

Negotiating trust and respect: relationships between staff members at La Trobe University International College and Middle Eastern Students

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Introduction

This presentation is based on a very small action research project undertaken by the author at La Trobe University International College (LTUIC) early this year when there were over 200 students from the Middle Eastern countries in ELICOS at LTUIC. The findings were first presented in May, 2008 at the NEAS Management Conference. Since then numbers of Middle Eastern students has increased at LTUIC, and some of the issues identified continue to present themselves, and attempts are made to resolve them systemically as well as on a case by case basis.

Premise

The motivation to conduct this project came from the need that language teachers (and some other staff members) have in understanding the concept of respect in a variety of cultures. The premise on which the project was based is that if a learner builds up trust in their teacher, then learning can be facilitated more easily, and trust is easier to negotiate if there is respect on both sides. Trust breaks down if either party perceives “respect”. There is a perception amongst some staff members and students at LTUIC that they are not respected or that Middle Eastern students do not show respect towards their peers.

Readings on Trust and Respect

According to Robbins et al, 2004: 364-365, there are three types of trust. These are:

1. Deterrence-based trust
In an organisation, if trust is based on fear of reprisal, then that type of trust could be violated. Most new relationships begin this way.
2. Knowledge-based trust
Trust based on behavioural predictability comes from a history of interaction. This type of trust exists when you have adequate information about someone to understand them well enough to be able to accurately predict their behaviour.
3. Identification-based trust
This type of trust is based on a mutual understanding of each other’s intentions and appreciation of the other’s wants and desires. This is the highest level of trust and it is achieved where there is an emotional connection between the parties. Such trust allows one party to act as an agent for the other, and to stand in for that person in interpersonal transactions.

Robbins et al, 2004, show how three types of trust exist in an organisation; however one may ask what exactly trust is. Trust is defined as a positive expectation that another will not through words, actions or decisions, act opportunistically. The five key dimensions that underlie the concept of trust are

- Integrity: honesty and truthfulness
- Competence: technical and interpersonal knowledge and skills
- Consistency: reliability, predictability and good judgement in handling situations
- Loyalty: willingness to protect and save face for another person

- Openness: giving the full truth.

In the premise above trust and respect are inter-related; therefore let us look at what respect is for the Middle Eastern person, especially one from Saudi Arabia. These definitions are taken from www.communicald.com/access/pdf/library/culture/Saudi

And the student in this context is treated as a client.

The key concepts and values of Saudi Arabian culture are described in terms of saving face, the influence of religion, paralinguistics and age.

1. Face

In a culture where confrontation and conflict are to be avoided, the concept of face is a fundamental issue of daily life. Dignity and respect are key elements in Saudi Arabian culture, and saving face, through the use of compromise, patience and self-control is a means by which to maintain these qualities. Arabian culture utilises the concept of face to solve conflicts and avoid embarrassing or discomforting others. In an official context, preventing loss of face is equally important. For instance, your Saudi students will not take well to pressure that places them in an uncomfortable position which makes them lose face.

2. Islam

In order to understand the culture of Saudi Arabia we need to understand the huge influence that Islam has on every facet of life. A lot of your students from Saudi Arabia it is likely adhere to the Wahabi sect of Islam. Thus their culture is detail oriented, and emphasis is placed on ethics and expected social behaviour such as generosity, respect and solidarity, mainly for fellow Muslims. These are customs and social duties that also run through businesses and even education.

3. High context communication

Saudi Arabia is said to have a very high context culture. The message being conveyed or the meaning being constructed amongst individuals depends highly on body language and eye contact rather than direct words. In this respect, assumptions are made about what is not said. Particular emphasis is placed on tone of voice, the use of silence, facial cues and body language. During a conversation, strong eye contact is maintained and a closer distance is expected in official and social settings. In this way not only is meaning constructed but trust is strengthened and respect shown.

4. Age

Greater respect is expected and commanded by the older students from the younger peers as age plays a significant part in the culture of Saudi Arabia.

Method used for action research

There were interviews conducted with 30 teachers and the Arabic-speaking student advisor conducted interviews with 30 Middle Eastern students. These were the 30 out of 200 plus who had responded on a short questionnaire asking them for their perception on whether they felt respected enough at LTUIC and how much they respect they showed towards their teachers and peers.

Summary of findings

The staff members' "complaints" about students showing disrespect was matched against students' responses, and the same was done in reverse. The tables which follow show summaries of these findings:

Teachers' complaints	Students' explanations
Students come late to class, especially after prayers.	Teachers are not very understanding of family and religious commitments of Islamic students.
Students answer calls on their mobile phones despite classroom rules.	Calls about wives and children have to be answered.
They insist on speaking in their own language.	It is best for us to translate concepts/ideas and help "our brothers" understand them.
Assignments are copied from past students or one another.	To pass is very important for a sponsored student.
They cheat in exams or take photos on their mobile phones of exam papers.	If teachers are negligent, any student would take advantage of the situation.
Some students use derogatory terms to describe staff and student peers.	These are just words/adjectives with no emotive connotations.
Some students constantly complain to the Director without discussions with teachers or student advisors.	Director has ultimate power to solve all problems. This saves time.

Note: Five teachers reported no problems with Middle Eastern students.

Students' complaints	Teachers' explanations
Teachers show anger and frustration openly.	Sometimes a point has to be made in a strong manner.
In summer some female teachers dress inappropriately.	There is no prescribed dress code.
Female teachers smoking with male students in the courtyard are not being respectful.	This is a free country and we are all equal.
Organising barbeques or excursions during the month of fasting is disrespectful.	A needs analysis provides choices and it is unfortunate if the minority do not get their way. This is the democratic way.
Organising a get-together without halal food should not be allowed.	There are always vegetarian options provided.
Teachers do not organise make up classes for the lessons we miss during Friday prayers.	Students should come back on time, and find out from their peers what they have missed.

Conclusions

There is a need to meet or exceed the expectations of the teachers and students. The values on both sides are not too different but the signals of communication are, and these are a cause of misunderstanding. Connotations and nuances of language are very important for clear communication.

Recommendations

1. A robust program of learning or being aware of western conventions, pragmatics, life etc. for students is required prior to arrival. LTUIC should be involved in sending this to the students, perhaps in their native language as pre-departure orientation material.
2. Professional development sessions for teachers should be provided on how to create inter-cultural classrooms. This should be on-going.
3. Cross-cultural learning for staff and students is vital.

Creation of intercultural classrooms can only happen if the teacher is provided with the knowledge or has high awareness of the backgrounds and cultures of their students. Managers have a strong duty to provide this information, and student advisors with their strong background in this area should be included in the construction of these support programs.