

## **Managing Cultural Diversity: The Role of a Teacher**

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### **I. Background:**

The current educational systems in Lebanese universities and schools are typical for their diversity; but unfortunately their applications suffer several shortcomings. Historically and for over four thousand years, Lebanon had been populated by the Hittites, Sumerians, Babylonians, Pharaohs, Assyrians, Arameans, Canaanites, Phoenicians, and currently the Arabs. It was also occupied by the Romans, the Byzantines, the Ottomans, and the French. All those who lived on or forced themselves onto Lebanese land left their marks on the formation of what is now a country of a peculiar cultural diversity, rarely matched to other countries in the world. From the religious perspective, Lebanon has been a fertile land for several dogmas. Old times paganism and later Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have over the years seasoned the Lebanese spiritual devotions. Lebanon currently hosts 18 different religions. The question one may ask: “Are they cohesive?” I like to think so; but in actuality, they are quite often disputive, although several ventures have been made to construct platforms for common religious ideals and values and to diffuse religious misconceptions and conflicts. The high profile for religious diversity had and has frequently spawned numerous conflicts and even sporadic clashes among the country’s various religious communities, especially between Christians and Moslems, Christians and Christians, and Moslems and Moslems.

The Lebanese educational situation is also peculiar and unmatched in its diversity. As early as the seventeenth century, Western missionaries were active in Lebanon; and for various reasons, they invested heavily in Lebanese schools. However, universities grew in number ever since the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> C. onwards. Currently, Lebanon prides itself for having about 40 universities and

colleges of higher education. Also, the Lebanese curricula fell under the direct impact of above mentioned historical, religious, and educational conditions. And Perhaps, Lebanon is the only independent country which has no unified educational system on the lower and higher levels of education. Educational institutions apply various systems of education such as: (1) The American system of education, which began by the early American missionaries and later pushed forward by AUB, LAU, NDU, Haygazian University, Ballamand University and other institutions of higher and lower education; (2) The French system, which was imposed by the French Mandate but earlier enhanced by St. Joseph University, and later by the University of the Holy Spirit-Kaslik (USEK), Hikmeh University, and especially Catholic schools spread in the Christian regions. (3) The Lebanese system which is a strange mix of the above mentioned systems. This system is employed by the Lebanese University, Beirut Arab University, the Islamic University, etc.

If one asks: “Who teaches in the Lebanese educational institutions?” The answer would be graduates from Arabic, from French and European, and from British and American universities. A telling fact here is that one of the most powerful variables in determining how university and school teachers think and teach is where and how they were taught to think and teach. Interestingly enough, one quite often finds in the same educational institution teachers and students of various religious and political affiliations. Is this a healthy situation? Yes and No! Yes for teachers who can manage cultural diversity in and outside the classroom. No for those who abuse this opulence. Here, I cannot but confess the failure of many Lebanese teachers in managing cultural diversity in the classrooms and in employing Lebanon’s rich diversity to foster tolerance, respect, and appreciation of *Difference* among students.

Mismanagement of cultural diversity in the classrooms may be rooted and related to teachers’ and students’ affiliations, to their unwillingness to learn about Other, and to their stereotyping which is quite often ignited by family members,

friends, and the partial media. Under such conditions, the material presented is sometimes one-sided, rather than decontextualized information. Such material usually provokes intense intellectual and emotional negative reactions between teachers and students and among students of different backgrounds. The issue becomes even more acute in the presence of culturally encapsulated teachers who, because of the dominance of their own perspectives, believe that Self is right; Other, wrong. Those do not realize that cultures, religions, and traditions chronically overlap in their essential human values. Unfortunately, some instructors who try to impose their political thoughts on their students, reward those who belong to the same political affiliation and abuse those who do not; and some others use the vertical method of communication to impose their views.

How can a teacher be right and only right if others could also be right? In old times, cultures were enclosed; nowadays all cultures are exposed. In this age of telecommunication and cyber-space, humungous information is available. The field of education must benefit from this the availability of information to develop systems whereby Self tolerates, understands, and appreciate the different Other. This may turn cultural diversity from a curse into a blessing, not only in Lebanon but also in the world.

## II. Remedies:

To discuss remedies one cannot be inclusive, so the remedies I suggest here are limited to my personal experiences and to some supporting research material. Proper management of cultural diversity in and out-side the classroom depends on teachers' and students' skills, knowledge, love, and humility. The skill needed is that of an interlocutor, one who can argue for or against and who can accept or refuse with the flexibility to respect and appreciate difference. To gain knowledge teachers and students must transcend the devouring of knowledge via books and data banks; they

must be trained to interact with several cultures by being on the spot. (I have so far attended more than 45 national and international conferences, lived in the USA for 5 years, and visited Australia and most European, African, Middle and Far Eastern countries and still feel how limited my knowledge and universal scope are). With respect to love, teachers and students must learn that, “Love is the divine solvent, Love is the splendor of God,” and “No matter how good thou art, O my Brother, or how bad thou art, no matter how high or how low in the scale of being thou art, I still would believe in thee, and have faith in thee, and love thee” (Ameen Rihani, 1910, *Book of Khalid*, pp. 295 and 5). The last need is humility, which enables the teachers and students to unconditionally accept and respect difference.

On the practical level I propose four suggestions; however and again, those are not inclusive. First, in and outside a classroom all aspects of human cultures should become equally salient, and interaction between the teacher and the students must be horizontal and not vertical. Here, Cushner (1990) offers four attention-grabbing conditions:

(1) Equal-status contact, that is, contact between people who perceive themselves as peers and who believe that they have equal access to rewards in the setting. Students feel equal if they believe that they have equal access to course material and class participation. Equal access implies that different students may need different types of support to feel equal. There should also be (2) Common tasks that require participation by all members; (3) social norms that encourage interaction; and (4) high acquaintance potential outside the classroom (pp. 114-15).

Second, it is the duty of the teacher, and not the student, to illuminate the dynamics of accepting Other as is and not as Self wants Other to be. Cultural diversity may be managed in discussions which have a cognitive process which is geared to

help students manage the probable conflicts between students' intellects and emotions; i.e., "What is needed now," says Jane Fried (1993), "is a set of bridge ideas that connect emotion and intellect" (p. 124). This could be achieved by learning the art of persuasion, which rests on both emotional and intellectual appeals. When such a bridge is maintained by the discussants, compromises become possible. Besides, the dynamics of accepting Other depends on "respectful listening and faithful responding" (Palmer 1983). Listening is an art and a skill which teachers must learn and teach before any discussion is held. The listener then may hold the place of the Other and see things from the Other's perspectives. Then teachers and students should be able to read and defend each others' views. (Example= Debate between two clubs at NDU)

Third, a teacher must spend a significant time coaching and modeling proper methods of research and investigation. Library research and roaming the internet are important, but students must learn how to critically evaluate what they read. Teachers should be capable of suppressing the bookishness of students and stimulating critical reasoning based on proper judgment and evaluation. And the best means of knowledge acquisition is, as I mentioned above, being on the spot. (Example= Student national and international conferences and study visits)

Fourth, teachers and students must learn that it is one's right to blame and/or criticize others; but it is wrong to over-generalize or stereotype and consider the individual a carrier of collective ills or virtues. A teacher, then, must encourage constructive feedback among students. He/she must be a cultural broker, "who thoroughly understands different cultural systems, [and] is able to interpret cultural symbols from one frame of reference to another, can mediate cultural incompatibilities, and knows how to build bridges or linkages across cultures that facilitate the instructional process" (Gay, 1993, p. 293). (Example= the Bible and the Koran as Literature)

These four suggestions are quite helpful, but they are not the only ones. Teachers' and students' training programs should be geared toward shaping interlocutors who are objective and sympathetic, who are willing to accept difference and change, who are capable of depicting the communalities of cultures and appreciating their differences, who are prepared to mingle and participate with Other, who ready to practice their own ideals and principles in their own life but not in the classrooms, who are capable of identifying misrepresentations of Self and Other, who are eager to turn clashes of cultures into dialogues, who take love and humility as the basis of bridging emotions to intellect, and finally who are able of teaching any discipline with the culture of peace in the back of their minds. In his "Seeds for Teachers to Sow," Ameen F. Rihani (1910) writes: "A teacher is a guide for the mind while the latter is growing, and a torch for the intellect at its early explorations of facts of existence. ... Using knowledge for self-promotion, decadent pomp, fame and profit or for a job or position desecrates the holiest of human feats and causes knowledge to be more harmful than ignorance" (pp. 449 and 452). Since true knowledge has no national boundaries, and truth does not belong to any one social, political, and religious community, teachers' and students' minds must transcend all personal cognitive boarders to acquire universal knowledge, one which holds firm the platform of world cultures.

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