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The recontextualisation and cultural compatibility of student-centred education: the case of the United Arab Emirates

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Abstract
This article examines the purposeful introduction of the pedagogy of student-centred education (SCE) in one educational institution in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to consider its cultural compatibility. The study was undertaken in the largest higher education (HE) institution in the country where a key element of the institution's two strategic plans over a nine-year period was to blend traditional and innovative teaching methods, including student centred approaches, into programmes of study. Interpretative phenomenological analysis is used to analyse the perspectives of seven non-citizen, Western teachers, as they recontextualise their practice. Drawing on Heidegger, the study explores the philosophical nature and significance of place as a way of thinking about the world. Findings revealed aspects of the teachers' student-centred practice are challenging; the universal value of SCE is understood in relative rather than absolute terms with an overall need to diversify universal imaginings of pedagogy. Centralised curricula, high stakes final assessments and individualised performance management models ultimately determined learning experiences, leaving little room for any sustained inquiry into the recontextualisation of SCE. The study concludes that pedagogy is inescapably situated: practiced in terms of place orientated thinking. Transformation necessitates an epistemic institution where change is a public endeavour and teachers are positioned inside participatory processes with possibilities to renegotiate, rearticulate and resignify pedagogy.

Keywords Student-centred education · Learner-centred education · United Arab Emirates · Education reform · Teacher agency · Teacher co-agency

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Introduction

Student-centred education (SCE), also referred to as learner-centred education (LCE), has been positioned by international agencies and national governments as universally applicable, a key vehicle for wider sets of behaviours and values to enter the curriculum. It is well established that SCE is difficult to define (Bremner, 2020), described in simple terms as a progressivist, “hands on”, “problem solving”, “experiential” or “enquiry-based” approach, all of which are characterised by the autonomy and independence offered to the learner. Scholars attest to the power of SCE’s “cross-national attractiveness” (Schweisfurth, 2013 p. 2); SCE sits inside broader conceptions of quality education and inextricably linked to concepts of humanism and democracy in education whilst being simultaneously tied to more instrumental ideas of education including twenty-first century skills, human capital development and economic growth. The global diffusion of SCE however does not go uncontested, and questions persist around its cultural compatibility outside of the West.

Guthrie (2011) and Tabulawa (2013) articulate the crux of this argument: SCE is a pedagogy originating from a Western[1] humanist tradition of learning that is a Western imposition. The argument is again raised in more recent papers by Silova et al. (2021) and Rappleye (2022) who questions the universality of so-called “best practices”, with Silova et al specifically mentioning student-centred learning (p.2), due to it emerging in a Western paradigm and then understood and promoted from a Western perspective. Despite concerns around the Western provenance and packaging of SCE, it has gained credence in higher education internationally as an approach to teaching and learning (Schweisfurth, 2013). As higher education institutions in diverse global settings continue to consider policy and practice promoting quality education, with SCE as a global marker of that, the significance of this study is in returning to the question of the universality of SCE and its historical, religious and philosophical compatibility to the Gulf context.

This study presents a detailed exploration of efforts to recontextualise SCE into a college of higher education in the United Arab Emirates. In 2010, the UAE laid out its National Agenda 2021, including a “complete transformation of teaching methods” (UAE Government, 2010). A strategic objective in the Higher Colleges of Technology’s 2017 plan across all 16 campuses was to “blend traditional and innovative teaching methods” (Higher Colleges of Technology, 2017a), including references to SCE as part of their overall mission to “equip generations with knowledge, skills and competencies” (ibid p. 4). The study offers an examination of how SCE is understood and recontextualised through a qualitative study of the interactions and experiences of a small group of Western teachers as they attempt to resituate their practice in the UAE. The main research question “how is teaching in a student-centred way experienced by teachers and how are their pedagogies recontextualised” is driven by a wider imperative to understand the nature of a tension between the universal and the particular.

The Faure report, UNESCOs humanistic vision of education, issued in 1972 and reissued in 2013, set out the premise of the universal that “fresh progress is possible and desirable by making the highest possible level of knowledge available to the greatest possible number of learners”(p. 20) in a world where “constant developments in scientific discovery and innovations will make this requirement more urgent as each day passes” (p. 20); it

[1] The study uses the geopolitical term “Western” to denote countries with predominantly European culture, the teachers in the study were a multicultural group.

was a clear call for enhanced international co-operation and the value of an overall vision for education. Benhabib (2004), a contemporary political theorist, sets out our fate as late modern individuals "is to live caught in the permanent tug of war between the vision of the universal and the attachments of the particular" (p. 16) which is a useful conceptualisation to apply to the tensions involved in introducing a universal idea of education to the particular UAE context. The particular, Benhabib asserts, cannot be collapsed into the universal just as progress cannot be unleashed inside the bounded particular. Her argument, in the context of political science, is that progress necessarily emerges from a dynamic tension between the two. This idea of a dynamic tension is useful in the exploration of the evident tension between global agencies' universal ideas of quality education and the particular traditional ideas of the Gulf region.

The question of the compatibility of SCE to the UAE is explored using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). The study uses IPA which allows an intentionally nuanced and experiential approach to access the subjective meanings Western teachers ascribed to their experiences. The variables within this study offer a particular set of circumstances that tracks a Western originating pedagogy, incorporated into the strategic plan of a key institution in the UAE, hiring teachers trained in that same Western paradigm. This line intentionally seeks a Western perception and promotion of SCE to put cultural compatibility and therefore its universal applicability in high focus. As a researcher from a Western background, the intention is to offer a reflective and critical analysis of ways in which Western teachers' practice and underlying assumptions around SCE might emerge as incompatible to the UAE. The emic perspective of Gulf Arabs or those from Islamic education backgrounds would significantly enrich this discussion.

To develop and distinguish this idea of recontextualisation, the study draws on the philosophical ideas of Martin Heidegger (1889–1976), over his 53-year body of work, "his central focus was realising more and more profoundly that human *being* is always and already human *being* situated in place" (Malpas, 2006). The study offers a philosophical perspective of pedagogy through focusing on how teachers with their worldviews of pedagogies re-situate those in a particular cultural space. Heidegger's work is also useful here to understand how teachers' work can become an inauthentic way of being when there is a lack of situatedness and therefore possibility, or agency, to make meaning. The study is cognisant that the philosophy used to analyse the compatibility of SCE to non-Western contexts originates from the same tradition. This study's critical consideration of the universal and its relationship to the particular has wider significance to decolonial thought, those suspicious of universal ideas (Carney, 2022) and those interested in a pursuit of increased representation and dialogue at both global and grassroots levels.

Problematising a universal idea of SCE

SCE stems from constructivist and social constructivist theories of learning. Originating in Anglo-American, European and Russian literatures, these ideas were popularised in Western education circles in the 1960s and have since become more widespread. In student-centred models, learners construct meaning through building on what they already know, individually or within the social context. There is no homogenised understanding of the term "learner centred" or "student centred" but they are labelled as "progressive" in comparison to traditional, behaviourist or formalist models which have their roots in precolonial epistemology (Guthrie, 2011) as well as the

colonial European model of memorisation and rote learning (Ofori-Attah, 2006). In a 2000 categorisation of teacher professionalism, Hargreaves referred to pedagogical expertise as "becoming an ideological decision", where "unquestioned routines and traditions were being replaced by an ideological conflict between two great meta narratives of traditionalism and progressivism" (Hargreaves, 2000 p. 159). This binary portrayal however belies a broader web of learning theories, dialogic approaches and exploratory learning methods that have emerged from differing histories, belief systems and philosophies. They are not easily slotted onto a continuum between traditional and progressive and demands deeper consideration.

In 2016, the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for 2030 were adopted including Goal 4 to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all", arguably grown out of UNESCO's humanistic ontology (Elfert, 2016). In 2022, Rappleye set out an argument against the view that "leading international organisations are simply the 'composite' if its contributing member states views, ideas and demands"(Rappleye, 2022 p. 8) concluding that there are different ways of "learning to be" which are not represented at global level configurations of quality education. According to Vavrus (2009), scholars of African education have questioned the explicit promotion of social constructivism by international organisations with O'Sullivan (2004 cited in Vavrus, 2009 p. 304) expressing doubts as to whether it makes sense in countries with very different models of student-teacher interaction.

Guthrie's, 2011 book, entitled "The Progressive Education Fallacy in Developing countries", set out what he referred to as "the false premise that progressive enquiry teaching styles are necessary to promote intellectual enquiry"(Guthrie, 2011 pxxii), going on to claim that education reform "based on Western ideas of reform may not be contextually compatible for non-Western cultures and contain logical fallacies and cultural bias"(p. 3). Ubuntu pedagogy, for example, is seeing a revival as a transformative and decolonial approach to restore African indigenous values and cultures (Ngubane and Manyane, 2021) which might be considered an African perspective on a universal humanism (Elfert, 2016) whilst a reflection of SCE in China found resistance to SCE for philosophical reasons concluding "Western frameworks lack the conceptual tools to grasp the emic realities of teaching and learning in China"(Schweisfurth, 2013 p. 94). Both examples cover populations of billions, and it seems fair to say that any universal representations of quality characterising pedagogy should channel this rich diversity in addition to those from a Western humanistic tradition.

Much has been written about SCE in developing countries with less in the Gulf region and less still on higher education. Research from 2011 synthesising 72 articles on SCE in developing country contexts found the same message, "that LCE isn't working" (Schweisfurth, 2015 p. 3) in terms of full-scale policy changes or smaller scale interventions. Reasons put forward include unrealistic expectations, resource shortage, lack of appropriate training for teachers, large classes, high stakes assessments based on content and language difficulties in English making this type of informal, spontaneous instruction difficult. In the Gulf, resource shortage, teacher training and large class sizes are not a barrier to SCE; however, issues raised by authors around cultural compatibility do require consideration. It is worth noting that Guthrie (2011) does not dismiss progressivist techniques completely, proposing that focusing on higher level cognitive enquiry at tertiary level is, in fact, the most effective place to start.

Education reform in the Gulf region

The traditional classrooms of the Gulf and the wider region have a historic emphasis on religious instruction, memorisation and rote learning: traditionally valued in Islam. Didactic styles transitioned from early forms of education into more formal education, conducted by Arab scholars from around the region (Alhebsi et al., 2015). Education became semi-organised in the early twentieth century with the first school opening. More modern education systems were established in the mid-twentieth century drawing from regional influences including the Kuwaiti curriculum and the Egyptian model, themselves thought to be an impost from the colonial period although it is argued that formalism has its roots in traditional, precolonial epistemology (Guthrie, 2011). According to Alhebsi et al., early iterations of education have left "remnants which still exist within the culture and are evident in modern day society", concluding "Islam continues to fortify didactic practice throughout the UAE and remains integral to the educational structure"(p. 4-5). It is worth emphasising the speed of education development in the UAE; for example, post-secondary education was only established in 1976. Thus, in just 45 years, the UAE went from no post-secondary education to a wealth of public and private universities and colleges substantially achieved by transferring educational models from elsewhere, often referred to as policy borrowing and lending (Steiner-Khamsi & Waldow, 2012). It is only relatively recently that the UAE has taken active control over its own education sector which is now run and managed by Emiratis. The "Global Education Industry" (GEI) is "embedded in all stages of policy making, delivery and monitoring in the Gulf", and revolves around the selling of "best global practices" (Mohammed & Morris, 2019 p. 1). Donn and Al Manthri argue that as purchasers of "First World products", Arab Gulf States are buying into inevitable contradictions (Donn & Al Manthri, 2010 p. 13) claiming that this shift has reshaped and reoriented education towards corporate and consumer arrangements and question the ability then of these countries (the purchasers) to develop their own way to indigenous knowledge-based educational development. Despite massive investment over a significant period, there appears to have been limited progress towards advancing an idea across the region of quality education. At the 2009 Gulf Comparative Education Symposium (GCES), it was identified that "a recurring concern amongst participants was the lack of substantive progress on the education front despite various educational initiatives" (Tabari, 2014 p. 7).

More recently, a 2016 report by the Gulf Financial House (GFH) on the GCC education sector noted that there is a willingness to spend for quality education with government impetus to spend for improving the quality of higher education as part of a long-term vision with increased private sector participation and Public Private Partnerships. The report concluded that "quality education remains an issue in many of the GCC nations" (GCC Education, 2016 p. 4). Kirk argues that development is constrained and "innovativeness is a concept that does not really apply to the Gulf region, as educational structures remain top-down in terms of management and change" (Kirk, 2014 p. 82). A report from within the region, by the Mohammed bin Rashid School of Government (MBRSG), recognised this and identified "vertical relationships" in the Gulf where "institutions from the West have taken a lead in designing, shaping and overseeing their branches in the Gulf, which needs to be rebalanced in terms of a more horizontal model" (Warner & Jonathan Burton, 2017 p. 14).

In 1995, Smith set out unintended costs of pursuing instrumental outcomes through a performance rated, data-driven model of governance which included a tunnel vision focused on quantifiable phenomena at the expense of all others, measure fixation and

misrepresentation as well as general organisational ossification due to excessively rigid systems of performance management (Smith, 1995). Decades later, a 2017 report was commissioned by UNESCO, named "teaching to the test" and "narrowing the curriculum" as well-established (unintended and unexpected) results of accountability systems that aim for instrumental outcomes. The authors stated that these unintended and unexpected behaviours amongst educators "appear so frequently in the literature, we wonder whether they can be considered as 'unintended' or 'unexpected' any longer" (Verger & Parcerisa, 2017 p. 30). The UNESCO report went on to call for further research "to understand how education accountability systems can be designed in order to minimise these types of undesirable behaviours" and "contribute to promoting more expressive responses, including the development of innovation within the curriculum and in pedagogic terms" (Verger & Parcerisa, 2017 p. 30) the latter of which this research set out to achieve.

Smith's set of consequences were evident in a report by the Mohammed Bin Rashid School of Government (MBRSG) on the role of the teacher in government schools in the UAE which concluded that there was a need to revise the existing paradigm of teacher training and professional development, moving away from traditional models of training towards a more situated one. A more constructivist approach to teacher learning was said to be required in order to empower teachers and build capacity to enable the reform goals of the National Agenda 2021 to be met. A qualitative study by Tabari in 2014 of Emirati and non-Emirati Arab teachers' responses to education reform in the Emirate of Ras Al Khaimah in the UAE concluded that "implementing reforms without consulting teachers and without their participation is unlikely to result in substantive change" (Tabari, 2014 p. 25). In 2007, a case study on school reform and the role of leadership in the UAE concluded that "a fresh blend of theory and praxis unique to the UAE will need to be developed", going on to identify the most immediate challenge to that is the ability to "engage a critical mass of current professionals and enabling them to learn and create learning organisations" (MacPherson et al., 2007 p. 60). The study acknowledged that the purchase of international best practice alone was far from enough, and that education professionals "required social constructivist pedagogies to sustain coherence and authenticity" (ibid p. 74). What these studies have in common is adding to the persistent call for a reconsideration of a model of global governance, away from results-based management which is characterised by the limited role that teachers themselves have in defining the nature of their work. Ideas converge here that links pedagogic transformation to the existence of teacher-centred practice.

The UAE context

The UAE has a bold, long-term vision for its future economy; their reform agenda supports the transition from an oil-based economy to a knowledge-based economy and is designed fundamentally to replace one form of wealth creation with another. A focal point of the knowledge-based economy is science, technology and industry and the seven targeted sectors in the UAE include renewable energy, transport, education, health, technology, water and space (UAE Government, 2019) with education positioned as the engine of for this growth. At the end of the reform period, this study captures an insight into teachers' experiences of a working for one key stakeholder in this transformation, positioning itself as the

"largest human capital provider in the UAE[2]", The Higher Colleges of Technology (Higher Colleges of Technology, 2017b p. 2).

To align with the National Vision 2021, a two-part, nine-year reform programme for all 16 of their campuses across the UAE was initiated, part one running from 2012 to 2017 and part two 2017to 2021. The first strategic plan entitled "An ambition for more: Going the distance through Learning by Doing" was "dedicated to fostering a student-centred learning environment" (Higher Colleges of Technology, 2012 p. 4). The second strategic plan HCT 2.0 targeted twenty-first century skills specifically with one goal setting out the aim to "blend traditional and innovative teaching methods to ensure student-centred learning" (Higher Colleges of Technology, 2017a). No further definition of student-centred learning was offered in the documents besides a general coupling of it to practical skills, knowledge production, innovation and creativity. Focusing on the experiences of teachers during the reform period, conducting interviews between 2018 and 2019, the study set out to learn more about this blending of pedagogies by gathering the experiences of teachers in the classroom.

The vision to "blend traditional and innovative teaching methods" rightfully acknowledges the legacy of teaching methods in the region whilst aiming to stimulate divergence. References in both of HCT's strategic plans included *Learning by Doing* in the 2012–2017 plan, replaced in the 2017–2021 plan with a more broadly defined *student-centred learning environments* and *ubiquitous learning,* including more abstract concepts such as *innovation, inclusive* and *immersive learning*.

Method: interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA)

IPA was developed in the mid-1990s as a qualitative psychological approach which could capture peoples' experiences of engaging with the world. Generating experiential, qualitative data, it is founded on theoretical ideas of phenomenology[3] and hermeneutics[4]. It is distinct in its combination of psychology, interpretative and ideographic aspects. It is psychological in its commitment to a person "as a cognitive, linguistic, affective and physical being and assumes a chain of connection between people's talk and their thinking and emotional state" (Smith & Osbourn, 2007 p. 54). Moving pedagogy from one professional environment to another is the phenomenon under examination in the context of a single institution.

The data set comprised of seven in-depth interviews where respondents narrated their experiences. Teachers were selected through a snowballing technique which sought a diversity of nationalities with experience of SCE. The goal of this study was to capture both teachers' experiences of professionalism and the meanings participants ascribed to their experiences. Seven interviews were conducted with teachers who had between 2 and 17 years of professional experience. The names of all the teachers who took part were changed to allow anonymity. The sample represents a range of teachers in the region who are considered to be "native speakers" of English: Matt from Australia, Caroline from the USA, Fares from Canada, Omar from England, Dave from NZ, Elizabeth from England

[2] With 23,509 students enrolled in 2016–2017 (Higher Colleges of Technology, 2017b)

[3] An approach that concentrates on the study of consciousness and the objects of direct experience.

[4] The branch of knowledge that deals with interpretation.

and Hannah from South Africa/England. The interviews were recorded and lasted around 90 minutes. Data is inductive and collected to form "a composite description of the essence of the experience for all individuals" (Cresswell, 2013 p. 76). It is not a discursive attempt to give objective reasons and arguments for objective positions; rather, it is interested in the subjective meanings people ascribe to events. The steps for phenomenological data analysis are generally similar for all phenomenologists (Moustakas and Polkighorne in Cresswell, 2013 p. 83). A three-step approach of coding, developing themes and then identifying significant statements from these themes was followed. The themes derived from interviews aim to capture a distinctive representation of a way of thinking or talking about an issue (Flowers et al., 1998 p. 411); in this case, the broad issue was that of professionalism and the themes emerging across the interviews were agency, regulation, pedagogy and community learning. Parts of the analysis are presented below with brief extracts selected to both exemplify the themes and the divergence and convergence across them.

Analysis

The analysis is framed through two concepts: the first is Heidegger's care structure to offer a philosophical view of teacher agency and co-agency and the second is the Heideggerian approach towards understanding how the worldview of teachers and students differed[5], to understand how that impacted student centred pedagogy.

Heidegger's care structure and teacher-centred practice

Central throughout the interviews were accounts of teachers who cared about teaching and students. This overall concept of "care" is a central concept in Heidegger's philosophy, which he outlined in his 1927 work, "Being in Time". The scope of what Heidegger means by care is wide and captures what is most important to a human being. His philosophy places "care for" or "concern for" others[6] at the heart of the structure of our being, giving us meaning. It has a reality that is interpreted in terms of three temporal dimensions: future (possibilities), past (facticity) and present (fallenness), which he terms "The care structure". Heidegger set out our temporal existence in time as a state of "being ahead of ourselves". In other words, what is most important to a human being is our future aims. To be deeply engaged in understanding our own reality, of the culture we were born into, to realise the tasks we have fallen into and to live for oneself and radically realise all the possibilities you have, according to Heidegger, is to live authentically (Horrigan-Kelly et al., 2016 p. 3). If you are unable to embody (future) possibilities, for Heidegger, you are living inauthentically. To understand the over-arching theme of limited agency that ran across the interviews, using Heidegger's three elements of the care structure, equates an idea of agency to a potentiality for being. Using this understanding of a totality of being that the care structure attempts to represent allows a threefold understanding of teachers' everyday experiences of "being-in-the-world"[7] which is discussed below.

[5] Heidegger understands worldview existentially, as a way of "being in the world" which is situated.

[6] Sorge in German means "care for" or "concern for" (others) translated as "care" in English.

[7] In German, "Dasein" translated to mean "human existence".

Facticity

The teachers had all actively pursued a subject specialism within the backgrounds they were thrown[8] into, acquiring knowledge and experience and had moved to teach in the UAE for varying reasons. All the teachers had been oriented towards implementing their (past) experiences to develop their courses, and five of them had clear ideas around implementing SCE. There was however an idea that they could not legitimately participate in meaningful change because the role that their knowledge and skills had in that change was not reciprocal. This was exemplified by Caroline's description of her: "expertise not valued", feeling "demotivated", "deskilled", "unprofessional", "cynical" and her knowledge "not being capitalised". Dave said courses were "locked down" and staff "not being challenged to grow". Matt summarised that the college had taken "intrinsic motivation and made it extrinsic"; people felt they were not being treated like professionals.

Fallenness

Matt, with his managerial experiences, articulated the present situation that teachers found themselves in, "it is not individuals who are the problem, but that the roles within the system are too tightly defined". Caroline talked about "barriers impossible to get past". Heidegger describes this as a "fallenness": realising the tasks we fall into due to social expectations and a herd mentality. With decisions about what to teach at all campuses made centrally, decisions on how to teach were indirectly impacted. Teachers spoke about ways in which they were inextricably tied to curriculum and assessment which felt "closed down". This evoked significant responses from everyone because it interfered with their capacity to make meaning of their professional life in terms of both their subject specialism and their pedagogy, giving a sense somewhat of a meaning crisis. Some tried and were frustrated, others like Caroline "gave up", Omar "felt like a number" and Fares "individually monitored" which links to Biesta's description of a way of being where teachers are "specimens of a more encompassing order" (Biesta, 2008 p. 21).

This phenomenon is not peculiar to this study and evident in the literature on de-professionalism. The individualised nature of the teachers' work and contractual obligations cast them as the architects of their own renewal, resulting in performativity and self-surveillance set out by Ball (2008). Performance management processes were something all teachers spoke about linked to the themes of agency and regulation. The teachers spoke in terms of it stifling development rather than facilitating it. According to Morley (2008), "management micropolitics" inside institutions can be lagging behind or even dissonant with the macro policies that aim to engineer a transformation (p. 116). In this case, the development of pedagogy was dissonant with the micropolitical strategies used in curriculum and assessment development. The processes within the institutional strategic plans and performance management cycles bonded meaning in a manner that devitalised processes of change by diminishing the possibility for the teachers to connect to a more dynamic idea of pedagogy. From a wider perspective, the study adds to a well-established body of research on the de-professionalising effects of performance cultures (Ball, 2003; Ball, 2008).

[8] Heidegger calls this "Geworfenheit", an idea of being arbitrarily born into a family, culture and moment in history.

For the purpose of this study, using Heidegger's distinction between authenticity and inauthenticity is useful to gain an insight into the interviewees' well-being. Living according to only the past and present dimensions of the care structure is to live inauthentically. What had become delimiting to the teachers' authenticity and driven out possibilities was the concept of the accountable, measurable and compliant individual. The interviewees all spoke about how some of the processes had become inimical to human well-being: "I'm not sure what that does to a teacher", "no wonder we all have mental health problems". Caroline reported being "isolated and anxious" and Omar "measured individually" with "no-one being interested" in his work. This climate resulted in strong feelings including many being "demotivated", Fares "demoralised" and Omar "untrusted" with Caroline "having to react" and "having no emotional connection". Environments of "performativity" (Ball, 2008) are not conducive to reform programmes which aim to develop the higher order competencies of communication, critical thinking, creativity and collaboration[9] that modernising reform programmes seeking "twenty-first century skills" desire.

Existentiality (possibilities)

The closing down of the possibility to conceive of, or enact change in relation to curriculum, assessment and pedagogic practice was a common experience identified by *all* the interviewees. The inability of teachers to have any critical or creative input in shaping or contextualising their courses resulted in a sense of mediocrity. The teachers converged around an idea that what had been eroded, both collectively and individually, was their ability to act on possibilities to widen what education in their subject area might mean. The care structure can be used to understand these subjective experiences of de-professionalism: without possibilities to conceive of, make meaning and enact their own change, teachers' work became inauthentic. With no avenues of possibility open to them, it was this positioning, as a means to an already defined end, which was demoralising and de-professionalising. The performance management tool was a blunt instrument and had been unable to mediate the dynamics of pedagogic change.

This notion of possibility also revealed what the teachers understood their agency to mean which was threefold: cognitive agency, beliefs (about education) and participatory processes. Teachers included a cognitive element to their understanding of teacher agency linked to an expectation of having judgement and control over their work. Common examples were linked to perceptions of the static curriculum and assessment. This lack of possibility to make meaning and enact their own change meant their perceptions of SCE or wider ideas of twenty-first century skills in their classrooms and departments had been left largely unexamined and their existing ideas had not been recontextualised. Powerfully converging across all the interviews was a sense of search for possibility wider than the individual, the transformation of the individual and the transformation of the institution emerged in the data as two inseparable processes. The way some spoke about their professional identity was relational, to serve something transcending the separate self, illustrated by Hannah talking about a "calling", connected by Omar and Fares to Islamic values, expressed by Caroline as of some kind of active "sharing" and "making a difference" and by Dave as "a call of duty". This can be understood as a belief in the value of a sense of communal being. The teachers wanted possibilities to be part of creative groups

[9] The 4 c's as defined by the WEF 2015

to actively "form a collective vision", "develop our potential as staff", "aim our energies" [in the department] and "generate a creative dynamic in the department". For this group of teachers, agency included a belief the value of environments, with collective spaces for *being* from which creative practice and pedagogic developments might emerge. The partial view of non-citizen teachers required clear channels for the teachers to access the historical and socio-cultural perspectives of the wider community. Communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) were not enough here for the non-citizen teachers, what was required was something additional and wider, more akin to communities of provision model (Rix, 2019) involving public, community engagement, and better placed to unpick the cultural, linguistic and historic circumstances of the students. The idea stemming from the teachers around transforming participation rather than transforming education is an important distinction. Within this, there is a sense of being without constraint which involves both potentiality and actuality.

The nuances required of developing pedagogy in the UAE context, as it was tied to the instrumentality of the strategic plan, did not allow a dynamic tension which might have allowed more diverse responses and configurations of pedagogy. The teachers' lived experiences exemplified how this eroded individual agency and processes of co-agency. Reified targets around *what* to learn and *how* to be assessed, limited options on the pedagogy of *how to learn,* resulting in an impoverished form of professionalism. A focus on propositional (or abstracted) knowledge alongside the quantitative approaches of the performance management methodologies found that the design of the strategic objectives closely twinned with the measurement metrics for success left little room in between for ecologies of meaning making to evolve. It was this top-down mandated model of reform that led to the "inevitable contradictions" identified by Kirk as a feature of the Gulf region (Kirk, 2014 p. 78) which in this study emerged paradoxically as the difficultly of developing innovative pedagogy in a reform that was seeking to develop innovative pedagogy.

SCE in the UAE

Perspectives of Western teachers were targeted to gain an insight into teachers' experiences of recontextualising SCE pedagogy in a culture with a different worldview to their own. How SCE pedagogies change the traditional role of the teacher, the relationship between teacher and student and the nature of dialogue in the classroom are important to consider. These elements powerfully challenge alternative worldviews of how classrooms and teachers operate. The assemblage of pedagogies promoted in the second strategic plan was not further defined, unpacked or in development in any systematic sense within the experiences the teachers spoke about. Fares perceived some pedagogic strategies as reduced to "buzz words" and "products" implying surface, shallow meanings around them.

To support an analysis of how SCE was practiced in the UAE by Western teachers, the study uses Mendenhall et al.'s seven minimum standards of learner-centred education (Mendenhall et al., 2015 p. 98). These minimum standards contained significant overlaps: atmosphere and conduct and dialogue will be discussed first and combined. The next three elements, engaging lessons, lessons build on existing knowledge and relevant accessible curriculum (in accessible language), will be discussed separately. The final two "a curriculum based on skills and attitude outcomes" as well as "content and assessment grounded in the principles of the other six" will be combined and discussed last.

Atmosphere and conduct, use of dialogue

One way that the atmosphere of the learning space manifests is through dialogue, not only in terms of the amount of it and who it is between but levels of formality which also pertains to conduct. The dialogue that many of the teachers had described in their student-centred classroom emerged largely within project-based learning (PBL) with the teacher acting as facilitator. The idea of "teacher as facilitator" both changes and challenges the authority of teachers' roles in a way that some practitioners from the Gulf and other non-Gulf Arabs did not find compatible with their own philosophy around the role and status of a teacher in society. According to Hannah, it was perceived as "looking chaotic to the untrained eye" and Elizabeth converged saying "management don't understand it". There were concerns that this reflected negatively on the teacher as "not having control" or "having no respect". There was an idea that others thought "no learning was taking place at all" with some students asking "if any of this was going to be tested". Omar considered it "a risk" to practice. Perceptions that other teachers and management saw their classrooms as "chaotic" and "disordered" was a clear cultural misunderstanding which led most of the teachers reluctant to experiment although there were no concerns that students had that same perception. Cultural conventions for showing and giving respect may well be incompatible to the very informal PBL styles of the teachers in the study but not incompatible to PBL approaches per se. The biggest concern within this was misunderstanding and misinterpretation between teachers and management rather than the students who were perceived as open and mostly positive depending on proximity to exams.

Almost all the teachers had assumed that the existing pedagogy was purely didactic and based on behaviourist models and mostly dismissed it off hand as "not relevant" and "outdated". Putting multinational and multicultural teachers together did not automatically lead to building any shared repertoire. Teachers encountered pre-existing practices, but there was little opportunity to relate or map these together through formal or informal networks and they were "not aligned in any shape or form" according to Dave. In reference to a multi-national staff, Elizabeth thought that "not everyone was on board" with "the paradigm shift". Invisible to, or misunderstood by, the teachers were the range of repertoires within dialogic approaches which range from lecture to more scaffolded dialogue with the teacher taking greater or lesser roles within that. Matt, who had witnessed a dialogic style, had gained an appreciation for it when during a lesson observation he saw the close questioning of a student to uncover a wider misconception held by the group. Language is culturally informed and in-depth teacher/student exchanges are well documented in dialogic traditions. Student-centred education is itself on a continuum between constructivist and social constructivist approaches. As such, student centredness manifested in diverse ways in classroom contexts from individual enquiry to collective discovery and formal to informal leading to unique culturally determined atmospheres developing in classrooms.

Schweisfurth, referring to The Gambia, observes, "the relationships of equality demanded by SCE mean that deference for elders may restrict open dialogue and critique" (Schweisfurth, 2013 p. 81). The local flavour of critical thinking and communication conventions used to express or resolve points of disagreement were undoubtedly unclear to the teachers in the study. The approach to critical thinking within an Islamic tradition was not understood and it is an assumption to interpret this as "restricted". Teachers spoke about a mismatch between some teachers' ideas of critical thinking and discussion of sensitive political, socio-cultural and religious views in class discussions. The nature of the dialogic culture of the Emirates, and how teachers and students negotiate power sharing,

open dialogue and critique, is subject to the protocols of a culture where the importance of reverence for elders, regard for religious beliefs and respectful communication cannot be over-estimated. This area was obscured from the teachers in the study. The understanding and interpretation of the purpose and nature of criticality by Western teachers was limited by their worldview.

Engagement

Open to interpretation is *how* learners are engaged in learning, and in this case, how teachers are engaged in developing their own learning. Omar was part of professional conversations with his departmental colleagues, and he clearly located his creative aspirations in the realm of these relationships and practice. He saw his departmental colleagues as the frontier from where any dynamic practice would emerge. The other teachers were disengaged reporting that SCE was "squashed", "gone", "misunderstood", "not aligned" and "not shared". A transformation of participation is essential because of proliferating teaching methods that go beyond simple binary understandings of teacher-centred vs. student-centred methods which was what the target of blending traditional and innovative teaching methods was trying to achieve.

Learning challenges and builds on existing knowledge

The nature, origins and scope of existing knowledge are open to interpretation here. In SCE, knowledge is repositioned away from an idea of education as exclusively involving the teacher transmitting it, towards the learner constructing it. The modern education system envisaged in the UAE National Vision involves a combination of both. The interviews exposed that the policy phrases across the Strategic plan, and measured in Goal 5 , such as *innovation labs*, *twenty-first century skills*, *quality*, i*nnovation* and *best practice*, had not, in the reality of teachers, been understood with a unified meaning. Despite small class sizes and well-trained teachers, key requirements of SCE, the opportunity to build on what was already known by students inside the classroom and innovate, was limited due to the rigid curriculum and assessments' preference for propositional knowledge. The overriding belief of the nature of knowledge as being "transmitted" had not fundamentally changed and it was this that did not allow any room for pedagogy to develop because the teachers and students were focusing on the type of knowledge that was needed to pass the exam.

Curriculum relevant to learner's lives and future needs, in accessible language

Emirati students are now taught in English across all levels of education. According to the teachers, there were general low levels of literacy in standard Arabic, with students using the Khaliji dialect, on top of the struggles of Arabic mother tongue speakers learning in English as a Foreign Language (EFL). This represents a complex language dynamic. Rix (2015) highlights a historical legacy in education initiatives that positions print literacy as "a fundamental social need" which "overtook other communication tools" (p. 9). This assumption manifested in curricula leaning towards a print form of communication (in English) which doubly disadvantaged the students, all of whom lived within the oral tradition of the UAE. Hannah mentioned that competence in the first language was masked from the monolingual teachers and interrupted the ability of many students to engage as

they did not have the level of reading literacy, in either language or oracy in English. There was no policy to use translanguaging[10] in the classroom. Perhaps as a result, all teachers mentioned rampant plagiarism with use of essay writing websites and endemic cheating in exams. The use of English and print literacy led to a cultural exclusivity which pushed aside multimodal approaches. This could be said to be a failure to recognise the "different emergent paths, local priorities and imperatives" (Rix, 2015 p. 10) within the community of students. Guthrie's cultural bias (2011 p. 3) and disadvantage are clear here. With fluency in English representing a goal in itself, the gap between English competence and any advance in knowledge was problematic.

A curriculum based on skills and attitude outcomes as well as content: assessment follows these principles and not purely content driven

Curricula were narrowed and based around projects, centralised "quizzes" and a final, centralised exam. Within project-based learning elements of the modules, there was some scope for SCE to develop; however, the overall dominance of centralised assessments left "no-time for participation" according to Matt. This is well documented with Schweisfurth referring to introducing SCE approaches in a context of high-stakes, content-driven, centralised examinations as "a spectacular own goal" (2013 p. 149). It is this last assessment category that severely limited the development of other six standards. Assessment of key competencies within the twenty-first century skills is undoubtedly a challenge for traditional assessment methods which were created for narrowed learning outcomes.

Discussion

The UAE National Vision 2021 targeted "a complete transformation of the current education system and teaching methods"(UAE Government, 2010), with one significant HE institution planning to "blend traditional and innovative teaching methods through using student-centred approaches"(Higher Colleges of Technology, 2017a). The study set out to determine the cultural compatibility of SCE to the UAE. Through a detailed examination of seven teachers' perspectives, the study found that SCE was either not used or was used as a project-based learning bolt-on, aspects of which raised some questions about compatibility.

Using Mendenhall's 7 minimum standards to identify student-centred practice revealed a complex picture. Teacher/student relationships for the seven teachers emerged differently but unproblematically with students perceived to be responsive to informal teaching approaches, arguably due to them being well practiced in intercultural exchanges, living in the diverse society of the UAE. According to the teachers, there were general incompatibilities around salient areas including the language demands within SCE not matching the language ability of the students not operating in their mother tongue and the use of critical thinking to advance thinking around some topics was not understood by teachers. Epistemological ideas around the nature, origin and scope of knowledge as they related to centralised curricula and how that connected to the innovation targets had not been well conceived and as such were not understood by the teachers. This was linked to perhaps the most significant

[10] Translanguaging is when bilinguals access the different linguistic features or various modes of the languages they speak in the classroom, in order to maximize potential for communication.

aspect which was that SCE was incompatible with the curricula and assessment demands for propositional knowledge. The project-based learning approaches used by the teachers found atmosphere and conduct and informal dialogue emerging differently. The seven Western teachers in the study appeared as anomalies in the wider system and they perceived the atmosphere and conduct within their classrooms as being viewed with disapproval. It was clear that dialogue was used differently across classrooms with other teachers misunderstanding student-centred approaches and the teachers in the study misunderstanding more formal dialogic approaches. As such, the teachers themselves did not understand the continuum and blending of traditional and innovative methods as referred to in the forward-looking vision of the strategic plan. The teachers in the study were not able to fully practice SCE resulting in the question of SCE compatibility being only partially explored. The institutional strategic plan that envisaged teachers adding SCE to their repertoire and building a continuum of approaches had also paradoxically put in place individualising and isolating performance management processes and outcomes which stymied the evolution of *any* united institutional approach to pedagogy. Additionally, a centralised approach to curricula and assessment which prioritised propositional and procedural knowledge severely limited the development of SCE and/or indeed any generative, alternate pedagogies.

The impact of the instrumental ideology at the core of the strategic plan twinned with the performance management process emerged for the teachers in the study on a spectrum from limiting to damaging, leading to little development of any pedagogy. This study raises a philosophical challenge to a core belief within results-based management approaches and performance cultures that is that we should justify ourselves and our institutions in this way. The study demonstrates that pedagogic development requires a management approach that promotes and cultivates a different type of conduct, a way of being which allows an unfolding of autonomy, repositioning the individual, not making demands to act or react, but allowing a space to explore a state of being. This is a perspective of knowing where advancement is positioned as both individual and mutual. In practical terms, this would promote a move to more integrated performance models which would include horizontal forms of accountability: professional, participatory and network (West et al., 2011) or what Sachs (2015 p. 422) broadly refers to as developmental accountability with its necessary subjectivities and subtleties. Such models translate what have become private, individualised concerns under individualised performance management systems, into participatory public concerns.

Conclusion

This study has discussed how a dominant conception of SCE has emerged out of the genealogy of Western thought. Introduced inside a results-based management system, the study found that SCE, reduced to a policy transfer of "what works", a frozen representation of a Western humanist perspective, was not universally applicable to the particular UAE context. Pedagogy is so intimately tied to nuanced human behaviours and values that the development of it, as part of any education reform, is only possible once the finitude of any purely propositional perspective of SCE is acknowledged. Heidegger recognised the finitude of all historical and cultural interpretation; knowing is always bound up with the world as a practical and continuous activity; as such, our way of thinking and valuing the world is tied to a worldview which is inescapably situated.

Herein lies the dynamic between the universal and the particular which has been the focus of this research around the recontextualisation of SCE to the UAE cultural context

and implies two potential pathways for the development of culturally compatible pedagogy. Firstly, as pedagogic development *requires* participatory processes, SCE can only emerge where there is scope for unique configurations and iterations of SCE's nuanced components inside localised discourse communities: here, the universal value of SCE is understood in relative rather than absolutist terms. In a second possible pathway, the premise that SCE can contextualise is explored within those communities and rejected, with progress following the direction of an improvement within existing pedagogic traditions.

In 2017, Labaree wrote a summary for a book entitled "Knowledge and the study of education: an international exploration". Within the book chapters, he identified a core tension running though international education: a narrowing of the educational vision (Labaree, 2017). What has been found in this study affirms this narrowing and the applicability of this to higher educational institutions globally. The introduction of new pedagogic approaches to a particular context requires careful planning, wherein returning to Benhabib's (2004) overarching call for an essential tension between the universal and the particular offers us guidance on how to proceed by offering a commitment to both. Properly situated teachers must be free to respond to the needs of context to dynamically renegotiate, rearticulate and resignify pedagogy into what she terms "democratic iterations" and it is this dynamic tension that drives development. Progress in developing pedagogy requires these two elements: animating principles, drawn from a wider pool of ideas, and patterns of participation. A progressive education institution aiming to develop pedagogy to further drive intellectual enquiry would necessarily prioritise the co-agency of teachers inside participatory processes above any set outcomes and strategically avoid narrow, technocratic approaches. This calls for further research, debate and action on alternatives to results-based management, to manage a situatedness that can also account for and drive progress. Notwithstanding, the study reinforces the need for a greater commitment from global agencies to a reimagining of the universal to diversify current international conceptions of quality education.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest The author declares no competing interests.

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