Meeting about classroom/education culture in Saudi Arabia

April 3, 2014

Jalloul Jedidi & Hamdah

Saudi Arabian Classroom/Education Culture (and Arabic...)

Attendees: Laurie Bridges & Uta Hussong-Christian

Saudi men and women segregated in the classroom. Also universities are segregated. The University may have the same name, but the locations will be physically separate (not just men’s classrooms and women’s classrooms). Segregation applies to activities outside of education as well such as shopping (separate areas of a mall for men and women - duplicate stores).

Saudi Arabian women studying in the US are very shy. Hamdah said coming to the US (1.5 years ago) was the first time she’d ever spoken with a man (outside her family). Classrooms are always lecture. Very formulaic with clear steps and curriculum. No homework. Students are not encouraged to mingle and talk with each other (like in the language lab in INTO OSU). If the student is having a problem, they won’t go directly to the teacher or ask in class, instead they save face by telling their family first. Then, a family member will talk to the instructor/teacher. Even at the University level, their last names indicate what tribe they are from, and they will know someone in common (a cousin, father, brother, etc.). Teachers and instructors are well-known to students in the classroom (the same teacher will teach multiple classes as a student progresses through the curriculum) and outside of the classroom and will talk with family if they see them outside of the classroom. Her perception is that teachers in the US are very serious (seems to have to do with the lack of getting to know one another outside of the class). Also, nothing like FERPA there, obviously. It’s collectivist not individualist. Almost all students from Arabic countries in INTO OSU will give Jalloul permission to speak with a family member (usually the father). Or perhaps a brother if he is in the US.

Students in Saudi Arabia get A’s until they come to the US, where they are challenged on different levels (speaking, listening, handouts, having homework, etc). They’re not used to having different teachers and different textbooks; in Saudia Arabia, individual texts are thoroughly examined and completely read by students. Jalloul says there is a lack of innovation or challenge...students know what is coming and how to finish. Lectures, readings, take a test. They will not do research in high school, but will at the University. They will use online sources and books, but books are encouraged because they never change and the information is seen as “trustworthy”. She said the library here is very different than her experience in Saudi Arabia. Students come here to study and do research.

I asked about critical thinking and innovation. Jalloul said if you’re studying poetry or writing it’s your own creative ideas (Jalloul says poetry is a popular major in Arabic countries). Otherwise there is little creativity and innovation. Education is mostly reciting. However, this is changing because of internationalization and King Abdullah. A few years ago they started asking students to do more research. Both Jalloul and Hamdah kept saying “three years” and “five years” so the changes are very recent.

One grade is given for all classes. Not a separate grade for every class every term. The grade is an average for all assignments or tests completed - no single test can fail a student.

Jalloul says that Arabic is a vocal language and the practice/experience Saudi students have had may be more spoken than written (because of contact with instructors/professors from other countries). Students might dabble in English starting at 13, but they won’t really learn English unless they want to go on to a field that requires it…like being a doctor. Jalloul says this means they need to pick their field of study early, if they plan to learn English.

King Abdullah is seen as very progressive when it comes to women. He’s focused the last few years on “education of the woman”. University is paid for (along with books), and if studying abroad the student gets tuition and family expenses (for example Hamdah gets enough for three children). Hamdah said that women do better in men than education but Jalloul noted that the perception is the opposite. Saudi Arabian higher education is seen as the best in the Arabic world.

Just a last note about the improvement of the education system in Saudia Arabia. Those who work at a university (e.g. like Hamdah who teaches at a university) cannot pursue Masters or PhD studies at a Saudi university. They much go abroad to pursue those degrees.