

## The Adventures and Challenges of Teaching Overseas

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As business professors become more immersed in global strategies, knowledge of foreign cultures and stereotypes will help further thinking and debate. This article explores the impact of culture on the process of adapting to living in a foreign country and teaching business principles in a Muslim society. Additionally, the report hopes to continue the discussion regarding the portability of American theories to foreign countries.

**Keywords:** Cultural relations, Teaching international business, Management styles

Pre “9/11” I was invited by a prestigious English-speaking university in Cairo, Egypt to teach Principles of Management and Human Resource Management. The tales of my journey encompass the experience of a single Jewish female management professor embarking on a cross-cultural experience in an Arab country comprised of approximately 96 percent Muslims in a university employing about 15 percent Americans with the remaining professors predominantly Egyptian and the majority of students Egyptian or from other Arab nations. The purpose of this paper is to explore my own process of adapting to academic employment and life in a foreign country, but more importantly how I have come to make meaning of this experience as a professor of management and as an adult learner.

### Arrival in Cairo (“Ahlan wa sahlan”-Welcome)

#### Initial Phase of Entry

The thought of teaching in an exotic city such as Cairo triggered my imagination as well as my adrenalin. An “official greeter” at the airport swept me through customs. It is a common practice for companies to employ greeters so that arrivals do not have to go through the hassle of long lines and baggage inspection. The taxi ride through Cairo was better than my mental pictures of 1001 Arabian Nights. The sun sparkled off the many gold-domed mosques and the palm trees lined the roads going into downtown. Greeting me as I entered my apartment was the perfume of two-dozen roses left by the cleaning crew. As roses are inexpensive in Cairo, I kept this as a weekly tradition during my nine months abroad.

Before leaving for Cairo, I read the spiritual poems of the great Sufi poet Rumi, the Lebanese poet Gibran, listened to Arabic music, and read some of the history of Egypt. The next challenge was to prepare for the academic part of the trip. The university was using texts written by American authors. They were the same texts that are used in most business schools in American colleges and universities. I had taught these same courses at my university in Georgia and expected it to be a cakewalk. I was also on a mission: The Egyptian government was privatizing many businesses and supporting joint ventures with a variety of US corporations. I was going to

“enlighten” the Egyptian students as to the American way of doing business! My teaching style is participative and parallels the style of many American business leaders. How naïve I was!

### **Experiencing Culture Shock**

My preparation for Egypt was hardly adequate. Although reading the poetry of Rumi was uplifting, it did not prepare me for everyday life in Cairo. I knew Muslims prayed five times a day. I was hoping that everything would get quiet during these five prayer times—Cairo was on high acceleration 24/7. The streets and markets were jammed with people shopping, buying food from carts, and men sitting at cafes drinking tea, smoking the shisha pipe, playing dominoes, or idling chatting. Men walked three abreast on narrow streets and I had to step off the curb to allow them to pass me. The energy of Cairo is intense. Sometimes I walked to the university with a scarf over my head to partially blend in (cover my blonde hair) and hide. At first, it was unnerving not to feel like an equal member of society.

There were about 30 American professors who arrived in September for a two-year contract. The university provided a one-week of orientation. We met some of the Egyptian faculty, learned a little of the Arabic language, toured the neighborhoods where we lived and learned how to grocery shop, and tried to absorb some of the policies of the university. During the course of our orientation, not one word was mentioned about Islam, culture, politics, or the environment in Egypt.

During a faculty-wide team-building session I realized there was a great deal of cultural disparity between the Egyptian and American faculty. As teams reported out the results of their discussions, the dissension between the two cultures became very apparent. I began to understand why there was one department meeting during the nine months, why I was asked to be on a special admissions committee whose meetings were always scheduled when I had a class. I was rewarded with a bottle of Jack Daniels (difficult to find other than at the Duty Free shop at the airport) and a leather briefcase for being on the committee. Many of my colleagues at home would be thrilled to be “rewarded” for not attending committee meetings and not attending meetings!

The first day of class had arrived. I was nervous and excited at the same time. I already learned how to manage my way through the streets of Cairo without getting run over (drivers may not stop for red lights or stop signs). I could negotiate with the street vendors for food. I was coping with the heat. The dirty streets, pollution, and the noise level produced by continuous honking of car horns were overwhelming at first. Probably the only thing I knew how to do in this new environment was to tie my shoelaces.

I am five feet tall with blonde hair and very assertive. I started out the first class meeting with introductions and described my facilitative teaching style and what I expected of the students. I forgot my organizational development (OD) training and didn’t ask what they expected of me. I soon found out that the traditional style of learning in Egypt is to learn by rote. Critical thinking did not seem to be expected or volunteered. I was the professor—the expert. The students expected me to feed them the information through lecture and they would memorize. My perception was that my being a female, American, and at a less-than-commanding stature of five feet

exacerbated the negative reaction to my participative style! The students considered the use of empowerment as a sign of my weakness. They expected a more directive approach.

### **Adjusting to Teaching in Cairo**

Undaunted, I had to figure out how to relate to my Egyptian students. I asked one of my colleagues to mentor me. I visited one of her classes to observe her style. She energetically moved through the 50 minutes at a fast pace and style that included interaction in way that asked the students to fill in the blanks with one or two words. The students seemed energized and happy to participate.

I had to figure out how to make the management principles authored by Americans to fit the Arabic life experience. Unlike many of my American students at home, the Egyptian students did not hold part-time jobs. Consequently it was difficult for them to relate to most of the subject matter. On the day I was to cover Job Analysis and Job Descriptions in my HRM class, my mentor suggested that I ask the students to write a job description for their mother. I was really surprised and delighted at their enthusiasm for this project.

My usual approach to making business concepts realistic for undergrads in the United States is to bring in course-related articles from newspapers and magazines such as Fortune or Business 2.0. I found several Arabic newspapers written in English as well as a wonderful magazine called Egypt Today. The local information helped me to frame the concepts I was teaching to the business environment in Egypt. In addition, I wrote short business cases that reflected Arabic culture and utilized Arabic names for all the characters. I once again was enjoying the creativity and excitement of being a college professor.

Ironically, several weeks before I left, one of my favorite students visited me in my office for a chat. I never discussed politics or religion with the students and these topics seemed to be taboo among my colleagues. In the course of the student's conversation with me, he said, "You know we hate Jews." I thought this might be a splendid opportunity to share with a student who probably never met a Jew the fact that I was Jewish. I was not in Egypt on a political mission and I was due to leave soon—my instinct for self-preservation was to keep this information to myself. I am not sure if I passed-up an educational opportunity

### **Goodbye Cairo ("Maa essalama"-Goodbye)**

"Halas!" Enough! Prior to going to Egypt, if anyone were to ask me if I was flexible and responsive to change, I would have quickly responded, "yes." The nine months that I spent in Cairo was a wonderful adventure. Why did I leave? Although I was starting to make sense of the culture as a resident and professor, the continuous change and intensity of Cairo was exhausting. During the first six months, the American faculty bonded. We were all we had that was familiar. Slowly the couples paired off and the parties became "old." I didn't feel comfortable in Egypt doing the many things I would do by myself at home such as eating a meal in a restaurant, having tea at a café or going to a movie. My Egyptian colleagues didn't seem available for friendship outside

the university. It was difficult to manage the stress of change without a support system. Honestly, it was a great adventure for nine months, but I was anxious to go home.

## Conclusion

“Shookran.” Thank you. I am grateful for my experience in Cairo. Every other Saturday the university provided a professional tour guide and minivan to take us to see various places in Cairo. I went with the Arab Language Department faculty and students to Siwa (near the border of Libya). I went with other faculty to Alexandria and a cruise down the Nile. I walked through the streets of Cairo, shopped and visited ancient Mosques; I was thrilled by the Sufi dancers at a historical Mosque in the Khan Al Kalili, and ate some delicious Arabic food.

My trip overseas to a very different and challenging culture helped to peel away many layers of baggage and open the door to personal discoveries. I believe now I really am more flexible. I also know the areas where I do retain some rigidity and accept that in myself as I do in others. I have learned to be more patient, compassionate, and more tolerant. I have applied these lessons and learned new ones during a Fulbright-Hays Scholarship trip to South Africa, a spring teaching experience in France, and now I am about to embark on a new adventure and challenge in India sponsored by a Rotary International Foundation Teaching Grant.

We live in a borderless world. How beautiful it is, is all in the eyes of the beholder. I am grateful for the profession that I have chosen as I am afforded these global opportunities of learning and sharing. My experience suggests that success at global teaching is certainly about our academic knowledge, but I think more about who we are as human beings. And, that is also true here in the United States as well.

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