. No one knows about James’s help from a professional except Ahmed, and Ahmed will not tell on his best friend.

Is this OK?

CASE THREE

Said’s friend is studying law in the UK. His friend told him that the school is so competitive that students will go to the library and hide books so that their classmates will not be able to find the best information and get the better grade.

Is this OK?

CASE FOUR

Shelly is analyzing a work of art for a paper in her English class. She has composed three pages of the paper based on her careful observations of the formal elements in the painting, such as the artist's use of line, color, and size. She needs two more pages to complete the assignment but just cannot think of anything else to write about the painting.

Imagine Shelly's surprise today when the guest speaker invited to her Survey of World Art class is an authority on the artist who painted the work she is analyzing! The guest speaks to the class about research he is conducting that is bringing new insight to this artist's work, and he discusses several unique brush strokes the artist used to convey depth, shadows, and movement. In addition, Shelly learns about the symbolism of several items that are always included in her artist's works. She realizes that the work of art she has chosen contains these items, and she takes very detailed notes of the talk so she can include all of this new information in her paper.

Is this OK?

CASE FIVE

Aisha was meeting with one of her professors when the Dean stopped by to ask him a quick question. While he was out of his office, she noticed a copy of her class's upcoming exam on his desk. She did not touch the exam but did take an upside-down peak at some of the questions. After all, it was the professor's fault to leave it sitting on his desk.

Is this OK?

CASE SIX

Fatima's older sister, Haya, has her degree from VCUQatar and took MATH 001 two years ago. Haya understands algebra much better than Fatima and has agreed that Fatima can borrow her extensive notes from the course, including her solutions to the homework problems in the textbook if Fatima promises to study each problem to be sure she understands it before she copies it for her own homework. Haya has offered to explain any of the problems that Fatima does not understand.

This process works well for Fatima until mid-term exams approach. In addition to studying for two difficult tests, Fatima also must complete a complicated design project to hand in the same day her math homework for Unit 4 is to be collected. Fatima promises herself to review the homework problems with Haya after the mid-term and copies them quickly so she can hand them in on time yet still complete her project and study for the two exams.

Is this OK?