

*Broadening the Landscapes of Learning:  
Language, Culture, Meaning-Making in a Nursing Degree  
Program*

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The title '*Broadening the Landscapes of Learning*' represents the Guest Editors' beliefs that exploring the nature of learning in diverse contexts and communicating this knowledge to a broad scholarly audience is both highly needed and highly valued among academics, researchers, and educators today.

We were inspired to develop a special issue devoted to teaching and learning after our 2<sup>nd</sup> Annual Conference, 2014. During that event, research presentations ranged from specific aspects of language, use of innovative teaching practices with technology, reflections on teaching practices, and the complexities of teaching nursing and health care in this international context. Many of the presentations illuminated both opportunities and tensions related to teaching and learning within an International Branch Campus (IBC) such as the University of Calgary in Qatar (UCQ).

UCQ is an IBC of the Canadian University of Calgary main campus which is located in Calgary, Alberta. As a nursing intensive higher educational institution, it offers both a Bachelor's and Master's degree in Nursing. Most of the student body consists of non-native English speaking students. While some students enter the UCQ Nursing Program directly from high school, others enter after having been in the workforce and out of higher education for several years. Regardless, both of these student populations require academic support in specific areas prior to beginning their degree in Nursing. As such, UCQ offers a Foundations Program that focuses on bridging student knowledge to reach the appropriate entry requirements of the Nursing Program in the areas of English for Academic Purposes (EAP), Math, and Science education. This Foundations Program also extends academic support throughout the students' university experience. As a result, students entering UCQ through the Foundations Program are provided with the required skills sets to lead them toward success throughout their academic journey in the Nursing Bachelor's Degree Program and in their future nursing work placements.

In this opening paper, we will explore the intersection of language, culture and meaning-making. These three themes dominated the manuscripts submitted to this Special Issue and illuminated the nature of teaching and learning in this context. This will be followed by an overview of the articles comprising this Special Issue, including two book reviews: One related to

Nursing and the other related to teaching in an Arab context. The co-editors will then discuss implications and recommendations.

### *The Interconnectedness of Language, Culture and Meaning-Making*

Qatar's rapid growth and development over the past two decades has resulted in a rich and diverse socio-cultural and linguistic landscape. As Qatar has transformed from a small tribal-based country to a wealthy modern state situated in the heart of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), it has experienced a corresponding change in its population demographics. Efforts to meet the human resource needs that coincide with such a daunting transformation has resulted in vast numbers of foreign populace residing in Qatar. This foreign population brings specialized skill sets needed to enhance and support Qatar's infrastructural growth and development. In addition, Qatar has also been relying upon the experience of foreign-based and world-class higher educational institutions to provide and support educational opportunities for its own populace through the establishment of IBCs.

The prevalence of North American-based higher educational IBCs in Qatar has resulted in English being the primary medium of instruction in higher education. Since the student linguistic demographic in Qatar is predominately composed of native Arabic language learners, English language instruction has profound implications on the student learning experience. Prominent scholars such as Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995) have explored the interconnected nature of language and culture in culturally relevant pedagogy particularly in the United States, and Jennifer Rowsell and Kate Pahl (2010, 2011) have discussed the role of language, culture and meaning-making in 21<sup>st</sup> century literacies education. But, how do language, culture and meaning-making interrelate in an English as a foreign language, higher educational context in Qatar?

The complex issues of language and culture that present themselves to IBC educators in Qatar involves a degree of delicate brokering between the domains of English language instruction and sociocultural reality. Further complicating the nature of teaching and learning in higher education in Qatar is the intersection of Western academic culture and the social cultural reality of the students. From the viewpoint of instructors, Telafici, Martinez, and Telafici (2014) observed that "The struggles we face as instructors [in Qatar] often stem from our own inner debate on what it means to teach a form of education we associate very deeply with our own form of society and government in a land where both are very different" (pg. 188). This struggle is further perpetuated if instructors are not able to fully understand and appreciate the linguistic and sociocultural contexts of their own students.

In relation to English language learning areas, it is crucial for educators in Qatar to understand the nature of the educational background and linguistic development their students have previously experienced. While a majority of the student body in Qatar consist of native Arabic speakers, there is also a significant proportion of learners from countries as linguistically diverse as Iran, India, and the Philippines. Although all of these learners might fit under the

English Language Learner (ELL) umbrella, their backgrounds in terms of their own approaches and understandings of the English language remain quite diverse. Educators in this environment need to be cognizant of creating a teaching and learning environment that is accepting and conducive to the linguistic development of all cultures and with recognition to multiple variations of English, commonly referred to as “World Englishes” (Kilickaya, 2009). This entails a balance between exploring paths in improving students’ academic reading and writing skills, while at the same time appreciating the shared and negotiated discourse that develops and is often reflective of the unique World English environment that surrounds them.

The sociocultural reality relates to Qatar as a conservative, Islamic, political monarchy on the world stage. The educator must first consider the role that Islam and the Muslim faith brings to bear on learners’ thought processes and their interpretation of content delivered by Western instructors. Furthermore, the educator must consider the implications a hierarchical social and political structure has on introducing concepts such as inquiry-based learning and critical thinking. It is within this unique context that Telafici, et al. (2014) have argued the need for educators to become more familiar with the linguistic and sociocultural realities of their students. These realities have been identified as assisting students in better understanding and coping with the effects of “globalization happening in their own country” as opposed to measuring them through the lens of preconceived Western standards (p. 188).

The contributions in this Special Issue reflect a unique opportunity to consider the landscape of learning at UCQ as revealed and represented through the research from Canadian-based educators currently teaching and residing in Qatar. This blend of insights offers a rich understanding of the implications of language, culture, and teaching and learning at UCQ which has the potential to broaden understandings of learning across higher education contexts.

### *The Articles*

Kim Critchley and Mary Gene Saudelli present a historical framework for the creation of UCQ as an international branch campus of the University of Calgary in the article *“Helping Qatar Achieve its National Vision 2030: One Successful International Branch Campus”*. This article outlines how UCQ as a nursing degree granting institution provides education that is designed to align with Qatar’s National Vision 2030 while maintaining the integrity of the Eyes High Vision of University of Calgary. The article recognizes the role context plays in the success or failure of an international education endeavour. Critchley and Saudelli highlight the salience of strategic growth, identity and partnerships, and community engagement in order to deliver a quality learning experience for students. The article provides valuable lessons learned about ensuring the success of an international branch campus.

In *“Bridging the Theory-Practice Gap: Situated Learning as a Pedagogical Framework for Teaching Undergraduate Nursing Students”*, Jason Hickey and Zohra Hasnani-Samnani describe the theory and practice gap that

exists in teaching clinical nursing. They adopted a situated learning approach to teaching clinical nursing in order to provide an authentic learning experience for second year Nursing students. Using a mixed method case study research design, they explored how utilizing simulated learning, creating a community of practice among students and the development of situated learning strategies may bridge the theory and practice gap to create an authentic learning experience.

Crucial to any understanding of education in an international context is the role of students' culture and faith. Jan Marie Graham and Diana White explore how students beliefs about Jinn Black Magic and Evil Eye impact teaching and learning in a nursing degree program. Their article "Muslim Nursing Student Beliefs about Possession States: An Exploratory Survey of Beliefs and Causal Attributions" is a quantitative study that problematizes the incongruence of teaching Western orientations to health care. They found that students believe in possession states and approach health care from a conflation of both spiritual health and wellbeing and physical health and wellbeing. Graham and White assert the importance of teaching for health care competency and cultural and religious competency in nursing education.

Jason Hickey, Mohamoud Adam, Ken Ryba and student researchers address the teaching and learning challenges encountered by English Language Learners (ELL) in his study of Clinical Nursing instruction. The article "*Development of a Clinical Nursing Wordlist*" is a quantitative cross-sectional study of communicative, oral instruction English language use in four clinical educational contexts. Hickey's results offer a preliminary clinical nursing wordlist essential for students in their development of nursing practices.

Continuing the theme of language, M. Gregory Tweedie, Robert C. Johnson, D. William Kay, and Jody Shimoda address phonemic awareness in teaching reading in the Foundation Nursing Program at UCQ. Their article "Direct Phonemic Awareness Instruction as a Means of Improving Academic Text Comprehension for Adult English Language Learners" is a quantitative quasi-experimental study of a commercial, digital reading program for ELL learners. They found that direct phonemic awareness instruction had a significant impact on vowel recognition and academic reading comprehension skills of Arab higher education learners.

Sharon Caroll contributed a book review of "*The Resilient Nurse: Empowering Your Practice*." Carroll asserts that this text is an excellent resource for nursing students and nursing educators. Although it is not written specifically for an international audience, it does have relevance for the nursing profession as the topic offers both understanding of workplace stressors and coping strategies. Carroll asserts that the book provides useful educational interventions in teaching student nurses strategies that will support and sustain them in their professional careers.

The Special Issue concludes with Marie-Claude Toriida's book review of "*Teaching and Learning in the Arab World*." Toriida identifies that although the book title indicates the teaching and learning in the Arab World, the dominating focus is specific to the Arabian/Persian Gulf region. Toriida shares that this book is valuable to anyone interested in teaching and learning in this

context as chapters relate to the historical accounts of Arab education, the challenges related to teaching to ELL learners and the role of education and change in 21<sup>st</sup> education in the Arab Gulf region.

### *Implications and Recommendations*

It is important to note, there were few submissions to this Special Issue using qualitative research methodologies. Given the unique educational context, the complex interplay of language, culture and meaning-making inherent in teaching and learning in Qatar, it would be beneficial to have qualitative research that speaks to these aspects. Particularly valuable would be narrative inquiries, ethnographic explorations, and case studies that address perceptions, beliefs, interactions and dynamics of teaching and learning in higher education in the Middle East. These are potential avenues of descriptive research that will hopefully be explored in a subsequent issue.

It would be naïve to assume international students can or should conform to Western ideals of teaching and learning. The authors in this Special Issue indicate the complex and dynamic relationship among language, culture and meaning-making in both teaching practices and educational research. These areas need to be edified in further research in order to inform other systems integrating international education.

International education initiatives are increasing in prominence in institutions of higher learning. Students, educators and institutions are currently and increasingly crossing geographical boundaries in pursuit of higher education opportunities. If these efforts at internationalization are to be successful and relevant, they need to embrace the complexities that form part of the 21<sup>st</sup> century learning experience for both educators and students. Ultimately, these articles explore the implementation of teaching and learning that is authentic and relevant to this unique international learning context. This is a context that involves a Canadian university delivering a nursing degree in Qatar. These initiatives can hopefully play an important role in further informing the field of nursing education, international education and English language learning across the globe.

### *Conclusion*

The contributions in this Special Edition capture an important period in UCQ's development as an emerging voice in Qatar's higher education community. They also illustrate the crucial and interrelated impact that language and culture have in the process of meaning making within Qatar's diverse sociocultural context. This background resembles a rich and vibrant sociocultural landscape that UCQ leadership, faculty, and staff continue to explore in defining their own unique contributions to educational development in Qatar.

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