Enhancing Teaching and Learning
in Higher Education in the United Arab Emirates

Enhancing Teaching and Learning in Higher Education in the United Arab Emirates: Reflections from the Classroom

Edited by

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**CAMBRIDGE
SCHOLARS**

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FOREWORD

As a first semester graduate student, the first author was asked to teach an introductory course at a major land grant university in the fall of 1982. Approximately halfway through the semester, a full-time faculty member made a classroom observation. Other than a 'teaching course' consisting of such words of wisdom as "always curve your grades so you don't give too many A's" and "never admit you don't know something; make up an answer as the students won't know anyway," preparation was nonexistent. The syllabus was copied from one provided as a 'model' and teaching methods were simply what was remembered from vaguely recalled undergraduate courses. Each class session consisted of reading from lecture notes, hurriedly scribbled directly from the text. No one discussed methods of engaging students, the learning process, or assessing whether students were learning. The second author had much the same experience teaching as a graduate student and again as an adjunct instructor where the syllabus, the book, lesson plans, and activities were all inherited.

Much has changed, however, over the past two decades, as the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) has revolutionized the craft of teaching. Today, there is an ever-increasing empirical literature documenting the relationship between effective teaching and student learning. Numerous journals now publish peer-reviewed articles on the scholarship of teaching and learning, and such publications are increasingly being more accepted by many institutions as evidence of scholarship. One of the most important outcomes of this literature has been the finding that the deepest, most meaningful, and longest lasting learning occurs when students are actively engaged in the learning process.

Unfortunately, many faculty members remain largely unaware of this burgeoning literature. Faculty may be given teaching tips but rarely read the literature outlining the many instructional methods available for enhancing active student learning as well as available tactics for both formative and summative assessment of student learning. The present volume represents the efforts of several faculty across a wide variety of disciplines to incorporate formal SoTL scholarship in their classrooms. This work is informed by the idea that any classroom may be conceptualized as a "natural laboratory" for studying both active learning

strategies and their relationship to measurable academic outcomes. Documentation of student learning is arguably the most critical issue facing higher education today. Each chapter in the current volume describes how this challenge can be met across disciplinary boundaries, and in a manner that far exceeds the degree of sophistication used in the past to document student learning. For instance, many faculty no longer rely solely on traditional student evaluations of teaching to support their claims of teaching excellence. There is, instead, a more empirical focus on how to reliably demonstrate relationships between specific instructional practices and course relevant outcome measures.

Finally, the chapters in this text present a glimpse of teaching from an international perspective. These glimpses are engaging and valuable. However, what most struck us was that the underlying principles of student learning, how to achieve student learning, and how to document student learning are universal. Regardless of geographic location, SoTL helps us to understand what enhances student learning and how to make our efforts more effective.

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PREFACE

American University of Sharjah (AUS) is located in University City, Sharjah in the United Arab Emirates. AUS was established in 1997 by His Highness Sheikh Dr. Sultan Bin Mohammad Al Qassimi, Member of the UAE Supreme Council and Ruler of Sharjah. Consciously based upon American institutions of higher education, AUS is thoroughly grounded in Arab culture and is part of a larger process of the revitalization of intellectual life in the Middle East. It is an independent, not-for-profit coeducational institution offering both undergraduate and graduate programs. AUS has three colleges, the College of Architecture, Art and Design, the College of Arts and Sciences, the College of Engineering, and one school, the School of Business and Management. In the 2011–2012 academic year AUS had an approximate student body of 5,500 students from over 87 different countries. The faculty at AUS are also multicultural, representing more than 47 different nationalities.

In the 2011–2012 academic year, the Faculty Development Center at AUS introduced a Faculty Teaching Certificate Program. One of the requirements of the Teaching Certificate is a capstone project in which faculty members demonstrate their efforts to enhance the learning opportunities in their classes by applying one or more of the ideas discussed in the program seminars. In addition, as Director of the Faculty Development Center, I also facilitated a Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) learning community where the faculty involved were also working on exciting and innovative teaching projects. The idea for this book stemmed from my work with the faculty and teaching staff on these projects. As with any scholarly work, it is imperative to share our findings, ideas and reflections with our peers. I would like to thank all the participants for sharing their commitment to teaching excellence with others. We hope you find the chapters relevant and useful in your own pursuits of teaching excellence.

INTRODUCTION

THE POWER OF INNOVATIVE REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

CINDY GUNN

Gibson points out that, "traditionally, teachers in higher education have focused on imparting content knowledge rather than on considering how different students learn and which strategies might in fact, promote that learning" (2010, p. 611). As with many traditions, however, modifications are often made to keep up with changing times and over the years there have been numerous calls from various stakeholders around the world to focus on improving teaching in higher education. Boyer (1990) stressed the importance of teaching at the college and university level by noting that, "the work of the professor becomes consequential only as it is understood by others" (1990, p. 23). Thus, the onus is on a professor to not only be an expert in his/her field but to know how to impart that knowledge to the students meaningfully and effectively. Boyer notes that "while well-prepared lectures surely have a place, teaching, at its best, means not only transmitting knowledge, but *transforming* and *extending* it as well" (1990, p. 24, emphasis in original). Thus, rather than filling the students' heads with facts and then testing them on these facts, engaging students and offering them opportunities to make sense of the new content by demonstrating their understanding through a variety of ways is an important part of the teaching process.

When it comes to discussing teaching in higher education, however, Neumann notes that "its complexity is rarely acknowledged and aspects of university teaching are still under-examined" (Neumann, 2001, p. 135). Although there are limited studies specifically devoted to teaching in the various disciplines in higher education, there is agreement among researchers that the concepts of teaching and learning often vary across disciplines (González, 2011, Healey, 2005, Lindblom-Ylännea, et.al, 2006, Neumann, 2001, Smeby, 1996). Åkerlind (2008) notes that, "over the last decade, there has been an increasing number of researchers suggesting that

the most effective way of approaching teaching development for academics is to focus on developing their conceptual understanding of the nature of teaching and learning, as opposed to the more traditional focus on developing their teaching methods and skills" (p. 633). One way for professors or instructors to better understand the nature of teaching and learning in their classes is through reflective practice.

As Nehring, Wilfredo, Laboy & Catarius point out, "reflection [and] reflective practice signify an intellectual tradition with deep historical roots that cross academic disciplines" (2010, p. 399). Not only is reflective practice not the domain of any one discipline there is, as yet, no agreed upon definition of reflective practice in or among disciplines. Nonetheless, "despite the lack of consensus of definition and conception, its proponents remain committed to the notion of reflection as a critical element in teachers' professional learning" (Williams & Grudnoff. 2011, p. 282). Boyer claims that "teaching is a dynamic endeavor involving all the analogies, metaphors, and images that build bridges between the teacher's understanding and the student's learning. Pedagogical procedures must be carefully planned, continuously examined, and relate directly to the subject taught" (1990, pp. 23-24). Re-examining and revising pedagogy and its impact on the learning process are essential elements of reflective practice.

For the purposes of this book, Thompson's definition of reflective practice is apt. She notes that, "reflection and reflective practice are regarded as close examination of one's own thought and behaviour, learning from experience and an experimental disposition towards ongoing activity" (2010, p. 393). When professors take an "experimental disposition" this can encourage risk-taking and innovation in the classroom which is a powerful combination to enhance the learning experience for students and to further a professor's teaching professional development.

Dana's well-known 1912 quote states, "Who dares to teach must never cease to learn." The fifteen chapters in this book are examples of university professors, instructors and academic teaching staff from different disciplines at American University of Sharjah (AUS) who have taken up the challenge of both teaching to and learning from their students through reflective practice. They have deliberately chosen to approach teaching with inquiry and enthusiasm to enhance the learning opportunities for their students. Through topics ranging from introducing active learning techniques to examining the effect of technology on the learning process, each author describes and reflects upon his/her experience. With the exception of the first and last chapters, the book is organized alphabetically by College/School. The first chapter discusses an

interdisciplinary course developed and taught by professors in the College of Architecture, Art and Design and the College of Arts and Sciences. Chapters two and three are from the College of Architecture, Art and Design, followed by chapters four to seven from the College of Arts and Sciences. Chapters eight to eleven are from the College of Engineering and chapters twelve to fourteen are from the School of Business and Management. Chapter fifteen, the concluding chapter, is from an academic teaching staff member in the Library.

Interdisciplinary Chapter

In Chapter One, *Designing Stories of Our Lives: An Exploration of Interdisciplinary Teaching*, Lelania Sperrazza, an instructor in the College of Arts and Sciences, and Clément Vincent, an assistant professor in the College of Architecture, Art and Design, offer insight into an interdisciplinary course they developed and taught in the 2011-2012 academic year. Through their collaborative, on-going discussions they take the reader through the rationale, development and implementation of the course. They share both their own and their students' reflections on the impact of the course on themselves as instructors and their students.

Chapters from the College of Architecture, Art and Design

In Chapter Two, *Making Connections, Marking Differences, Filling Voids and Minding Gaps: Teaching Art History in the UAE,* J. Martin Giesen shares how he handles the challenges of teaching culturally sensitive subjects in his Art History classes. Although Giesen takes the time to build rapport with the students in his large lecture classes and offers them the opportunity to discuss and debate the various topics, misunderstandings still occur. Giesen reflects on these misunderstandings and how to overcome them in order to provide a comfortable teaching and learning environment in his classes.

In Chapter Three, *From Passive to Collaborative Involvement in the Classroom: Reconsidering the Notion of a Museum Studies Course in the UAE,* Seth Thompson illustrates how he engages his students in a new Museum Studies course he was asked to develop. Through the use of various active learning strategies Thompson transforms what could have become a lecture based course into an interactive learning experience for the students. Thompson shares his own and his students' reflections of the course.

Chapters from the College of Arts and Sciences

In Chapter Four, *Investigating Techniques to Enhance Learner Autonomy in Biology Classes,* Sarah Dalibalta discusses her investigation into the role of motivation in enhancing learner autonomy with her freshmen biology students. At the beginning of the semester she asked the students to set goals for themselves and to identify their fears and expectations. Throughout the rest of the semester she introduced 11 Principles of Success intended to inspire students to take control of their learning and increase their awareness of ways that would aid them in achieving their goals. At the end of the semester she surveyed the students on their perceptions of the techniques and whether or not the techniques helped them achieve their goals. The students also offered suggestions on how to improve teaching the techniques to future classes.

In Chapter Five, *Engineering Students' Reflections on the Relevance of an ESP Course: Delayed Understanding*, Tharwat M. EL-Sakran and Mujo Mesanovic discuss the updates made to an English for Engineers course to better meet the needs of the students. To ensure that the changes have brought about the required effects in the learners they conducted a cross-sectional study of junior, senior and graduate engineering students to assess their perceptions of the course. They found significantly positive attitudes towards the course contents overall but also identified differences in students' perceptions of the course by year of study and gender.

In Chapter Six, *Formative Assessment: Uncovering Writing Excellence One Student at a Time*, Sana Sayed explores the use of a number of formative assessment activities with her students in a required writing class. Over the years she noticed that many of her students lacked motivation and were not actively engaged in the class writing activities. By introducing low-stake formative assessment activities such as peer and self-evaluation exercises, she hoped the students would find them motivating and encourage them to become active, responsible participants throughout the learning process as well as gain a better understanding of their individual writing strengths. She reflects on the success of these activities from both her own and the students' points of view.

In Chapter Seven, *Examining the Impact of Private Tutoring in Business Mathematics Classes*, Hana Sulieman explores the practice of private tutoring in mathematics among first year university students. She further examines how this mode of learning during high school impacts the students' performance in freshman mathematics course. She found that students who have received private tutoring in mathematics in the form of individualized instruction for at least one year in high school are more

likely to request tutoring in the subject during their freshman year at university. As for performance, students who purchased private tutoring in order to improve their performance in the course consistently underperformed their peers irrespective of whether they had tutoring experience in mathematics in high school or not and showed significantly higher failing rates in the course compared to their peers. In addition, there were gender differences where boys were more likely to purchase tutoring than girls.

Chapters from the College of Engineering

In Chapter Eight, *Do Personal Response Systems Enhance Learning? A Case Study in a Junior-Level Civil Engineering Course*, Ghassan Abu-Lebdeh evaluates his experience with the use of Personal Response Systems (PRS) as a way to encourage student participation and enhance learning in his undergraduate civil engineering class. Two groups were used in this investigation, a study/test group and a control group. Formal evaluation of the outcome of the investigation was conducted using both stated students' responses and formal statistical tests of the students' grade performance. Stated responses showed an overwhelming support and enthusiasm for the use of the PRS. The two-sample t-test revealed no statistically significant difference in the grade performance of the two groups at the end of the semester. The results parallel those of other researchers. The mismatch between the overwhelming positive students' response and the lack of tangible grade benefits, however, points to the need for further exploration.

In Chapter Nine, *Reflecting on Students' Attitudes and Performance in Homework*, Hasan Al-Nashash knows as a professor the value of homework in better understanding class material but over the years has noticed that his students do not seem to be taking their homework assignments seriously. In order to help his students realize the value and importance of homework he first tested his assumptions and reviewed the grades of his students to see if there was a correlation between the final grades and their homework grades. He then asked the students if they found homework to be useful or not and why. Finally, he reflected on the academic implications of the information he gathered from the students in order to better meet the needs of his future classes to help them improve their homework attitudes and performance

In Chapter Ten, *Evaluating the Effect of Video Lectures on Student Learning*, Zahid Hamid Khan discusses the introduction of pre-recorded video lectures in his civil engineering classes. The recordings were

produced at the instructor's convenience with Camtasia software and a tablet PC. The lectures were then posted on the AUS Learning Management System before quizzes and exams but not before the actual lectures. The students' activity of accessing the lectures was monitored and analyzed. The student's perceptions about the video lectures were also documented by conducting preliminary and final surveys. The video lectures produced with simple and easy to use technology were found to be a very useful tool in enhancing the students' learning, facilitating their access to education, and incorporating technology in the course.

In Chapter Eleven, *Interactive Games in Mechanics Education*, Shivakumar I. Ranganathan searches for a way to improve his students' learning opportunities in Mechanics of Materials, a core course in a variety of engineering programs. He argues that a student with a strong understanding in this course will navigate the engineering program very well and as such it is an important course for the students. The course, however, is perceived by the students to be moderately difficult to difficult since there is a lot of material that needs to be covered (~11-12 chapters) within the span of one semester and the class requires a lot of imaginative skills. Since Ranganathan can do little about the first issue as it is a requirement directly mandated by ABET he decided to investigate whether or not it was possible to address the second issue by using interactive games to hone the imaginative skills of the students. Results indicated that students overwhelmingly approved of the use of interactive games in the course and suggested that the games help them learn.

Chapters from the School of Business and Management

In Chapter Twelve, *Enhancing Undergraduate Finance Students' Experience Through Active Learning*, Tanya Gibbs examines the impact of the introduction of several active learning activities on her students' attitudes towards and learning of Finance. Fundamentals of Financial Management (FIN 201) is a required course for all Business and Management students at AUS and for most students it is not a course they look forward to taking. Gibbs sets out to change the students' views of the course and make it a more meaningful learning experience for them and a more rewarding teaching experience for her. The data collected from the student surveys, interviews, course evaluations and exam performance indicated that active learning methods positively affected students' academic performance, enhanced interest in the subject, and overall changed their attitude toward learning Finance.

In Chapter Thirteen, *A Learning Management System's Discussion Board or Facebook Groups: A Classroom Implementation Study*, Alaa Hamade first discusses the discussion board feature of the AUS Learning Management System. In his experience both as a student and an instructor, he found that the discussion board has several drawbacks for both the lecturer and the students. As a result he decided to look for a viable alternative and settled on a Facebook group. His chapter includes information on how he implemented a Facebook group with his students and followed by a discussion of the results of this implementation from both his own and the students' points of view.

In Chapter Fourteen, *Introduction of Learning Technology in the Management Curriculum: Progress Toward Group-Work*, Linzi Kemp argues that the ability to work effectively in groups, whether face to face or virtually, is essential for today's Business students to prepare them for the work world. She believes that engaging in group work is an opportunity for students to help others to succeed in task fulfillment. Kemp introduced two group work tasks involving technology: blogs and podcasts. She first describes the technology introduced and the benefits to learning. She then outlines what was achieved in the classroom by way of the task that the students completed. She concludes by reflecting on the strengths of using technology in group work tasks and offers some practical advice for areas of improvement.

Chapter from an Academic Teaching Staff Member

In Chapter Fifteen, *Information Literacy Outcomes Assessment Using Rubrics: An AUS Library Pilot*, Alanna Ross discusses a pilot study trialing a rubric-based approach to information literacy assessment. At AUS, the information literacy classes are developed and taught by the library academic teaching staff members and the class outcomes are designed to align with the overall AUS information literacy outcomes. The pilot study outlined in Ross's chapter is a first attempt at collaborating with faculty to test an alternate method of information literacy outcomes assessment in support of quality instruction and learning at the curriculum level as well as to extend the library's current assessment efforts beyond the classroom.

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Chapter One

Designing Stories of Our Lives: An Exploration of Interdisciplinary Teaching

Lelania Sperrazza and Clément Vincent

Introduction

As collaborative instructors approaching the classroom from two different disciplines-Writing Studies and Visual Design-we wanted our students to express their diverse cultural identities without the constraints of a single-disciplinary course or medium. If one's identity, according to Maalouf (1998), "cannot be split in halves or thirds, nor have any clearly defined set of boundaries" (para. 3), then we also felt that a single-disciplinary course would be too confining for our students to truly explore the global expanse of their identities. But, by authoring a story of their lives in two collaborative mediums, our students would have the autonomy to construct their identities beyond traditional storytelling, therefore creating a new voice for today's youth in the Gulf: one that is not constructed for them by the outside world, but designed by them, within their own situational knowledge and understanding of their lives.

However, as we strived to liberate our students' learning in the collaborative classroom during Fall 2011 to Spring 2012, we also found that our own experiences as instructors had been deeply impacted by the merging of our ideas, our disciplines, and our own pedagogical beliefs. To our surprise, the mutual exchange of knowledge we so much wanted for our students had developed into a parallel exchange of pedagogy between us, the instructors. In fact, we found that our actual conversations throughout the academic year were just as valuable to our growth as instructors as was teaching the course curriculum. By sharing a sample of these conversations throughout our paper, we hope you will learn from our

experience in the collaborative classroom as you also gain some insight into how collaboration transforms both educators and students alike.

Our Intent

Clément: The idea for creating a collaborative course started with a project that I had offered to my Visual Communication students in Fall 2010. The project had to do with the investigation of a place, and one of my students chose to explore three different gravesites in a cemetery near Dubai. She took very simple and quiet pictures of graves and imagined the lives, names, and words of their residents. Her final piece became a little book where pictures of each grave were accompanied by the imagined thoughts of the deceased. While the work was very touching and profound, I wished I could have given more guidance to my student's writing.

This experience triggered in me a desire to offer a course where writing and graphic design would become partners; a class where fine-tuning a text—its tone, style, structure, basic grammar, and syntax—would not be confined to the 12-point Times New Roman font and double-spaced format that the academic world has adopted as its standard. I dreamed of something more subtle, where exquisite writing and exquisite layout could work together and be acknowledged for their interdependence. I dreamed of a Visual Communications major discovering the power of words next to an English major understanding the purpose of typography, the role of image, the impact of the proportion of a page, and all the other decisions that go into the design of book.

When AUS launched a new grant for Collaborative Undergraduate Teaching Across Disciplines, I shared my idea with a colleague of mine in the Writing Studies department. Lelania's enthusiasm matched my own, and we met for months, researching ideas and revising our content, until our course was one of only two chosen to be taught the following year.

Lelania: As a writing instructor in the Middle East for over five years, I've thought a lot about my students and their stories and making words come alive from the whiteness of a page. From Yemen to Egypt, and now Sharjah, I've listened to the lives of young people whose experiences were so rich and varied that I felt they needed to be shared with others. But something strange always happened when it was time to write down those stories. Words got lost or forgotten, or even worse, written in a voice that wasn't their own. The 5-paragraph essay, with all its rules and regulations, somehow drained the color from my students' stories until they became as white as the paper they were printed on.

So, I imagined a space where stories mattered. I envisioned a place where students could voice theirs views without conforming to a Western academic standard. Here, in this narrative world, my students would be able to explore their identities in a voice that reflected their own language, their own history, their own culture, beyond the written page.

When Clément approached me about creating an interdisciplinary course that combined both visuals and text, I began to see this space where stories could exist. We talked about how we wanted to move beyond mere sentences or single designs so that students could reach a part of their pasts never expressed before. As we designed our syllabus, we chose memoirs, documentaries, and an array of visuals that challenged cultural notions of identity. We also found visiting artists and writers who could describe the process of shaping stories into livable works of art. But, most important, we tried to create projects where students had to play with color, images, and words so that they could structure their stories how they lived them: as a union of interactive memories, not separate moments isolated by only text or only visuals.

Interdisciplinary Teaching: The Ice Cream of Academia

However, before we could create this space for stories, we needed to first understand each other's motivation for teaching a course together. Over 50 percent of interdisciplinary collaborations fail (Kezar, 2005) because the worldviews of those disciplines are unable to converge. While we wanted to provide an opportunity for narrative discovery, we also had to be aware that the relationship between word and image should involve the "collapse of academic borders and the emergence of a new discipline" (Davidson, 2004, p. 308). Otherwise, we could have easily remained in our separate classrooms attempting to incorporate each other's disciplines into our very fixed, traditional curriculums. But our desire for energizing exchanges and unexpected revelations from our students' stories made us want to teach in a way that has often been criticized for "dissolving" traditional disciplines (Marginson, personal communication, 2007). In the often-cited and intentionally provocative article "Five Arguments Against Interdisciplinary Studies" (1982), Benson addresses the academic fear that interdisciplinary courses are as light and superficial as "curricular ice cream" (p. 39), meant to please rather than challenge the scholarly tastes of university students. Even more alarming, since these two disciplines are taught during a class period originally designed for one, the substance of the course material itself is considered stripped bare of essential skills in order to fit within the confines of an academic semester. But the

interconnectedness of disciplines does not automatically dilute the rigor of a course; single-subject disciplines are just as susceptible to blandness. If both disciplines are allowed to exist freely in the classroom, then an opportunity for symbiosis can occur, which could actually add strength and depth to the intellectual development of students as they begin to view the world as "dialogic relationships rather than binary opposites" (Hocks, 2003, p. 631). By seeking to remove the limits of our disciplines—by looking for the layers of a story through an interdisciplinary lens—we wanted to find that place where untold stories try to hide. And, if interdisciplinary teaching is considered the ice cream of academia, then remember the excitement of seeing that ice cream truck drive down your street during a hot, dull day. Remember the instantaneous spark of hunger as you selected your favorite flavor. This is what we believe can occur when two disciplines combine, and this is the feeling we would like to convey as we share our following conversations with you.

Conversation #1: Expansion of Knowledge

But, in order for this "spark" to occur, interdisciplinary teaching must contain certain structural elements to ensure its success in a world dominated by single-subject courses. The first requirement necessitates the "dominance of an idea," which, according to Davies and Devlin (2007), is a "clear and recognizable idea that can serve as a central focus for the work" (p. 5). Without this collaborative goal, it seems obvious that any interdisciplinary course would flail around as it searches for the purpose and meaning of its co-existence. However, in our particular course, we strived to design two core projects that culminated in an understanding of the *relationship* between texts and visuals. We did not want students to only acquire certain skills from both disciplines—it was the *understanding* of how both disciplines complemented each other that we wanted to teach.

Our first project, Autobiographical Booklet, merges the development of image and text as students investigate the stories of their own lives. Since their identities have been shaped by multiple cultural formations based on their backgrounds, languages, and beliefs, we felt it was necessary to help our students express their diversity through different mediums, as well. Instead of limiting their voices to one form of story-telling (through writing, drawing, painting, or photography), we wanted them to have the freedom to explore and create with as many forms as possible. Below is an excerpt of our assignment sheet with directions for how students should prepare their autobiographical booklets.

Project 1: Autobiographical Booklet

The autobiographical booklet is both a written and visual communication of your identity, your interests, and your beliefs for an audience of people you value but by whom you feel misunderstood. The content, meaning, and form of this small book are of equal importance. The underlying criteria by which the project will be evaluated is the level of intellectual and emotional engagement the booklet will produce. The strategy, style, and aesthetic choices you make, both visually and textually, will be at your discretion but should be informed by the readings, visuals, lectures, and discussions held in class.

Since the concept of identity is ever-shifting, we wanted to provide an opportunity for our students to express the uniqueness of their lives. And, by sharing that uniqueness with others, they also acquired an understanding and vision of how stories can be shaped and produced to represent different versions of their identities.

Expansion of Students: Reem
(See Image 1 in Appendix 1-A)

Lelania: How does creating this autobiographical booklet-which includes writing, drawing, painting, photography, and any other image students want to create-give them an expansion of knowledge and an understanding of themselves?

Clément: Because they spend time thinking about what they're going to write. They have to consider their past experiences and try to articulate them into visual and textual forms.

Lelania: But, couldn't Reem just have written the story about lemons? Wouldn't that have been enough? Let's just say we had given an assignment that said, "Write a story about your childhood, your younger self. *Write* it." That's a slight expansion in the sense that students had an opportunity to write this, I agree. But, there's something about the combination of all these elements that has to add to the expansion of the self, the expansion of the story, the expansion of how we, as an audience, understand the story.

Clément: Reem had various qualities that were scattered about. This booklet was an opportunity to gather those elements she had produced— for example, she had already produced this painting before our class, but now she has asked someone to embrace that painting, and Reem photographed her. She is connecting things. The venue for this is the booklet. The pages are a garden for the senses, so there are many senses

coming together. To me, the expansion of knowledge is the fact that Reem got an opportunity to put in relation elements that she had created before but were not related.

Lelania: I'd like to add, that this particular student has said to us that she doesn't like writing. She avoids it at all costs. And, this course, this particular project, forced her to write. It forced to put words to her painting. It forced her to put words to her photography. This is very important, because she came from a painting and drawing background, and those were her strengths. The expansion is that students were forced to add to their strengths. Reem could have easily taken another painting or drawing course. This course forced her to challenge herself. And that's why she told us she took the class …

Clément: … to leave her safe harbor. Yes, that's what this class does for many of our students.

Expansion of Instructors

Lelania: After Project 1, I saw the creation of ideas in a different way. I never thought about the construction of an image in the same way someone would construct an essay or story. I always thought photographs, specifically, were more spontaneous, but I discovered that students had to prepare their photographs beforehand the way an academic writer uses an outline, creates a thesis statement, and organizes supporting details. By discussing these design choices with students, I felt like I could help them visualize the image of a written story better than just having them brainstorm some ideas with paper and pen.

Clément: For me, I felt like a student again in a literature class. I was able to participate in discussions with students and share ideas about writing. My expansion out of teaching with you is that I stopped teaching with faculty who teach design.

Lelania: Also, you made a comment earlier that because you teach design, and you teach design in studios, that you don't have a chance to have these literature discussions.

Clément: Yes, in a design studio environment, this is not able to happen. The open space of the studio and the individual projects students are working on doesn't allow for group discussion very often. It's quite challenging to conduct a serious, in-depth, intellectual discussion in this open space. In our class, I was able to discover more about my students as they talked about their writing, which helped me understand their intent more when they wanted to design an image.

Lelania: So, we could say that combining both disciplines helped us see beyond what we know as writers or designers. I was able to use images to help my students reach the stories they wanted to tell …

Clément: … and I was able to read our students' stories and see how they could help shape and create a visual design that also told a story without words.

Conversation #2: Connection of Ideas

The second requirement for a successful interdisciplinary course is to foster a "concept which does not find a natural home in an established discipline" (Davies & Devlin, 2007, p. 10). Otherwise, why combine disciplines in the first place if we are not willing to think beyond traditional, academic conventions? Teaching an interdisciplinary course demands a willingness to challenge our pedagogy, rethink our set routines in the classroom, and develop a new relationship with our students. Even more important, it challenges us to create a curriculum that is new and innovative by finding connections between two disciplines that have never been taught together before.

For our second project, Identity Narrative and Self-Portrait, we wanted our students to deepen their understanding of themselves and their perceptions of the world. We wanted them to reveal parts of their lives that they kept hidden, or didn't even know existed, as they connected these experiences to the lives and cultures of others. At the same time, we wanted our students to understand, at a much greater level, the relationship between visuals and text that Project 1 only began to touch upon. Below is an excerpt of our assignment sheet, which details how students should prepare their narratives and self-portraits.

Project 2: Identity Narrative and Self-Portrait

All of us have our own unique identities that are created, shaped, and influenced by various forces in our lives. What significant moment influenced you? How did you become the person you are today? Decide on your audience and write a narrative in which you try to convince them of the importance of one of these influences in your life. To do this effectively, you need to describe elements from your own culture that have specifically influenced you and your identity.

In conjunction with your Identity Narrative, you are also being asked to compose a self-portrait. The self-portrait does not exist separate from the narrative, nor does the narrative exist without the self-portrait. The

self-portrait is an extension of how you see your identity that words alone cannot express. This project asks you to explore the relationship between images and words by thinking about the following questions: What can your image do for your narrative? What can your narrative do for your image?

By having to create two separate versions of themselves, our intent was to have students discover the "story within the story" of their identities as they found the link between their narratives and self-portraits. The search for this link, we hoped, would expose the depth of our students' identities shaped by languages and countries and cultures that far exceeded the limits of a monolingual, mono-cultural identity rarely found in the United Arab Emirates, and especially, American University of Sharjah.

Connection for Students: Yosr
(See Image 2 in Appendix 1-B)

Lelania: We truly wanted to convey how we can look at something separate, such as a photograph and a text, and then we look at them together, and we can see the complement or connection. When we first looked at Yosr's, we asked students to tell us what they thought was the meaning of Yosr's photograph. Here she is sitting in this dry, parched land and water is being poured into her cupped hands.

Clément: Students noticed the land was dry and damaged, with leftover concrete, plastic, and a horizon of buildings … the alteration of nature with human materials.

Lelania: But that's all we knew.

Clément: For me, the first message I got was "a land without water." At the same time, the mix of garbage and sand said something else.

Lelania: And that's what the other students got from Yosr's picture, as well. But then, we read her text! And there was so much more that added to her photograph. She wasn't just talking about damaged land. She was also talking about her relationship with her mother; she was talking about hope and disenchantment; she was talking about Egypt. And then we went back and looked at her photograph and we looked at what she wore. She made a conscious choice to wear the colors of the Egyptian flag, which was lost to me when I first looked at her self-portrait.

Clément: Yes, the text does not limit the image. Often, when you have a title for a piece of art, it can limit your interpretation of the work. And the text could have done the same. But we didn't ask students to take a picture and write about that picture.

Lelania: Exactly! Otherwise, Yosr could have just written, "This picture represents Egypt. This picture represents my sadness over my lost land." But how does this piece of writing not limit the audience?

Clément: Yosr takes me to another space. When I read her text, I'm not in that picture at all. And somehow, I'm enjoying that picture, but for another reason.

Lelania: And we guessed that she was talking about Egypt! She never mentioned it in her text. You asked her why she was wearing all white, which made us look back at her photograph, and we realized … "white, black, red" … So, if her title had been "Old Egypt" instead of "The Old Pools," that would have directed us too much.

Clément: But you know, this work is her talent. We cannot get credit for this. We can only get credit for setting up the situation for this to happen … for our students to be successful.

Connection for Instructors

Lelania: I didn't have knowledge about your discipline, and I didn't feel comfortable at times giving students guidance on visual design. It's only now, after two semesters of listening to you talk about your work, that I feel a sense of understanding and a confidence in helping my students beyond words. I never would have taken time out from my life to take a design course so I could help my students …

Clément: … but even that would not have worked …

Lelania: You're right. It wouldn't have! I wouldn't have applied what I learned from a design course as much to my writing because I wouldn't have learned design from the perspective of a writer. This is the essence of our connection: We learned how to teach each other's disciplines by observing how we taught them.

Clément: You showed me your world, and I showed you mine, and when we discovered each other's worlds, we realized they are not so different. We also began to understand how our disciplines worked—before, we just accepted them or rejected them (the structure of a story or the layout of an image) without understanding the intention of the artist.

Lelania: So, I only had one level of understanding …

Clément: … I would say an "emotional" response … and then you saw that we could have a "critical" response to each other's disciplines and show our students how to deconstruct each other's disciplines. I never had to show students how to look at the structure of a story before …

Lelania: … and I never had to show students how to "read" an image or construct the story of a photograph before … but by forcing ourselves

to learn each other's disciplines, I felt like I saw things through my students' eyes. I became more empathetic. I connected with them on their level as learners, and when I understand how my students feel, this helps me become a more effective teacher.

Clément: And that's how I was looking at this class, too: as a student and as an educator.

Empowerment of Self

Our expansion of knowledge and disciplinary connections did not magically occur just because we chose to create this course. We made a commitment to ourselves and to our students to make Designing Stories of Our Lives succeed. The time, effort, and newness of building a course without pre-established standards was often challenging and all-consuming. There were many moments throughout the year when we felt the weight of our high expectations, and sometimes, we even wondered how much we were truly impacting the lives of our students. But, we always overcame any doubts by maintaining a strong belief in the collaborative learning process and instilling the practice of constant reflection of our course outcomes. We also discovered, time and time again, how significant mutual understanding and respect for each other as educators propelled this course from a one-semester "idea" into a yearlong journey of unexpected revelations. We did not anticipate how much we would become stronger teachers when we originally sought to create a course that focused on students finding freedom through their own voices, their own stories. But we did. In fact, we created our *own* story of pedagogical discovery through the very stories of our students.

At the same time, we were able to witness our students' voices emerge in different forms of media. Their textual and visual revelations of their identities went through a series of phases ranging from fear to trepidation to joy, with the eventual discovery of new and potential ways of expressing themselves. Our hope, our intent, is for students to maintain this strong sense of self once they leave our classroom so that they can tell their varied stories to the world. With this last thought, we would like to share two of our student evaluations, which, we believe, express the pedagogical objectives of Designing Stories of Our Lives.

Mariam: I've learnt so much with integrating design and writing together and exploring so many things about myself that I didn't know were possible. If I could, I would take this course again because I think it's almost like a never ending journey of self-exploration, so there is always more to learn from both professors and classmates too. I don't recall being

bored once during this semester and both professors had something different to offer, which made the course even more dynamic and we learnt so much from each side, writing and design.

Mursal: I would take this course again because I felt that the whole semester was like a self-exploration trip. Like I went on this journey where I had to discover so many things about myself, some of which I didn't even know. What I particular loved about this course is how the writing assignments pushed me to really put my feelings and emotions on paper. I've never been the type to write things down; I usually like to keep them in my head.

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Appendix 1-A

Reem Alawdah: *Lemons*, layout, 2012. Original work in color.
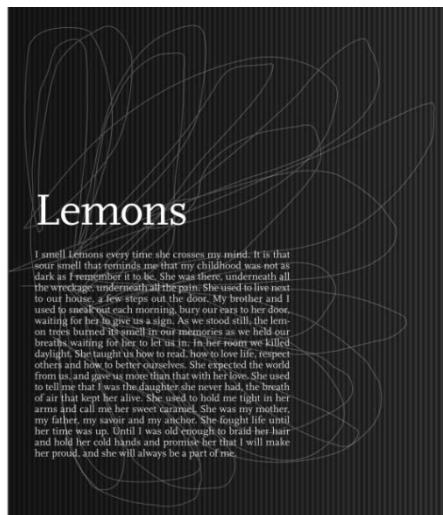
Booklet Text: I smell Lemons every time she crosses my mind. It is that sour smell that reminds me that my childhood was not as dark as I remember it to be. She was there, underneath all the wreckage, underneath all the pain. She used to live next to our house, a few steps out the door. My brother and I used to sneak out each morning, bury our ears to her door, waiting for her to give us a sign. As we stood still, the lemon trees burned its smell in our memories as we held our breaths waiting for her to let us in. In her room we killed daylight. She taught us how to read, how to love life, respect others and how to better ourselves. She expected the world from us, and gave us more than that with her love. She used to tell me that I was the daughter she never had, the breath of air that kept her alive. She used to hold me tight in her arms and call me her sweet caramel. She was my mother, my father, my savoir and my anchor. She fought life until her time was up. Until I was old enough to braid her hair and hold her cold hands and promise her that I will make her proud, and she will always be a part of me.