Developing an Independent Learning Resource Centre

A Project in a Military Language Institute in the United Arab Emirates

A thesis completed in partial fulfilment of the requirements

For the Degree of Master of Arts

in

Second Language Teaching

at

Massey University

Palmerston North

Josef Hurtubise

2005

Abstract

Establishing new educational structures within an existing institute can be a highly complex and challenging undertaking. When the placement of the institute is also in a social and cultural context distant from that of the educators working to bring about the change, these challenges become extremely complex. This study considers such a scenario: the establishment of an Independent Learning Resource Centre (ILRC) within a military language institute, in Abu Dhabi. In working towards this goal there were, in addition to the tensions existing within any language learning institute, issues of culture, religion and the military organisation to be navigated.

To reflect the highly complex nature of this situation, this study adopts a framework acknowledging the intricately connected social/cultural 'ecologies' which provide the site for many of the issues that need to be resolved in successfully implementing a structural change in an institution. The study seeks to describe the elements of these relationships and to consider the impact they have on the overall context. The awareness of these cultural interactions was held in mind during the development of a proposal, with the intentions of avoiding what might be termed 'tissue rejection' or the failure of an externally initiated innovation to survive in the local host environment. The study follows the process involved, initially, in moving towards the development of the proposal for the establishment of the ILRC and the set up of the centre and its early period of operation, and raises the question of whether this dilemma of 'tissue rejection' was satisfactorily resolved.

The process described is a long one, and in the hiatus between planning proposals and implementation of the centre, a course was developed, designed to be an adjunct to the ILRC. Due to institutional constraints which are explored in this study, this course was not able to be trialled as designed. The course, in seeking to provide students of the Institute with a supportive context for developing increasing degrees of independence in language learning, emphasised the acquisition, development and practise of language skills through a practical engagement with real tasks. This study offers a description of the course, along with a discussion of a modified version of it, implemented for a year with two classes of students. In supporting this curriculum, and in the absence of an existing ILRC, as much as possible was done to make use of

available resources, carried into class, as a portable ILRC. Within the limits of this course's operation, the following study offers an assessment of the success of the modified course initiative in terms of what it can suggest about the value of moving towards increased levels of independence.

In this study, the establishment of the ILRC and its subsequent failure to fulfil its expected outcomes is described and discussed with reference to the ecological framework and its significance. In conclusion, the distance of understanding between the committed parties, teachers and administration, is seen to widen to the point where there is little remaining of the common purpose which enabled the process of innovation to begin.

Acknowledgements

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Chapter One Introduction

This study is concerned with the development of an educational initiative to introduce an Independent Learning Centre, within the context of the United Arab Emirates. The move to bring an Independent Learning Centre into the programme of a language learning institute operated by the UAE military was initiated both by the expatriate teaching team and the military administrators of the programme, both supported by input from a team of educational consultants from the USA. The efforts to develop this initiative can provide an insight into the ways in which attempts at educational change are dependent on a complex interplay of factors. These factors, if not fully allowed for, can result in the achievement of limited success in terms of intended goals. At worst, it can result in failure.

By way of introduction to the more specific matter at hand, I will present here, an overview of the historical and social context of education in this area, and the way in which this creates the ground conditions for all educational endeavours in the UAE.

1.1 Learning in the UAE and the Qu'ran

Education in the Arab world is rooted in the teaching of the Qu'ran. From this source flows literacy, world view and ethics and morality. Historically, the teaching was conducted in the mosque, led by *Mutawa*, men dedicated to their belief in the principles of Islam and committed to their promulgation. This was a highly decentralised education, with no formal system, operating out of every mosque in every town and village. Its purpose was to provide the only education that a young Muslim boy could ever need, an ability to read the Qu'ran. For girls, a similar level of education was provided within

the home. The methods of teaching were traditionally based in rote recitation. More important than comprehension was accuracy. For those who could not master the skills of literacy, memorisation was an acceptable goal, and indeed a great deal of praise was given to any student who showed the ability to memorise Qu'ranic verses and Surahs, feats that continue to be celebrated in annual festivals. But to be able to read the Qu'ran is a special gift and one of the main commitments of the period of the Holy Month of Ramadan is the reading of the Qu'ran in its entirety. This is the traditional root of educative process in the UAE. Its objective was the formation of the good Muslim, and its main outcomes were, academically, literacy in Classical Arabic, and socially, a cohesively held set of social and cultural values which provided stability. This qu'ranic education continues to be a strong influencing factor in contemporary education in the UAE as the indigenous educational experience of the Arabian Peninsula, but as contact with the broader world encroached on the region, different educational needs were indicated.

1.2 Learning in the UAE as a foreign experience I

When we look at much of the visible structures of education system in the UAE today, we identify a highly westernised process, and come to the conclusion that for the Emirati students in schools, learning is a foreign experience, defined by foreign ideas, often delivered in a foreign language by foreign teachers. Such on observation, might make the mistake of identifying this as a recent product of global moves to standardise educational practice and outcomes. But what is missed in this analysis is the historical reality that in the UAE, education has been a foreign experience for a very long time. As the British government began to operate in the Trucial States, eventually to become the UAE, there was a new educational imperative: employment.

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Advancement was seen as possible through employment with the British administration, dominated by clerks and specialists from the Indian Sub-continent. To gain entry to civil service work, the requirements were literacy in English, advanced numeracy skills, and a degree of familiarity with the cultural norms of the administrative culture. Throughout the British Empire, during this period in which the administrative civil service grew in importance, there was always the goal of the British education, achievable by only those with a reasonable degree of wealth. But in the UAE, for those with fewer financial resources, there were the many schools in India which had produced the skills of those workers from the Indian Sub-continent already filling essential roles in the local civil service.

The education in these schools was modelled on the British system of the late nineteenth century, with large classes, and emphasis on rote learning and a rigorous schedule of testing. The schools were run for and by the citizens of the British Indian Raj, the language of instruction was primarily English, though Hindi, Urdu, Gujarati and other languages of the Sub-continent were used at times. For the boys sent to these schools, there was the added burden of extended separation from their families. This practice continued through the period of Indian and Pakistani independence. The main outcomes of this process of education, in the UAE, was the development of bilingual literacy, an increase in the depth of world knowledge and a growing influence of Emiratis within the civil service structures which administered the country.

1.3 Learning in the UAE as a foreign experience II.

As the region began to benefit from its oil wealth, money began to be directed more rigorously into its infrastructure with some improvement made in roading, housing development, health care and education. Schools began

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began to appear in the larger towns which housed administrative offices, and these continued with the pattern set in the schools on the Sub Continent. Like those schools, classes were taught primarily by teachers from India and Pakistan, the curriculum still carried out in English and the goals still linked to involvement in the civil service. At this time there was also a growing move to involve Emirati girls in some form of external education. This was the start of what would become the UAE's imported education system. With low numbers of trained and qualified local teachers, oil revenue was used to bring teachers into the country to fill newly built schools with ready to go expertise. There was no room or time to train locally, and education, while seen as a desirable commodity, was not viewed as a valued career. The only truly valued teachers remained the *mutawa*, who continued to teach from mosques and halls through out the countryside as well as in the cities. The main outcomes of this educational development was the continued development of local involvement in regional government and a strong impression of schooling as a foreign construct, useful but not identifiably part of the local lifestyle.

1.4 Learning in the UAE and the role of independence

Independence brought the UAE a new collective sense of self. It also brought full control of the burgeoning oil revenues which would allow the country to take control of its newly gained independence in a way that few other countries could. Infrastructure development was suddenly flooded with capital, ambitious roading projects and urban developments projects were initiated and the health and education systems were brought abruptly up to speed. At the beginning of the 1970's Abu Dhabi was a large village, within a decade it had the structure of a modern city and by the year 2000 it was a city of over 500.000 people. Dubai similarly grew from a small fishing port

into a major modern city with a reputation for some of the most ambitious architectural projects in the world. Between these and other cities in the UAE, built up out of villages in the desert, wide modern highways created links that made travel across the country more efficient and less stressful.

In the midst of all this, was the drive to educate the people of the country to take up their place in this new world. Schools were built in every community, staffed with teachers brought in again with money from oil revenue. The most significant difference here was that many of these teachers came from Arabic speaking countries, as this became the official language of schooling. English continued to be seen as a highly important element of the educative process, and instruction in this continued to be delivered by teachers from Pakistan or the Middle East who were deemed proficient in English. Also, increasingly in schools, teachers were imported for whom English was their first language. A Tertiary sector was similarly constructed and staffed with teachers from around the world. As the country developed, it imported the skilled workers it needed, not only in education but in industry, health and commerce. This created an increasing population of 'guest workers' and their families who helped fill the growing cities and expanded the demand for services as well as schooling which met the specific needs of the expatriate communities.

Educationally, the flow on effect to the local community was a broadening of options for education, as the schools, based on North American, British and other European curricula, staffed primarily by teachers from the countries of origin, became available for local student enrolment. The dilemma in all of this was that education, as well as health, industry and commerce, continued to be dominated by non Emirati workers. This has begun to be slowly

corrected as newly educated and trained locals take up key roles in these areas. The civil service and its recently created adjuncts, the military and police, continue to draw the majority of Emiratis, with commercial endeavours most often engaged in outside of existing jobs and the health sector is gaining in the number of local doctors. Education, and ironically the oil industry, however remain heavily dependent on expatriate workers as is the entire service sector of the UAE. In exchange, the UAE has gained an up to the minute modern infrastructure providing all of the attendant benefits and convenience to its citizens. It has also found itself in the situation of having those citizens substantially outnumbered by the guest workers who are needed to maintain this infrastructure.

1.5 Coming to the question

What then are the questions that must be answered with regard to developing educational initiatives in education? Firstly I think we need to ask, to what extent do such initiatives meet the educational needs of the students of the host country and how might they be expected to do so? There are expectations on the part of those seeking to introduce a new initiative, those receiving it, where do these meet and where they are disparate, how can they be resolved. What degree of interplay exists between the initiators of change and the recipients of the new structures and indeed amongst different factions within those seeking to initiate change? Also, how will the extremely complex environment that exists in the UAE, which is suggested in the above discussion of the history and role of education in this country, impact on attempts to introduce new ideas? This question is applicable to each and every country where new ideas in education are tried.

Specific to the idea of independence in learning, there is the question of whether this is, in itself, a foreign concept. What difficulties or dilemmas does the introduction of such a concept produce for the initiators and for the recipients. Further, how do differing understandings of the nature and purpose of independence in learning contribute to difficulties in instituting new ways of supporting such independence?

In seeking to answer these questions through the following discussion, the significance and relevance of such developmental initiatives can be clarified, and at the same time a pathway for enhancing the effectiveness of such initiatives can be defined.

In the following chapter, I will discuss the methodology that underpins this study, focussing on the choices made between qualitative and quantitative approaches, the value of an anthropologically holistic perspective rather than a sociological one and the influence of the action research model on the shaping of my approach. The chapter will also lay out the three main aims of this study.