

Cultural Diversity between City and Village Students: A Teachers' Perspective on Bridging the Cultural Gap in a Blended Learning Setting

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Abstract: There are currently increasing concerns about how teachers, delivering their courses in a blended learning setting, can enhance and customize the learning process by providing the courses in a way that bridges the cultural gap between students. It is noticeable that there are some cultural differences between students studying in cities and villages. This study identifies these differences and possible methods to bridge the diverse in these cultural differences in order to enhance the learning to the benefit of students from both cultures. In addition, Bridging the cultural diversity in this study assumed as a pre-requisite for enhanced blended learning settings, which gives the students a supporting space of opportunities to easily understand the course and interact. This study uses a focus group methodology investigating the perspectives of teachers, tutoring in blended learning setting. Specifically, the cultural differences between a student from Jerusalem city and Bethel village studying at one Palestinian University have been investigated.

Keywords: Blended learning setting; Cultural differences; Bridging cultural gap; Focus groups

I- Introduction :

The text is written in Times New Roman, size 12, the inter lines spacing 0.88 (of course, this format applies to all textual texts); the author of the article considers both the general and specific side of the subject to provide information that describes the problem accurately. Rationale of the subject should be presented in a form of a question the problem in the form of only one question, and the hypothesis/hypotheses underlying it (the possible outcome of the solution), in addition to the previous research and studies that dealt with the subject directly related, and written in a sequential and concise scientific way through which the researcher shows similarities and differences in terms of purpose, Sample study, variables, method and tools used, then the conclusions reached.

This study explores teachers' perspectives tutoring in both the Jerusalem (City) Educational Region Study Centre and the Bethany (village) Services Centre at Al-Quds Open University (QOU) to find out the cultural differences between students and methods that can be used to bridge these differences to support the students' learning in a blended learning setting. QOU is a Palestinian open university that has twenty-one educational regions and study centers spread geographically across Palestine.

There are about eight hundred students studying in Jerusalem educational region's study center and about four hundred students studying in the Bethany service center. Usually teaching a course in a blended learning setting for students of these varied elements is challenging for teachers. The well-established infrastructures in institutions yield to affordances for how technology can be integrated in a learning environment (Wasson, 2007). Similarly, QOU has the richest, far-reaching technology networks in Palestine.

Jerusalem (Al-Quds), the largest city of Palestine, is considered as the Arab capital of culture. It is divided into two parts, west and east with Jews living in the west and Arabs living in the east. Hence, Jerusalem is a mixture of cultures and nationalities of old and new. It is a union of contrasts with a unique character. The city is controlled by the Israeli authority. Arab students usually attend QOU since it is the only Palestinian university located in Jerusalem. Jerusalem's cultural facilities and activities are always expanding, and the city has become host to international cultural festivals and scientific conventions.

Bethany (Al-Eizariya) is a small village located about two kilometers to the east of Jerusalem on the southeastern slope of the Mount of Olives. This village is controlled by the Palestinian authority. Only Arabs live in Bethany and many students usually attend Al-Quads University and some attend QOU. This village has only one main street that has all the shops, which is about three kilometers long. The life in Bethany is very simple and most of the people do not work. Many of them are salaried from the Palestinian social-fair office. There is no hospital, theatre, or any public facilities in this village.

Some teachers of QOU are arguing that there are differences in the academic achievements between Jerusalem and Bethany that could be partially due to cultural differences between them, I wanted to investigate what was teachers' opinions teaching in both places about these differences and ways to bridge the gap.

1. Literature Review

There are many definitions of culture; (Goodfellow et al., 2009), suggest that it is difficult to define the culture because of its complexity; it is a phenomenon arising from the intertwining of educational, linguistic, technological, and cultural factors. When looking deeply into human nature one can easily recognize that human beings are not only natural but also cultural beings. They share a common human identity, but in a culturally mediated manner (Parekh, 2000). It is not hard to guess that human beings' culture will diverge according to the environment where they live. Cultural diversity can be categorized according to many elements: geographical, historical, climatic,

religious, political, and linguistic influences as elements of cultural diversity (Goodfellow et al., 2009). In addition, they have emphasized the role of language that frames online cultures and the role of technologies in online interactions.

The relation between culture and technology was a concern to some researchers; though there was idea believed that the use of ICTs in learning threatens the cultural importance of education. However, proposes technology is more than a tool, it “is us and we are it” (Hodgson, 1977, P.219) and as a “new dimension [to] human experience [that] will have an impact upon the processes of education [which require us] to adapt our educational thinking and approaches to these new learning environments” (Hodgson, 1977, P.220). Hence, one can consider technology as a mean to be used with no threaten to the learners that can enhance the learning process by its avoidance. Although designing the course to include learning activities that consider the cultural differences among learners, it is “sensitive to the needs and requirements of the on-line learner“ (Mercado et al., 2004, P. 184), and usually students who exhibit cultural differences will appreciate it the most. They also emphasized that an alteration could be necessary when designing on-line courses for students from different cultures where the design should consider common values of these different cultures.

There are different factors that commonly framed from different studies that should be taken into consideration when coursework is designed to intentionally plan for cultural differences such as different issues about race, gender, and other ways “in which people’s experiences will differ and to resist abstractions of humanity that diminish such differences” while “emphasizing on ways difference is described and interpreted, [and] contrasting approaches that are proposed for dealing with it”. (Reynolds & Trehan, 2003, P.165-166). In her doctorate dissertation, Birch has mentioned that “Social and cultural backgrounds [and some other factors] should be incorporated into the educational dynamic for the benefit of the learning process” (Birch, 2008, P.235). In addition, “gender was a factor in the relationship between learning style and student engagement [in online courses]” (Garland & Martin, 2005, P.67)

Unfortunately, I couldn’t locate any cultural studies based on work in Palestine that is related to students studying in Palestinian universities.

2. Research Questions:

This study answered two questions:

1. What are the cultural differences between students studying in Jerusalem city centre and Bethany village centre in a blended learning setting?
2. What should teachers do to bridge the divide in theses cultural differences in order to enhance the learning to the benefit of students from both cultures?

II– Methods and Materials:

I used a focus group methodology to conduct this research in order to enable me to get insight results of what were the differences in both cultures between city and village students and methods to bridge the gap between them. Additionally, I wanted to examine if I will get similar results that are consistent with those illustrated earlier in the literature review.

The focus group methodology allows participants to express freely their opinions and thoughts within the context of the group and keenly discuss individual issues that they may not disclose otherwise (Baumgartner & Strong, 1998). Moreover, focus groups are considered to be naturalistic (Krueger & Casey, 2000). Additionally, the complexity of information to be gathered in this study about the students is more than questionnaire is likely to reveal. By using focus group, I was hoping to get more reliable, in-depth, and naturalistic data.

As in this study I wanted to investigate the teachers' perspectives and they can speak with insight knowledge about their experiences and point of views, I decided to have two participants from each faculty because I adopted Bedford and Burgess definition of focus group, where they "define focus groups as a one-off meeting between four and eight individuals" (Hopkins, 2007, P.2). I believed; if I take the maximum number of participants possible, I will get better results, and this could enable me to generalize it to similar settings. The profiles of these participants are shown in the appendix (A).

I used a purposive sampling method to select eight participants from four different faculties who had experience in teaching in both centers. By this, I wanted to make sure that they were able to provide thoughtful judgments about the researched topic. By doing so, I followed guidance from (Richardson & Rabiee, 2001) to select the participants in my focus group by applying the criteria for participation on the basis that they: (a) would have something to say on the researched topic, (b) thought in both centers, (c) thought blended learning course(s), (d) had similar types of experience, and (e) would be comfortable talking to me and each other.

I ran the focus group in one ninety-minute session starting by greeting the participants, reminding them about my study purpose. I distributed the list of questions to them and informed them that we will answer the questions in order as they were presented.

While keeping in mind that focus group is a group discussion organized to discuss a specific issue and kept focused, I ran the focus group as a facilitator. In Addition, following Denscombe's (2007) recommendations to run the focus groups, the following steps were used: (a) at the beginning the session I presented some ground rules ensuring that all members participated as much as possible in a way that allowed the sessions to move along while generating useful information, (b) occasionally, I reminded the participants of the aim of each question, (c) I asked each question and allowed fifteen minutes for the discussion, (d) as a facilitator and a leader for the focus group I tried my best to keep focused, maintain momentum, and get closure on questions, and (e) I tape-recorded the session and took notes.

Although the focus group methodology has many benefits, it also has some drawbacks. Since the focus group provides exclusively qualitative responses, it is not statistically representative of society at large and this prevents the generalization of the findings. In addition, focus group can't bring public consensus, hence the goal of this study was to obtain opinions and not to publicise information.

I asked the focus group the following five questions:

1. Would you please identify any cultural differences between students studying in the blended learning setting in Jerusalem and Bethany and would you illustrate if any have manifested you?
2. What is your point of view about these cultural differences between the two groups and how do you see any of the differences affecting students' learning in any way at present and how?
3. Can you attach the cultural differences identified to factors like gender, place, tradition, learning centre, or any other factor? Why and How?
4. How can you bridge the diversity in the two cultures?
5. What should you as a teacher need to take into consideration and do when teaching in the blended learning setting in order to enhance the learning of the students from both cultures?

III- Results and discussion :

I was happy to see that the discussion in the focus group was taking a collaborative angle where participants were very motivated to participate with their thoughts and points of view. I think this is mainly due to: (a) the good preparation and organization of the group and (b) the harmony of the group; since all of the participants were colleagues of the same institution and everyone respects the others. One thing that I found difficult to control during the session was to keep the participants focused on the questions being asked. There were lots of intersections in the answers (i.e. They were answering different questions at the same time).

I benefited from following the guidance of Krueger's (1994) framework which provides a clear series of steps that assisted me interpreting the data. Some of the analysis occurred concurrently with data collected during the session itself, particularly the last fifteen minutes of the session where the discussion turned into some consensus building between participants about the discussed issues. Krueger (1994) recommends that a helpful way of thinking about this is to consider a continuum of analysis ranging from gathering raw data for the interpretation of data: the analysis continues, raw data, descriptive statements, and interpretation.

There were a three steps that enabled me to produce the results of the research with reasonable effort and time: (a) during the session, I started the process of data analysis concurrently with the data collection by facilitating the discussion and generating rich data, accompanying them with my own observational notes, (b) listening to the recording, transcribing it, and reading of transcripts several times helped me get familiar with the data collected, and (c) consensus and summary points taken the last fifteen minutes of the session enabled me immerse in the details with data analysis.

The most difficult thing was the transcription of the recorded tape, especially when more than one participant spoke at the same time and when some participants were speaking to questions not asked yet.

1. Findings

This section is divided into two parts; one is about the cultural differences identified and the other one is about methods to bridge the gap.

2. Cultural differences

This study identifies a set of differences between students studying in Jerusalem and Bethany centers. The participants of the focus group agree that these differences are the reasons for the difference in academic achievements noticed between the two parties. The differences identified are discussed.

3. Place and Authority

There are many barriers that are due to the place and the authority that people follow and that make the difference between students of Jerusalem and Bethany. The people, organizations, and education systems in Jerusalem follow Israeli. This difference affects many aspects of students' lives including regulations, possibilities and lifestyles which ultimately affect students' achievements.

Participant 4: “students in Jerusalem don’t care about the accreditation whilst students of Bethany are fully dedicated to their studies; this makes a difference in the motivation between Jerusalem and Bethany students” ... “Most students in Jerusalem are workers whilst in Bethany there are a very limited opportunity for students to work”

Participant 5: “In Jerusalem, students come to study for the purpose of knowledge itself and to get a job whilst in Bethany they come to study to get their certificates in order to work that is why student of Jerusalem averages are higher than Bethany students”

Due to the place and authority there is a difference in the work opportunities. In addition, the certificate of QOU is not accredited by Israeli authorities because of the political issues.

4. Economic Situation

The students of Jerusalem and Bethany encounter completely different economic situations where the students of Jerusalem have a higher income level, better internet connectivity, better infrastructure of networks and telephone lines in homes, and less power outages.

Participant 1: “From Bethany, most students come from rural, and some of the Bedouin and their chances to connect, having weak infrastructure and low electricity outages, are weak and sometimes non-existent”

Participant 6: “It is easier to engage students of Jerusalem to the virtual learning activates due to the infrastructure and electricity outages difference between them and students of Bethany”

Participant 8: “many students of Bethany can’t afford having internet access of even computer at their homes and they can’t pay for coffee net to access the internet”

It is rare to see Jerusalem areas with power outages whilst the power outages in Bethany occur frequently and for many hours both day and night. The internet prices are expensive in Bethany even though the connection speed is low.

5. The Effect of Students' Relatives' Ways of Thinking

People raised up in Jerusalem have different ways of thinking and judging things than those raised up in Bethany. In Bethany they are closed minded, dislike open cultures, and they want their children to be a mirror of them. They consider openness of the internet shameless and an invasion to their conservative world.

Participant 2: “one of my Bethany students refused to go the internet coffee shop because she afraid that if she does so her husband will divorce her. Another student rejects to go because her father will punish her. And many students and families of Bethany look at internet access as a sham and a bad thing to do and they refuse to have internet access in their homes”

Participant 7: “I thought one blended learning course where most of Bethany students' access the virtual sessions; one student had to go to her sister house to have access to the virtual class because she afraid from her brothers and father to see her sitting in the front of the computer”

Participant 8: “before being a teacher, I used to work in a bank branch in Bethany and I discovered the people of Bethany to be hard to go with, they are closed minded and unconscious of the changes going around them”

6. Educational and Cultural Backgrounds

Students of Jerusalem and Bethany studied in different educational systems and they have grown up with different cultural aspects. The educational system in Bethany requires and expects students to obey the system itself and to their teachers. In Bethany students have less freedom and there been more borders between them and their teachers.

Participant 8: “students of Bethany are very weak in English and their academic levels are low, I think this is due to the environment and their elementary and secondary education”

Participant 1: “the educational and technological background of Bethany students affects their virtual practices... Also, the cultural background prevents many of Bethany's students from participating in virtual class and if they participate, they don't share their thoughts”

7. Motivation

It is a little bit surprising that even Bethany's students were considered, according to the participants of the focus group, to be more motivated than students of Jerusalem yet their academic achievements are lower. I have been teaching in both centers with more than ten years and have noticed the same thing; I think all differences caused this situation.

Participant 4: “students in Jerusalem don't care about the accreditation whilst students of Bethany are fully dedicated to their studies; this makes a difference in the motivation between Jerusalem and Bethany students”

Participant 3: “students of Bethany are more motivated to learning students of Jerusalem, who are busy with many activities besides learning”

Participant 7: “students of Bethany are more careful about their studies than students of Jerusalem; I think this has to do with the work opportunities and place”

8. Daring and shyness

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There was agreement between the participants of the focus group that students of Bethany are shyer than students of Jerusalem. In addition, female students were found also to be shyer than male students in general. It is observed that students of Bethany have fewer contacts over telephones or email with their students; even in face-to-face sessions they are good listeners and they usually don't ask daring questions. In addition, the interactions between themselves are limited.

Participant 5: “students of Jerusalem are very daring in comparison to Bethany which affects the Bethany students not to be aware full of the learning activities”

Participant 6: “most female students, especially from Bethany refused to talk over the microphone in the virtual class and I think it is due to their weakness in self-confidence or shyness while the students of Jerusalem were more confident.

Participant 8: “Bethany people are conservative, and they shy and not very daring; they are hard to change”

9. Horizon of Thinking

There were differences in how both students of Jerusalem and Bethany think. The impressions of understanding that one gets from Bethany's students after a lecture of an online session can't tell accurately if they really understand or not. I was surprised several times in Bethany that the students don't understand the lessons and they don't complain or even say a word!

Participant 3: “students of the Bethany horizon of thinking are limited compared to Jerusalem students and teachers' efforts with Bethany student is much more and they have to repeat several times to let the students understand”

Participant 5: “one example that shows differences in students' horizons where when I asked Bethany students what they know about ‘Kiwi’ they only knew that it is a type of fruit and they didn't know that is also one know the type of shoe polish nor the ‘kiwi bird’ of New Zealand”

Participant 8: “Bethany is a closed area, and the students are limited to the cultures of the village itself while the students of Jerusalem are living in an intercultural environment and very open in their lifestyles and thinking”

10. Bridging the Gap

The last two questions asked to the focus group intend to obtain information about how one bridge the diversity in the two cultures can and what should one take into consideration and do when teaching in the blended learning setting in order to enhance the learning of the students from both cultures? There were five different methods suggested by the participants to bridge the gap between students from both centres. These methods can be also seen as considerations that teachers or course designers need to take care of when designing future courses. These methods argued by the participants to bridge the gap that is due to the identified cultural diversity and should give students from both parties an equal space of opportunities to study and participate in the learning activities. These suggested methods are presented:

10.1 Ice Breaking Sessions and Forums

It is recommended that at the beginning of the blended learning course to have a face-to-face meeting, a virtual session, or a discussion forum that breaks the ice between students and allows everyone to get to know each other.

Participant 7: “I wanted to setup a discussion forum for my students that help them know each other; but I didn’t do so because of the University regulations”

10.2 Gradient from the Know to the Unknown

Start discussions in the course with simple ideas that motivate students to participate and enable teachers to engage students and then slowly increase the level of discussions critically in a way that stimulates students' brain storming.

Participant 2: “setup of appropriate learning activities is very important in bridging the gap between the two cultures; a certain activity should change students thinking from diverge to converge thinking”

10.3 Using e-Learning as a Method of Bridging

E-learning can be used as a method to bridge the cultural gap between students where the e-learning, virtual environment can be used as environment for students from both cultures to learn together and understand the culture of each other.

Participant 2: “eLearning is a method for cultural communication between students”

Participant 3: “I find my students from both cultures to share the same VLE in the course and this can be used as a method to bridge the cultural differences”

10.4 Considering Individual Differences and Preferences

It is important to cope with the new trends where the students become the center of the learning process; taking into consideration the students' preferences should increase their motivation to learn and help them participate which enhances their learning.

Participant 2: “Students' preferences and needs are different; for instance, some students learn by lessening, discovering, or practicing; if we consider their preferences and needs in the designing of the learning activities then by default, we can overcome their cultural differences”

10.5 Imposing University Regulations and Rules

Some participants suggested that we, the University, and teachers, should change the students and not the opposite. Hence it is important to set up rules and regulations and rules that enable students to participate and study mainly by assigning grads for every simple learning activity from participating in the virtual class to exams.

Participant 1: “... you all remember when we first imposed the electronic assignments only 25% of the students participated and the rest resisted; but now after two years everybody agrees... we need a similar action to bridge the cultural gap”

.IV- Conclusion:

In this study, similar to findings and implication of much research (Goodfellow et al., 2009; Mercado et al., 2004; Brich, 2008 ; Garlan & Martin, 2005), seven cultural differences had been identified between students studying in blended learning setting in Jerusalem and Bethany centers of QOU. The identified differences were: (a) place and authority, (b) economic situation, (c) the effect of students’ relatives’ ways of thinking, (d) educational and cultural backgrounds, (e) motivation, (f) daring and shyness, and (g) horizon of thinking. These differences if gaped should

enhance the learning of the students and their achievements, especially those of Bethany center. In addition, five methods were suggested to bridge the gap in the identified cultural differences: (a) ice breaking sessions and forums, (b) gradient from the know to the unknown, (c) using e-learning as a method of bridging the gap, (d) considering individual differences and preferences, and/or (e) imposing University regulations and rules. Additionally, these findings clarify why the achievements of Bethany's students were lower than those of Jerusalem students.

After conducting this research, I can, without hesitation, recommend these findings to the strategic eLearning committee at QOU. The committee can then promote them to teachers and course designers to take into consideration when producing an intercultural blended learning course in the future for students from cities and villages.

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