

Push Pull Pedagogy: 15 Strategies for Saudi Student Success at the University Level

Alan Garfield

Chair, Computer Graphics and Interactive Media. University of Dubuque.
Dubuque, Iowa. agarfield@dbq.edu

Phyllis Garfield

Director, International Studies. University of Dubuque.
Dubuque, Iowa. pgarfiel@dbq.edu

Abstract

One challenge that instructors face is how to design and teach a course so the material engages students' prior knowledge and their skills, whether the intent is to examine that knowledge, build on it or use it for self-reflection. Basically, when students bring diverse backgrounds, course design and teaching is particularly challenging. By invoking various strategies to address student differences can provide valuable clarity for both students and instructors while creating vibrant educational classroom conversations.

This paper provides an overview of strategies for Saudi student success at the university/3rd level based upon discussions, observations and practices instituted at the University of Dubuque in Dubuque, Iowa. Key to these 15 strategies are Hofstede's cross-cultural theories from 2001, often cited and recently amended, and the application of author Phyllis Garfield's thesis on short-term study and cultural competence.

Keywords: Saudi Arabia Students, SACM, King Abdullah Scholarship Program, Saudi Enrollment, Cultural Competence, Hofstede

Introduction

Since 2005, there has been rapid growth in Saudi Arabian students at colleges and universities in the English speaking world (mainly in Great Britain, Ireland, Australia and the United States).ⁱ According to the Saudi Arabian Cultural Mission (SACM) which administers the King Abdullah Foreign Scholarship Program, the number of Saudi students in the United States has grown from 10,000 in 2007 to 111,000 in 2014. The estimate for 2015 is 125,000 students. Besides the economic impact of contributing over \$3.2bn to the US economy, these students often arrive on campus with low levels of English and math preparation and with cultural values that can complicate their chances for success in an American classroom. According to the Saudi Ministry of Higher Education in a March 2013 report appearing on the Arab News Network, there were 14,459 students studying in 2013 in the United Kingdom. Clearly the numbers of Saudi students studying outside of Saudi Arabia require some consideration from the institutions teaching them.ⁱⁱ

This paper outlines interrelated strategies for Saudi student success at the university/3rd level based upon discussions, observations and practices instituted at the University of Dubuque in Dubuque, Iowa. Key to these 15 strategies are Hofstede's cross-cultural theories from 2001, often cited and recently amended, and the application of author Phyllis Garfield's thesis on short-term study and cultural competence.ⁱⁱⁱ

Upon consideration, various challenges to Saudi student engagement and success are relatively well-known and well-documented.^{iv} In the United States, the Institute of International Education (IIE), in partnership with the US Department of State's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, helps international educators by

documenting the total number and specific breakdown of international students studying in the US. But its Open Doors Report on International Educational Exchange stops short at the point of suggesting strategies for success for these students in their universities.^v And that is where this paper takes up. The documented macroviews identify framework trends while omitting the classroom obvious.^{vi} What suggestions or methodologies exist to assist professors on the microlevel in trying to ensure academic and social success for these large incoming numbers of undergraduate Saudi students?

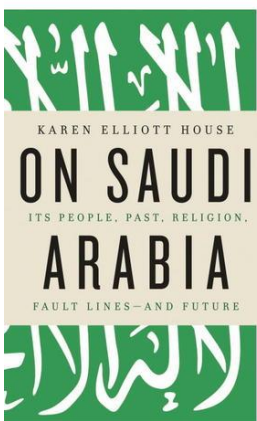
The following strategies are based upon internal and external factors at the University of Dubuque, a small, quiet, homogeneous educational private university environment in a city of 60k people on the East coast (Mississippi River) of Iowa, about 180 miles from Chicago. We believe these strategies apply equally to varied environments and demographics.

Strategy 1: Learn Cultural Differences – Mixing Oil and Islam.

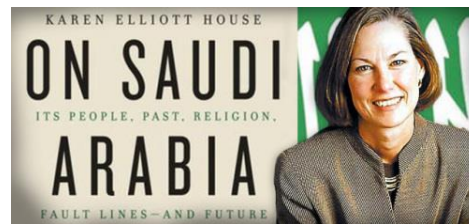


If you’re teaching Saudi students, let’s be clear. First, look at a map and learn where the cities and surrounding countries are. Saudi Arabia is inextricably linked to oil and Islam, and oil is simply critical to the West. A mixture of mild concern or curiosity that might be afforded other nations simply cannot apply here. Oil feeds the industrial world’s insatiable appetite; that is the key. Despite talk of energy self-sufficiency and conservation, the reality is that the world relies more than ever on Saudi oil. And Saudi Arabia is the heart of Islam, with its two holy cities of Mecca and Medina.

Strategy 2: Learn Cultural Differences – the Ruling Family in Saudi Arabia.



What drives the country how is the West supposed to an important question which non-Saudis to answer. Karen Elliott House, Pulitzer-author former Wall Street reporter in Saudi Arabia, the country is fundamentally a family corporation. In her 2012 book *On Saudi Arabia*, she calls it “Islam Inc”. The Board of Directors (20 religious scholars who theoretically set rules for corporate behavior) are handpicked by the Al Saud owners and can be fired at royal whim. The Al Saud family members hold all the key jobs – top down to middle management. (Governors of 12/13 provinces are princes.) At the bottom of the company, ordinary employees are poorly paid and poorly trained



politically and know? This is is difficult for According to prize winning

because management doesn’t value initiative that might threaten its control. If you follow House’s defeatist position, the question is can the Al Saud regime reform in time to save itself? Along this line of logic, educating their youth is an attempt to abandon the divide-and-conquer ‘house of cards’ approach. It seems to be the hope of the royals that Western educated youth will help Saudis bridge divides and reach a consensus that allows the kingdom to move forward.

Strategy 3: Learn Cultural Differences – the Culture of Negotiation.

While it might be preferred and even accepted in the West, the complex culture of negotiation in Saudi Arabia requires that a relationship is built before conducting meaningful business. On the one hand, this can be interpreted as rather surprising and somewhat harmlessly strange. On the other, it can be seen as offensive and even tantamount to creating a classroom where bribes are to be expected.

Specialists within the Arab and Islamic worlds and Western academics/diplomats try to explain how Saudi society works, how Saudis think and how the future might unfold. Yet, as educators, we’re not nearly as committed in expending the energy in trying to understand Saudi Arabia or in trying to get it right; we have other priorities.

But while we do not have the responsibility to get it right, nor are we excused from trying to understand the interplay of these multiple cultural issues – religion, royalty, economics, culture, tradition and modernity. If we want success for our Saudi students, then we must try to understand, first, about Saudi Arabia. With such gaps in understanding, why is the Western education system the preferred one? The central problem with the Saudi educational system is that it is rooted in religious indoctrination and coupled with a pedagogy often focused more on rote memorization rather than critical thinking and creativity.

Strategy 4: Learn the Finances – Follow the Money to KASP.

The King Abdullah Scholarship Program was started in 2005. King Abdullah implemented a government scholarship program to send young Saudi nationals to Western universities for undergraduate and postgraduate studies. This program has been extended to 2020 and currently includes 125k students studying in the US. Accurate numbers for the UK, Canada, Australia and Ireland are difficult to come by. The scholarship includes:

(1) 12-18 months language training, duration of study for BA/BS, MA or PhD, stipend for living expenses, health insurance, conferences/workshops/field trips, awards for academic excellence, tickets home per annum and for emergencies.



(2) full
(3) monthly
(4) 100%
(5) costs for
(6) merit
(7) round-trip

Of note, all major and fields of study are not funded. There is a list of majors supported by the KASP in the Ministry of Higher Education, but not always available on the US - SACM website. These include, among other areas, medical/health studies, computer technology, engineering and business.

Strategy 5: Acknowledge that English is a 2nd language - Slow, Clear & Deliberate Helps.

While each Saudi student has proven English proficiency via ESL, TOEFL and/or IELTS (International English Language Testing System) scores, one must be reminded that English is not the Saudi student’s native language. Care and meaningful direction by the teacher is more important for a Saudi student than for a traditional domestic student.

Example. The Saudi student was instructed to take the math final with his phone safely tucked away in his backpack. In fact, the instructor suspected that the student had emailed a cousin to help him with his previous

exam through the phone. When the instructor left the room, she instructed the student to call her if he had any questions. 10 minutes later, when the instructor walked into the room, the student was using the phone – but only to call her, exactly as she instructed. For the Saudi student, “call”, meant via phone. The instructor had her proof and the student failed the class.

Strategy 6: Speak Slowly - Repeat Often.

Often the most difficult task for Saudi students is taking notes during a lecture. While it might also help domestic students, a lecture which is organized to emphasize and re-emphasize the most salient points will benefit Saudi students. This can be cumbersome for the instructor, reorganizing material differently.

Example. After explaining Early Italian Renaissance art via images of architecture, paintings and sculpture, the Saudi student asked the instructor to explain why Italians would call the style *Run-and-Cents*. Why involve money in the style? It was clear after this question that very little else in the 1 ½ hour lecture was understood.

Strategy 7: Review and Reorganize Lectures.

This is old news but it bears repeating. At the beginning of each lecture a professor makes a choice: (1) choose to make the material clear and understandable, or (2) allow the material to be organized, in the best way, by the individual student. Simply put, reorganizing material requires more work and preparation time. Yet, the effort pays off by improving comprehension of the material. After a good lecture, students are better equipped to understand and learn from the textbook. While true for domestic students, it’s imperative for Saudi students.

A standard lecture might be broken into constituent parts:

Introduction - Initially, most ideas are simple and straightforward. When complexity is built incrementally, the original simplicity becomes foundational. Why are the following concepts being studied?

Body with Sub-concepts – While some ideas are fundamentally simple, others are inherently complicated and messy. Complex concepts require that a number of different techniques and ideas all be understood together before any part of the new concept can be grasped.

Review - By linking new concepts to old, previously learned ideas and terminology are renewed and become active again.

Justification - Why is the material important? How will it be used? Why is this technique better than the techniques learned earlier?

Repeat – Since no idea or fact is understood during the initial introduction, showing it in a variety of contexts and applications with multiple connections is key to the intellectual process.

Strategy 8: Grades = Pressure. Cultural and Economic.

Since Saudi merit awards (based upon grades) are significant, pressure to perform A-level work frequently outpaces any real interest to learn A-level work. At this point, many Saudi students request ‘extra credit’ or ‘extra work’ – *anything* – to assure the desired end. While traditional domestic students understand how ill-fitted such requests are, the persistence by Saudi students of such inappropriate actions can often result in frustration and the opposite desired action.

Whether such persistent requests are based upon cultural differences or the hope of very real rewards, professors often show their frustration by otherwise uncharacteristic and unreasonable reactions.

If negotiation of papers and exams is not a hallmark of a class, that fact should be stated verbally and in writing from the start on the class syllabus.

Strategy 9: Clarity re: Team or Group Projects - Questions of Authorship.

While domestic students might be familiar with the issues of completing group projects, such assignments are often confusing to Saudi students. There is often a social, familial order within a group which dictates the degree to which each person in that group is expected to contribute. Those boundaries can easily result in members of the group not participating fully in the project. Explicitly or implicitly, a group leader may rely on traditional Saudi relationships to dictate what will or will not be done and by whom.

Example. Mohannad was the project leader in a group made up of 4 other Saudi students, his brother and 3 cousins, one of whom was a female. Mohannad designated the work to be done and delegated it since he was the eldest. The female was told not participate. The instructor gave very low grades to everyone in the group except Mohannad.

Strategy 10: Prepare for Conflict between Saudi Youth Culture and Western Traditions.

Saudi Arabia is a deeply conservative state with Islam dominating all aspects of life in the Kingdom. Thus, moving to the West can be daunting for even modern, Saudi youth. There will be a degree of cultural adjustment required for living in a decidedly strange, Western environment. The degree of cultural dislocation is fraught with exceptions, generalizations and simplifications from the start. Some cultural considerations:

1. Many Saudi students come from homes with maids and drivers at their disposal.
2. There is no mixing between males and females socially or in classrooms.
3. Alcoholic beverages are illegal throughout Saudi Arabia. Some students will focus on “the party” in the beginning.
4. Many Saudi students expect to be treated as “VIP” students when they first arrive in their new countries. They expect to live in a nice and luxury accommodation and expect a lot of support from the educational provider in terms of helping and organizing their journeys to and while at their universities.
5. The Saudi cultural mission counselor is a ‘big brother’ who will oversee a student’s performance and attendance.
6. Saudi students tend to group together. Traditional domestic students often interpret this behavior as exclusionary or elitist. Yet Saudi students wish to experience new cultures and perceive themselves as very friendly, social students who wish to have a positive cultural impact on campus.

Strategy 11: Provide an Environment of Constant Communication

With a system for communication set up, it is easier to deal with situations as they do crop up. Some suggestions include:

1. Establish an active ESL program on campus for students and their families. This becomes a significant cultural factor. Not only are English skills improved but important personal, non-academic (familial) concerns are addressed.
2. Have Arabic speakers on staff. With native speakers, subtle issues can be explored and dealt with quickly and more successfully.
3. Create a dedicated prayer space. Since Saudi students are used to prayer rooms at their former schools, having a dedicated space becomes a meaningful institutional statement.
4. Clearly label Halal food. The meaning of food is, not surprisingly, cultural identity; clearly labeled ingredients and a specialized area of Halal food opens cultural and personal doors.

Strategy 12: Emphasize Attendance and Participation in Class.

If regular, on-time attendance is important for a class, then that needs to be stated explicitly and placed clearly in the syllabus, made in bold weight and announced in class. Equally important is a clear statement of the ramifications of not attending on-time.

Example. Abdullah never noticed the teacher's class attendance policy in the middle of the third page of the syllabus. And with him, his 2 cousins also missed more than 5 classes which was the limit set on page five of the syllabus. The three students, upon failing the course, were surprised and not very happy.

Strategy 13: Clarify the Difference between 'Borrowing' and Plagiarism.

In the Western tradition, plagiarism conjures up a list of pejoratives starting with 'stealing' and 'theft'. In English, we can gloss over and even hide the obvious seriousness of 'copying another's work' or 'borrowing someone's original ideas' and presenting them as your own. Many Saudi students have to learn the difference between 'borrowing' and plagiarism hopefully before an exam, a paper or a project.

Why this is true is not entirely clear, but three factors are often cited. First, the Saudi culture in general places great value on communal activity and presenting the work of the community as your own can be seen as reinforcing the community, a very positive value. Second, in previous schooling in Saudi Arabia, it is not clear that students learned that use of another's ideas, images, words or production without crediting the source is unacceptable. Third, the language of assignments is often confusing to Saudi students and the notion of committing an act of fraud might have never been in their consciousness.

Most issues stemming from plagiarism can be avoided by explicitly stating in the course syllabus what constitutes plagiarism:

- turning in someone else's work as your own
- copying words or ideas from someone else without giving credit
- failing to put a quotation in quotation marks
- giving incorrect information about the source of a quotation
- changing words but copying the sentence structure of a source without giving credit
- copying so many words or ideas from a source that it makes up the majority of your work, whether you give credit or not



Example. The major assessment method in the class was weekly essays. Questions were asked on Friday and papers were collected on Monday. 5 Saudi students received an F on the first essay; in fact, they all handed in the same essay. Abdullaziz met with the teacher and told her that since the same essay was given to all the students in the class (ie, not individual and different questions), he assumed it was proper to submit the same answer, worked out by all 5 students. While the Saudi students received zero points on the first assignment, they soon understood the issues of such group work and worked independently from that time onwards. And passed the class.

The notion of a cultural ambivalence to issues of plagiarism and academic dishonesty can be seen on the website www.arabnews.com from 9 May, 2015. The lead story appeared about faculty being fired and disciplined for falsifying their research and for plagiarism. Please note, in the discussion, the comment. The statement is not one of ambivalence; it is one of suggesting that the problem of plagiarism is known and generally accepted at King Saud University, the main university in Saudi Arabia.^{vii}

Strategy 14: Be Creatively and Intentionally Intrusive.

In order to maximize student engagement and therefore student success, a culture of intentional intrusiveness should be established in general advising, in each individual class and in the residential student life components of a students’ educational experience. Examples include:

- Do not allow the use of translation software for class work. Encourage and reward original writing, raw as it might be in the beginning.
- Instead of merely ‘taking’ attendance, require that each student correctly answer a question based upon the last lecture or the readings for that day. This is a review for everyone, but explicitly a review involving comprehension for the Saudi student. In this scenario, a student will have to continue answering referential questions until a correct answer is given.
- Assign partners for projects rather than self-selection which might result in in-groups.

Strategy 15: Become a Role Model, a Friend, a Family Member in-situ.

To the extent that it’s possible or even desirable, given the nature of complex relationships, become a role model, a friend – even a family member in-situ. This is, of course, the most time-intensive strategy with no clear predictable outcome.

Professors all remember what drove them to teaching, that old romantic idea of a learned elder and a student, sitting on a log, discussing and reacting, back and forth, sharing and relating. The closer you can allow yourself this relationship, the more success you will have with the Saudi student.

Example. Invite Saudi students to your house for a friendly, afternoon cookout (not on Friday – the prayers, not on Ramadan, observe male/female tradition of separation, assure students of Halal food). Participate in breaking-of-the-fast on Ramadan. Assist in social outings with Saudi student organizations.

Conclusion

On one level, of course, Saudi student success references a simple business model. With 125,000 students paying list price for university education in the US, the billions that pour into our educational institutions simply cannot be ignored. But Saudi student success is not just about funding or facts, ideas and education. It is based on celebrating our cross-cultural similarities and differences with respect. Central to the 15 strategies presented here are the assumptions of student passion for learning, teacher excellence, vibrant professional curricula and our shared cultural desires to remain vitalized.

It should be remembered that these Saudi students will return to their country, and they will be the future leaders, the employers and the strategists when King Salman and his authoritarian family are gone. We have a significant challenge in our classrooms of Saudi students.

ⁱ This paper is an expanded version of a presentation made at the 5th International Conference on Teaching, Education and Learning, September 20-21, 2015. Imperial College, London. The authors gratefully acknowledge research grants from the Faculty Development Committee, University of Dubuque.

ⁱⁱ This explosive growth can be attributed to an educational agreement brokered between former US President George Bush and Saudi King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Al Saud in 2005. See documents from SACM: http://www.sacm.org/ArabicSACM/pdf/Posters_Sacm_scholorship.pdf and <http://www.sacm.org/AboutSACM/History.aspx> . The agreement effectively opened the doors for Saudi students to pursue their higher educational degrees in the US with their government paying most/all of their educational expenses. See I. Naffee in <http://www.arabnews.com/news/558416> . According to the Pew Research Center, this makes Saudi Arabia the fourth largest sponsor of international students to the US. See D. DeSilver (2013), Record Number of International Students Studying in U.S. at <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2013/11/12/record-number-of-international-students-studying-in-u-s/> .

ⁱⁱⁱ See P. Garfield's abridged thesis, "Short Term Study, Long Term Results" at http://www.nafsa.org/File/regiv/2011_regiv_short_term_bib.pdf . Cultural competence is first introduced by G. Hofstede (2001), *Culture's Consequences: comparing values, behaviors, institutions, and organizations across nations* (2nd ed.). Sage Publications. Thousand Oaks, CA.

^{iv} A. Razek found various implications arising from the continuous increase of Saudi students on American higher education campuses. Based on his data relevant themes emerged including: cultural adjustment, self-efficacy, challenges, stereotypes, persistence, success, support mechanisms and academic integrity. His aim was to develop a system to ease the cultural adjustment of new Saudi students. See Abdel Nasser Abdel Razek (2012), *Dissertation, An exploration of the case of Saudi students' engagement, success, and self-efficacy at a Mid Western American University*, University of Akron.

^v See J. Tempera (2013), "Foreign Students Examine Benefits of Studying in U.S: Great Colleges, Diversity and Great Job Opportunities Are Just a Few of the Reasons Foreign Students Choose to Study in America." *USA Today*. <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2013/06/12/foreign-students-studying-usa/2416313/> and T. Hall (2013), *Dissertation, Saudi Male Perceptions of Study in the United States: An Analysis of King Abdullah Scholarship Program Participants*, Western Kentucky University. <http://digitalcommons.wku.edu/diss/50> .

^{vi} C. Taylor and W. Albasri (2014), *The Impact of Saudi Arabia King Abdullah's Scholarship Program in the U.S*. *Open Journal of Social*

Sciences, 2014, 2, 109-118. <http://www.scirp.org/journal/jss> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.4236/jss.2014.210013> This is an excellent statistical overview of the Saudi educational landscape in the US.

^{vii} The news article and comment can be read at: http://www.arabnews.com/news/744386?quicktabs_stat2=0