

BOOK REVIEW
Teaching and Learning in the Arab World

MARIE-CLAUDE TORIIDA
University of Calgary in Qatar

The book *Teaching and Learning in the Arab World* is a compilation of 21 papers representing completed research from the Arab Gulf region. The editor, Christina Gitsaki, was the UNESCO Chair in Applied Research in Education at the Sharjah Colleges of Technology at the time of publication. The book was compiled as an attempt to increase the number of published studies on education, teaching, and learning in the Arab region. This effort was due in part to concerns raised in the 2009 Arab Knowledge Report by the United Nations Development Program (as cited in Gitsaki, 2011) regarding the state of education in Arab countries. The purpose of the book is to provide an overview of some of the challenges and issues that have arisen in the Arab Gulf region as a result of the fast-paced educational reforms that have been implemented.

It is important to note that, while the title refers to “the Arab World”, the focus of all but one paper is education in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Arab counties. This affects the generalizations that can be drawn from the findings as the Arab world is a vast region inclusive of countries in Africa, the Mediterranean, Iran, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, in addition to the GCC countries of the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain and Oman. In fact, in chapter 16, “Teaching in the Arabian Gulf: Arguments for the Deconstruction of the Current Educational Model”, we learn that, due to different influences, the education model of the GCC countries developed quite differently from the rest of Arab countries from the mid-twentieth century onwards, the post-colonial times for Independent GCC Arab nation states. In short, although the title of the book uses the general title of the Arab World, the papers included in the book reflect a reality specific to teaching and learning in the GCC Arabian region.

The book is divided in three parts entitled “Current Practices and Challenges in Teaching and Learning in the Arab World”, “Educational Reforms in the Arabian Gulf”, and “New Approaches to Teaching and Learning in the Arab World”. Interestingly, the only study conducted in a non-Gulf country, Palestine, is included in the section “Educational Reforms in the Arabian Gulf”. Placement of this chapter under this section does not seem fitting. However, the inclusion of this chapter provides a good example of successful novel techniques used in early education teacher training. The book would also be strengthened if the section on educational reforms had been presented first as the chapters in this section provide the necessary background to understand the challenges and the current teaching and learning practices faced in education in the Arabian Gulf region.

Overall, the topics covered in the papers are quite varied and include elementary, secondary and tertiary education. Chapters focused on elementary

and secondary education report on teacher training initiatives, often in a bilingual environment. From these, the reader can acquire an understanding of the heavy reliance on traditional teaching practices in the GCC, and of the clear need for teacher training. At the same time, the importance of reforms dictating that elementary and secondary education should be bilingual and the resulting struggles of L2 teachers (teachers whose first language is not English, but are required to teach in English) are highlighted.

In the chapters related to tertiary education, various themes emphasize the challenges teachers face in this context, including institutional support for implementing new approaches. Some of these challenges are topics of current scholarly debates in the field of international education, such as the suitability of implementing imported curriculum, methods, and materials in an Arab setting. The educational implications of importing a foreign curriculum are potentially related to social, cultural, political, and religion content, or discussions that may not be appropriate or appreciated in the GCC region. Further chapters explore issues related to critical thinking, learning strategies, and motivational issues, especially for male students. Significantly, five chapters in the book are related to teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students. These chapters highlight the fact that students in the region are foreign language learners who continue to face linguistic challenges even after having completed foundational EFL courses. One such challenge mentioned is the ability of students to clearly express themselves in written assignments.

The chapters I found the most interesting were two that gave historical accounts of education in Arab countries. First, chapter 16, "Teaching in the Arabian Gulf: Arguments for the Deconstruction of the Current Educational Model", gave an insightful historical background to Islam and education. The authors also explain some of the socio-political and socio-cultural variables that have influenced the development of education, specifically in the GCC, and how these pose challenges in implementing Western educational models. Second, as I am based in Qatar, I found chapter 11, "The Rush to Educate: A Discussion of the Elephant in the Room", particularly insightful as it explains the educational reforms that have happened here since the implementation of the first Ministry of Education in 1950. The historical perspective demonstrating the impact of religion and culture on teaching and learning provided a framework to understand my students in this context. I have a better understanding of the roles of religion and culture that influence who my students are as higher education learners today.

I recommend this book for teachers who are interested in teaching in the Arabian Gulf or those who are new to the region. I also recommend this book to scholars of international education as this region is underrepresented in the field of published studies. Further research on teaching and learning in the Arab world, including the GCC region, is needed at all levels of education.

After reading the book, I was left contemplating how rapidly education has been evolving in the GCC region. There is, at the same time, a great devotion to teaching, learning, and research in this part of the world. Education is developing as quickly as all other spheres of life here, and students and

teachers alike are adapting to these changes. Teaching and learning in the Gulf region is complex and dynamic, making it an exciting place to teach.

Gitsaki, C. (Ed.). (2011). *Teaching and Learning in the Arab World* (2011).
Bern: Peter Lang.

About the Reviewer:

Marie-Claude Toriida

University of Calgary in Qatar

mcmtorii@ucalgary.edu.qa