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# Globalization and Possibilities for Intercultural Awareness: Multimodal Arabic Culture Portfolios at a Catholic University

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## Chapter 13

# Globalization and Possibilities for Intercultural Awareness: Multimodal Arabic Culture Portfolios at a Catholic University

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### ABSTRACT

*This case study explores the teaching and learning of Arabic at one Catholic university campus, with a focus upon the complex interactions between language and culture in a postmodern globalized context. Specifically, it examines the use of “multimodal culture portfolios” as a means to engage students both linguistically and culturally in classroom and community discourses. Through their interactions and co-construction of knowledge with other participants, these students are led to think about the multiple communicative contexts that are shaping and being shaped by them. Data collection was conducted through survey questionnaires and students’ responses to the assigned culture portfolio. The participants were made up of students enrolled in first year Arabic courses during the 2012 spring semester. The purpose of this exploratory case is to attempt to understand students’ investments in Arabic and their cultural knowledge of the Arab world pre and post their enrollment in the Arabic courses. It also seeks to understand their socialization into the culture assignment and the main challenges they faced in accessing, interacting with, and reflecting upon cultural aspects related to the Arab world. This study’s findings are significant for enriching the general conversation on intercultural proficiency in classroom discourse, curricular decisions, roles and challenges of teachers, and the involvement in target language communities, particularly in less commonly taught languages such as Arabic.*

### INTRODUCTION

The multiplicity of communication channels brought about by multiculturalism, globalization, and multimodalism has profoundly affected both language education in general and world language education in particular. In what he called “domesticating the foreign,” Lo Bianco (2014) argues that “teachers

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of different languages need to make multilingual and multicultural realities...central notions in [the] curriculum” (p. 312), especially if they are to accommodate such communicative shifts. Furthermore, he questions the concept of “foreignness” (p. 313) in foreign or world language education, and claims that globalization has shattered the old order of nations, national languages, and “culturally authentic language” (p. 314). It is thus imperative to rethink how we prepare students to participate in this highly globalized and culturally pluralistic world.

Given the increase in globalization and the explosion of communication technologies, there have been many productive debates on the changes and challenges in language education (Cope & Kalantzis, 2010; Kramersch, 2007, 2005; and Kumaravadivelu, 2003). In critiquing national language education policy in the United States and its politically charged ideologies, Blake and Kramersch (2007) referred to the irony of calls to encourage learning world languages as part of the “internationalization” (p. 247) of higher education while the arguments clearly point to the politically charged relations between language learning and the government’s need to face “continual threats of terrorism” (p. 247). In the case of Arabic, Gerwin and Osborn (2005) argue against the dangers of aligning language education to such claimed threats:

*Japan’s attack on Pearl Harbor provides a compelling historical analogy for the September 11 attack itself...The war on terrorism...is open ended and murky on many scores, but the enemy does have a face. The enemy is Muslim, the enemy is Middle Eastern, the enemy is an Arab. (Gerwin & Osborn, 2005, p. 106)*

Because of the political nature of language education, Arabic as a foreign language has inherited the pros and cons of attempts to interpret globalization’s impact on the fate of the field (Abbadi, 2014, 2013). As a result, a widespread enthusiasm for teaching and learning Arabic has been reinvigorated (Allen, 2007; Leeman & Martinez, 2007; Ryding, 2006; Kramersch, 2005; Allen, 2004; Byrnes et al., 2004; and Edwards, 2000). Thus, it has received more attention and experienced growth in reaction to wider global economic, social, and political events, “transform[ing] [it] from an exotic less commonly taught language into a mainstream one” (Abdallah & Al-Batal, 2011-12, p. 1). With the above ironies in mind, Arabic, along with other less commonly taught languages, has become “a formidable challenge” (Byrnes, 2009, p. 261), demanding a rejuvenated curriculum. As a result, an increase in the quantity and quality of trained teachers and a critical need to redesign the framework and infrastructure of language programs is necessary (Ryding, 2013; Wang, 2009; Al-Batal, 2007; and Allen, 2007).

These demands have become even more pervasive given that political interest in the Arab and Islamic world has not subsided post 9/11. In fact, it has gained more attention currently due to the uprisings in many Arab countries, starting with Tunisia and spreading to Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Syria and Iraq among unsettlements in other regions. However, the interest in learning about the culture of the “Other” and questioning ideological perspectives brought about by media and fast communication has also heightened interest in the field. Because of these communicative changes, new possibilities have surfaced in the academy to critically explore the macro sociopolitical and cultural contexts of learning and teaching world languages. This means that there is now also space for the micro hybrid contexts of language classrooms to support linguistic and intercultural competence. A more urgent need to transform our classrooms into a *cultural* and *interaccional* context (Kramersch, 1993, p. 41) is thus inescapable. Moving beyond classrooms, language teachers need to build crossings between learning in the classroom and the possibilities of carrying its implications and processes to real action outside within wider communities (Fairclough, 2001).

## **THEORETICAL BACKGROUND: LANGUAGE AND CULTURE**

Vygotsky's (1978) theory on learning and development and Halliday's systemic functional linguistics (Halliday & Hasan, 1989) help situate the teaching and learning processes created within a learning environment, i.e., they explain how meanings are created and *mediated* within a social and cultural context (Dixon et al., 2012; Pacheco, 2012; Thoms, 2012; and Magnon, 2007). Such contexts need to prepare learners for interconnecting with wider communities as citizens in a hybrid, global, multicultural, and multilingual world. Although culture is problematic to define and standardize, it has long moved beyond reductionist modernist views that categorized it as stable and fixed. In other words, culture has long been conceptualized as being fluid. Recent research supports the ever-changing nature of culture and its connection to perspectives, attitudes, artifacts, practices, and signs, in addition to other salient and vague aspects of culture (Pacheco, 2012; Rampton, 2006; Kramsch, 2003; Fairclough, 2001; and Kramsch, 1993). Wendy Allen (2014) defines culture by accentuating how it translates into meaningful classroom objectives:

*Intercultural competence (IC) lies at the intersection of attitudes, knowledge and skills. It is the ability to interact with others, to understand other perspectives and perceptions of the world, to mediate between different perspectives and to be conscious of one's own and other's evaluation of difference. (Allen, 2014, p. 27)*

In current discussions of language teaching and learning at professional, institutional, and personal levels, Scollon and Scollon (2001) explore intercultural communication while Kramsch (1998) describe intercultural learners/speakers, both of which shed significant light on intercultural competence. Moving beyond a mythical view of native speakers, target language, and culture, intercultural awareness proposes a more “reflexive” approach that helps learners focus on their own cultures and perspectives. Intercultural awareness also encourages them to explore the cultures and perspectives of others in order to help them “perceive and cope with difference” (Byram & Fleming, 1998, p. 4). The idea then is to move beyond finding general commonalities across cultures and peoples and rather observe, understand, and gain critical insights into the cultures and languages of the speakers and the targeted learned ones. This movement involves questioning, implicitly and explicitly, the “taken-for-granted” insights of cultures we are “socialized” into and critically interrogating our own “assumptions and values” (Byram & Fleming, 1998, p. 6).

This paper agrees with the need to situate intercultural competence in curricular models with clear objectives that allow for functional tasks and student projects to mediate linguistic and cultural learning beyond classroom contexts to larger community contexts (cf. Page & Benander, 2014; Cadd, 2012). It does not, however, address the significant body of research on intercultural competence. To sum up, the goal is for learners of world languages to develop, transfer, and transform language learning into something experiential. This can be accomplished by mediating differences, questioning their linguistic and cultural socialization, and reflecting on the practices and attitudes of their own cultures and those of the cultures studied.

This exploratory case study focuses on the following questions: What can language teachers do to critically engage with and respond to the politically charged contexts of teaching world languages in general, and Arabic in particular? How can we employ community resources within educational insti-

tutions or in their wider communities to problematize students' understanding of language and culture as a social activity, all in order to foster linguistic and cultural proficiency? How can we explicitly, as teachers, make "classroom discourse more explicitly intercultural" (Kramersch, 1998, p. 28)?

## **METHODOLOGY**

This paper draws on data from an exploratory case study at one Catholic university campus on the teaching and learning of Arabic as a world language. It sheds light on the possibilities for intercultural awareness by examining the use of multimodal culture portfolios as a pedagogical tool in Arabic classrooms to implicitly and explicitly interrogate students' understandings of linguistic and cultural difference. The study highlights learning beyond the classroom through engagement with larger communities through projects, experiential learning opportunities, and service as a means to prepare students to lead critical roles as global citizens. A follow-up discussion is provided on becoming an intercultural learner as well as on the importance of fostering a critically engaged "learning community" for Arabic students (Ryding, 1994, p. 23).

The researcher will first introduce the university context and its unique mission as a religious institution in fostering students' educated awareness of culture and society as global citizens with a social responsibility of service to others. The researcher will introduce the new Arabic program that aligns its language and culture objectives to the larger university mission. The researcher will follow this introduction with a description of the learning context and the participants within the larger community.

## **Research Context**

### **University Context**

The study was conducted in the early summer of 2012 at a Catholic university campus in the United States. It is located in a highly dense metropolitan city in the American Midwest, enrolling about 16,000 undergraduate students and employing about 4,000 faculty and staff members. The university has several local and international campuses in Europe and Asia to support its Catholic mission and identity. As part of its mission statement, the university prides itself on and is dedicated to providing a dynamic, transformative understanding of education that joins faith and reason and commits to excellence in integrative education and discursive knowledge. The university welcomes all faiths and traditions, encourages service to others as social agents, and fosters a high sense of social awareness and responsibility.

Given its relation to faith and tradition, the Arabic program is housed within the Department of Modern Languages as one of the critical less commonly taught languages on campus. Professor Marsha (pseudonym), an early supporter of the Arabic program at the college of arts and sciences, noted Arabic has been taught on this campus for over 15 years, offering two years of Arabic courses at the undergraduate level. A third year level has been officially approved in the past few years, however, as it seems that budgets and faculty allocations may have influenced the stability rate of students at the third year level. The program attracts about 80 students every semester based on the budget-approved courses offered.

Due to the program's stable enrollment, the campus has benefited in the past from several adjunct faculty members and Fulbright visitors, not all of whom were necessarily Arabic language or education specialists. Only recently did the department succeed in securing one fulltime position to rebuild the

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program and establish a new minor in Arabic, with attention paid towards the recent developments in the field of teaching the Arabic language and culture. This initiative has further helped to strengthen the field's interdisciplinary connections to other fields, including political science, international studies, and theology, with particular attention to enhancing Islamic studies. Currently, the newly established Arabic minor hosts around 50 students from a nexus of academic majors and investments in learning Arabic. Building on the larger university's mission, the Arabic program has visibly contributed to promoting students', faculties', and the larger community's engagement through service and experiential learning opportunities.

### **City/Community Context**

The university is located in one of the most diverse and densely populated cities in Midwestern America, IL. According to the city's 2010 census, the racial composition of the city is approximately 45% White, 33% African American, and 29% Latino people, in addition to some smaller groups, including Arab Americans. Religiously, the city is also diverse, enriching the campus body with members of multiple faiths, including Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, and Buddhism. In regards to Arabic, Professor Marsha emphasizes the importance of the Arab heritage communities to Illinois at large, a demographic that, according to the Arab American Institute Foundation website (2015, July 25), ranks seventh in terms of total numbers of Arab Americans in the United States. Ethnically, the university also invites students from the larger South Asian heritage who actively participate in Arabic courses for personal, religious, and academic reasons.

### **Arabic Program**

Arabic has been taught at this university for more than 15 years. However, the last few years have witnessed structural changes to improve the quality of the Arabic program under a new grant that allowed for a fulltime position and a doctorate level degree, with a focus on teacher education and curriculum studies. These allowances were made to ensure the program would be rejuvenated, the curriculum revamped, and teaching methods put in place that follow recent research in teaching world languages. The funding also offered the program the unique opportunity to be under the supervision of an external evaluator who supports the program's progress and offers rich consultation. The external evaluator is one of the main scholars and distinguished professors in the field of teaching Arabic in the United States. He is also a well-known author of one of the bestselling Arabic textbooks in teaching Arabic as a foreign language.

As part of the previously mentioned efforts to revitalize the program, a minor in Arabic language and culture was approved in the spring of 2012 with an interdisciplinary focus to serve the wider student population's majors/minors as well as their interests. There are limitations to this mission, however, beginning with the fact that the Arabic program mainly teaches Standard Arabic, offering colloquial Levantine Arabic only through about 15% of its teaching and learning materials. Hence, with limited teaching resources, fulfilling the program's desire to provide a special course or more integrative courses in colloquial spoken Arabic is still a challenge. To make up this deficit, supplementary authentic materials constitute a significant part of the classroom teaching practices to offer different insights and lively engagement with the language and culture. The materials include Arabic newspapers, folkloric games and riddles, songs, music, cartoons, menus, and more. The Arabic program also runs its own website, with an emphasis on students' investments in cultural awareness engagement initiatives. It also encour-

ages community involvement, offering a number of projects on and off campus including voluntary work with new immigrants, Arab refugees, blogs on study abroad experiences, and diverse socializing venues in learning Arabic.

In the Arabic courses in particular, one of the main assignments, which is of particular significance to this study, is the culture portfolio required of all Arabic learners. This activity has been adopted through consultation with the external evaluator and his home institution. It consists of four to five essays in English for first year Arabic learners, and two written in the Arabic language for second year Arabic learners. The entry essays include short critical reviews reflecting on practices, perspectives, and other linguistic and cultural aspects related to Arabic and the Arab world, at least as students themselves observe and understand them. The review also includes the students' conscientious voices reflecting on their own interpretation and negotiation of intercultural and linguistic variations in their native cultures. Those entries are designed around the following activities: attending a lecture related to the Arab world, watching an Arabic movie with English captions, reading an Arabic short story in translation, interviewing or initiating a chat with a native speaker, and reflecting on a topic of interest to be approved by the instructor. One of those choices may be modified with the instructor to reflect on participation in a community service project.

To promote learning and engagement amongst students in class, all responses are posted on Blackboard, a learning management system, so students can read each other's reviews and reflections. Entries are corrected by the teacher with a focus on providing explicit feedback to students on their tools and processes of analysis. Thus, there is a focus on the reasons behind their choices and interpretations and the perspectives consciously or unconsciously employed in interpretations of events. Attention is also given to reflections on their own native linguistic and cultural choices, taken-for-granted assumptions, and possible different/alternative points of view. The main focus for the teacher then is not accuracy of information but rather opening up a space for the students to unravel the mediational and socialization processes involved in dialectically constructing and deconstructing their meanings. Exemplary entries are further announced to students via email, and hard copies are pinned publicly on the walls outside the Arabic office for public viewing. However, verities of such an activity may be available on other campuses beyond the reach of this study.

While some language courses are dedicated to one of the aforementioned cultural activities, like film studies, or some aspect of engagement with native speakers as found in study abroad courses, the culture portfolio is unique in this study for several reasons:

- The culture portfolio allows students to engage with authentic Arab cultural artifacts available on their university campus and in the larger city. In fact, students are encouraged to take advantage of those resources, including making contact with people living in heritage specific neighborhoods. Hence, some activities resemble mini immersion experiences linking micro classroom discourse and macro community-wide discourses.
- It emphasizes students' use of multimodal texts, which enables them to draw on spoken, written, audiovisual, and "post-linguistic" forms (Fairclough, 2001, p. 2) when engaging in various course-related activities. Consequently, students' reflections are supported by several contextualized events that help them construct their responses to and against those texts.
- It also fosters implicit and explicit implementation of tools from critical language awareness (cf. Fairclough, 2001). Thus, students learn about the Arabic language and cultures while engaged in multimodal projects to help them assess their own constructed perspectives of other cultures and

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people (Janks, 2010, 1991). At the same time, students become more aware of their deliberate choices, interests, and biases, and how to problematize their representations of themselves and others as a step towards acceptance of cultural differences (Kramersch, 2003, 1993).

- Since the assignments are in English, students are given the chance early on to draw on their linguistic and cultural proficiencies to maximize the use of the resources available in their immediate communities. Naturally and unfortunately, study abroad is not an option for all students, so these assignments can help make up the difference.
- The culture portfolio creates a significantly strong logistic bond between the Arabic program's vision and the university's unique mission towards globalization, social responsibility, and cross-cultural engagement. This bond allows for college and university wide support of Arabic on campuses beyond the short-term interests triggered by global political events.

### **Study Participants**

The researcher is an instructor of Arabic at the campus of study. Due to the sensitive relations with the students, and in order to eliminate any biases or discomfort, the research was conducted in the summer of 2012 to ensure the participants' graduations, so as to ensure that the submission of their final grades in Arabic spring courses were not affected by the research. Hence, participants are considered former students to further protect their rights and the voluntary nature of their participation. Volunteered participants were enrolled in first year Arabic courses in either both the fall of 2011 and spring of 2012, or at least the spring semester of 2012. Any former student of one or more semesters of Arabic between 2011-2012 was eligible to volunteer to participate. Participants were given a survey questionnaire and an informed consent sheet upon the conclusion of the semester and were instructed to return the completed surveys during the summer of 2012. Additionally, the participants' responses to all culture portfolio assignments for the whole academic year were collected and analyzed (Figure 1).

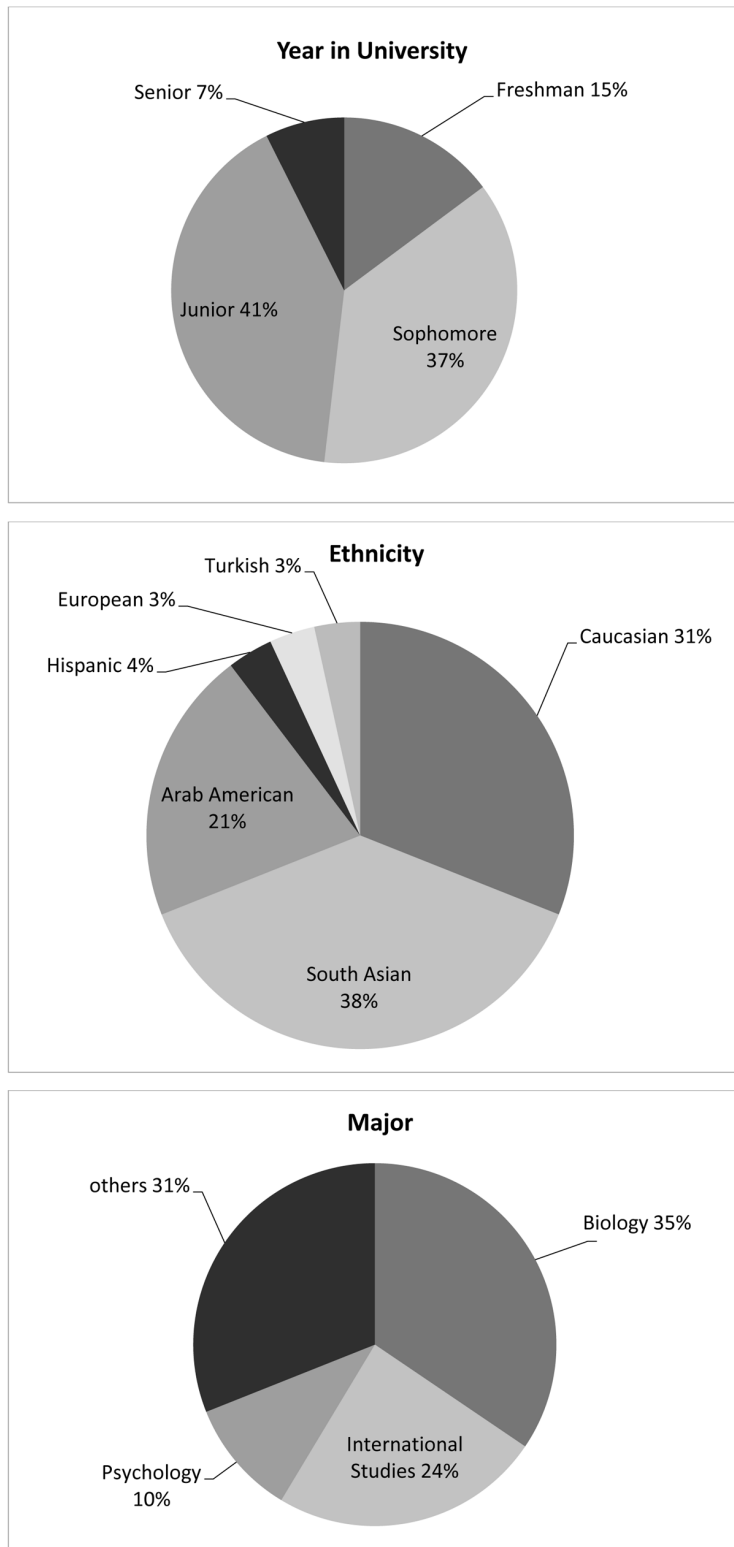
With only two senior students and four freshmen, the largest two groups enrolled (at 41% and 37%) were sophomores and juniors. Racially<sup>1</sup>, South Asians (Indian, Pakistani, and Sri Lankan) comprised the largest group at about 38%, followed by Caucasians at 31%, and Arab Americans at about 21%. Classroom data mirrors the demographic makeup of the larger community and city in which the university is located.

Academically, the Arabic learners constituted an interesting blend of majors and minors, with the highest percentages in biology 35% and international studies 24%. Other majors and minors included psychology, criminal justice, Spanish, Italian, political science, and history. At the time of the study, only 4% of the students declared enrollment in the newly established minor in Arabic Language and Culture, as the university had just been approved for the initiative to establish it.

It was also shown that 63% of students' enrolled in the Arabic course in the spring of 2012 had voluntarily participated in this study. Unfortunately, without certain of the research limitations imposed by the campus of study, the study could have attracted larger responses among the Arabic learners, and hence provided more important details on Arabic studies within this Catholic institution. One of these limitations includes the institutional regulation prohibiting the researcher from conducting the study with "current" students enrolled during the academic year, so as to minimize students' compulsory participation or an influence on grades. Hence, the researcher had to wait until the end of the semester for the learners to be officially considered former students. Naturally, access to students over the summer was a challenge. The researcher was also the only Arabic instructor in the program during the spring of 2012 and the only instructor working with those learners.



Figure 1.



## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

The exploratory study at this particular Catholic institution helped shed more light on the investments of Arabic learners, specifically in regards to their challenges in learning the language and culture through formal and informal channels. Additionally, the study helped provide feedback to the teacher in regards to curricular choices, both linguistic and cultural, and to foster a supportive yet critical learning community for Arabic students.

### **Investments in Learning Arabic**

In reflecting on the racial diversity of students and their university majors/minors, the survey responses of first year Arabic learners focused on a few major investments, with overlap in several areas for some learners. For example, some students have several overlapping investments at the same time such as both religious and political at the same time. Research on investments in learning Arabic has been the focus of a number of studies all of which support the findings of this current exploration (cf. Belnap, 2006; Husseinali, 2006; and Suleiman, 1991). These investments, which I will detail below, encompass the religious, sociocultural, political, and personal reasons students had for pursuing Arabic studies.

#### **Religious**

The Muslim students, who were mostly South Asian with only a few Arab Americans, clearly indicated that they were learning Arabic for religious reasons, namely, to help them read and understand the Quran. Fifteen students, representing 30% of the participants, reiterated that they had some exposure to Arabic through Islamic weekend schools, private religious tutors, and Islamic institutions during the academic year or summer. A number of them emphasized the role of Arabic in their prayers and their interest in understanding what they say or read. A few mentioned the role of elders in their families and communities who encouraged them to read and understand the Quran. Some referred to feeling disappointed in their pronunciation while reading the Quran and felt ashamed of losing the Quranic learning they received as children. Some students also referred to performing or desiring to perform Hajj or Umrah, both pilgrimage trips, emphasizing how Arabic would help them through the religious journey and rituals. There was only one student who did not identify as Muslim, who claimed that he took the course because of his interest in understanding the “parallels and origins” (Meg, survey, May 1, 2012) of religions through language.

#### **Socio-Cultural**

A more hybrid group of students clearly referenced understanding the Arab culture and gaining perspective on other people’s lives as their primary motivation for taking the courses. Fourteen students, representing 28.5% of the participants, highlighted their interest in learning about a new culture and gaining new perspectives as a way to learn about global affairs and thus become a “multicultural” person. These same students also indicated that they enjoyed sharing what they learnt about new cultures and people with their families, in addition to mentioning a desire to not feel “ignorant” (Crystal, survey, April 27, 2012) about other cultures of the world. They also cited enjoyment in getting to know their own cultures and heritage and attempting to rectify the “limited point of view” (Auburn, survey, May 13, 2012) oth-

ers may have constructed about Arab cultures. Some participants shared that they were curious about misperceptions as a reaction to global events, which included awareness or a lack thereof of stereotypes, a lumping together of all cultures in media representations, or misunderstandings due to an acquaintance with friends and neighbors of Arab heritage. Some students referred to having some exposure to aspects of Arab culture through travel, even though not necessarily to Arab countries, but to areas where Arab and Muslim cultures have left an imprint such as India, Italy (Islamic influence on southern Italy), and Spain (Islamic and Arabic influence in Al-Andalus). Students' responses also emphasized the cultural aspects they had been exposed to in other disciplines on campus and the impact it had on their investments in learning more about Arabs and Arabic. For instance, students reiterated the value of learning courses about the history of Islam, cultures of the Middle East, Media studies, gender, and Art in Islam on their investments for learning Arabic.

## Political

Naturally, reactions to the political events in a post 9/11 context and the current uprisings and crises in many Arab countries informed part of the learners' investment in learning Arabic. Ten students representing 20.5% of the participants highlighted the enormous attention on the Middle East post 9/11 and the media coverage with references to Al-Jazeera. Others referred to the War in Iraq and their interests in joining the Army, or in serving as a humanitarian aid in affected areas. Some students positively referred to their interest in being the exception among Americans in being politically educated about the Arab world, noting that their interest in Arabic became a "passion" (Madeline, survey, April 27, 2012). Others also referred to shocking life-turning events as they witnessed their close friends and neighbors being scrutinized in airports due to their race, dress, or names. They passionately expressed feeling "ashamed" (Auburn, survey, May 13, 2012) by such discrimination, especially as Americans, which led to a willingness to transform this "fear of others" and "backlash...against Arab" (Auburn, survey, May 13, 2012) through education and knowledge of other cultures. Some students also referred to future jobs in the FBI, in the State Department, as translators/interpreters, and in diplomacy and the marketing of Arabic in the midst of the aforementioned global political events.

## Personal

The majority of participants, almost 90%, expressed various personal investments related to gaining comfort in talking with heritage family members or friends, being intellectually and cognitively challenged in learning a more demanding language, having a love for Arabic calligraphy and hence the language, and wanting other job opportunities in the future. Usually these investments are categorized in conjunction with one or more of the previous ones explained above.

## Culture Portfolios and Becoming Intercultural

The culture portfolios are meant to allow students a personal and collective construction of linguistic and cultural proficiency through critical reflection and engagement with community and authentic artifacts. They are also meant to deliver more deliberate, diverse feedback both from the teacher in the classroom and other participants in the macro contexts of the university and community. The culture portfolios are thus used to develop students' intercultural awareness and in response to this, 47 students representing

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96% of participants reported that the culture portfolios were extremely helpful in being engaged in new aspects of culture beyond linguistic forms and classroom contexts. Students recognized a deeper growth in their critical understanding of cultures beyond a standard one-sided view, as they were pushed to take part in several activities in different contexts that fostered hybrid “cultural styles, norms, and mixing of peoples of different lands” (Mumtaaz, survey, May 1, 2012). Almost every student also emphasized that without being pressured to complete such a requirement, especially one that constituted 10% of their course grade, they may have never attempted to reach out and chat with a native Arab, watch an Arabic movie, or read Arabic short stories in translation.

### **Chat with a Native**

In regards to chatting with a native speaker, which was the highest valued activity, participants’ comments focused on taking a courageous step in asking to interview someone of a different background or experience. Some also highlighted the friendship created through meeting “a really good Arab friend” (Farrah, survey, May 17, 2012) which continued developing even after the activities were completed. Students were interested in being actively engaged in gathering information directly from a native speaker. This information entailed noticing differences in dialects, picking up slang phrases, observing traditional practices, trying samples of cuisine, hearing stories of immigration and adjustment in a new country among other family stories, and reflecting on personal memories of being an Arab post 9/11. Students reiterated their respect for the struggles of those natives (Aiman, culture entry 1, September, 2015; Ali, culture entry 3, October, 2011; and Auburn, culture entry 5, November, 2011).

In addition to learning more from a native, some students also commented on the benefit of chatting as an interactive chance to experience cultures and be able to compare and contrast them with their own. Some students met each other on campus, while others visited each other’s family homes, as they were more fascinated with the new learning opportunity. A number admired their ability to engage in greetings and understand a few Arabic words, in addition to loving the challenge and being open-minded enough to talk to someone in Arabic. They referred to feeling increased hope and being encouraged by their interviewees to continue practicing their learning of Arabic. Many students reflected on learning how to separate being an Arab from being a Muslim among many religious and cultural practices (Mary, culture entry 3, November, 2015; Basima, culture entry 2, February, 2012).

In terms of who the students selected to interview, some chatted with elder members of their family or Arab neighbors in their community. In doing this, they were not only surprised by the cultural knowledge they experienced firsthand, but also by the appreciation of the interviewees and their high regard for being valued, listened to, and asked to speak about their language and cultures. One student wrote after visiting a lonely native elderly in the community: “I did not know I could have such an impact on someone’s life even with an assignment like this. This was more than an assignment, but a lesson to me as well” (Dana, culture entry 2, September, 2011).

### **Movies**

Watching a movie in Arabic also captivated the students’ attention, as it allowed them to focus on aspects of the language and culture that the classroom setting was not always able to provide due to time, technology arrangements, curriculum requirements, or ability to satisfy diverse students’ needs and investments. While the teacher pointed the students to a few titles available in the language lab and university library,

they were encouraged to research others on their own, which opened up a space for new knowledge to unfold without prior expectations from the teacher. A student can pursue choices that may be unknown or even new to the teacher allowing both to be active participants of the learning process. The freedom to choose thus allowed them to construct insights “that a textbook cannot provide” (Taha, survey, May, 2012). Movies also creatively introduced students to the Middle East and helped them reflect on the linguistic and cultural knowledge they were introduced to in the classroom without having to “fly to the Middle East” (Farrah, survey, May, 2012). Some students enjoyed the different dialects and pronunciation while others took interest in the “styles of dress” (Nili, culture entry 2, October, 2011), “household interactions” (Crystal, culture entry 3, October, 2011), “wedding customs” (Khan, culture entry 3, November, 2011), and “foods” (Mary, survey, April, 2012). Movies varied in topic from politics and family life to comedy and romance among others depicting different Arab countries and diverse faiths.

Once they viewed the movie, students submitted rubric-defined written reflections and received feedback to help them analyze cultural aspects and critique biases. The goal of this activity was to attempt to understand native perspectives on topics related to social class, politics, religion, gender roles, and ideologies of media representations, in comparison to their own cultures. The teacher’s feedback was thus not about the correctness of students’ analyses, but rather a dialogic encounter with students’ voices to visibly accentuate tools of analysis to construct and deconstruct their interpretations. A large number of students admitted they had never watched an Arabic film and they may never have done so without this requirement. One student commented, “more importantly, I learned not to accept everything that I hear without looking further into it” (Lee, culture entry 1, September, 2011).

## Lectures

Participants also noted that attending and/or listening to lectures about the Arab world on and off campus, including multimodal recordings, further developed their interest in Arabic within an interdisciplinary nexus. A large number responded positively to the informative and eye-opening topics they attended to and mentioned that they enjoyed reflecting on their understandings as well as their agreements and disagreements with other speakers through the writing assignment. Lectures covered a large spectrum of topics. The teacher actively announced via emails all possible opportunities to learn more about Arab culture in the community by attending events and speeches organized on campus and by other Middle Eastern organizations in the larger Arab community. However, the majority of topics were political in nature due to current global events in the Arab world such as the Arab countries’ uprisings and unsettlements in many regions. Students reflected on their “ignorance” (Zena, culture entry 2, October, 2011), “misconceptions” (Joshua, culture entry 2, October, 2011), and moments of “change of heart” (Hamad, culture entry 2, October, 2011). Since students’ own interest dictated the choice of lecture, they continued to feel empowered making decisions, owning their learning, and taking responsibility for their efforts to enhance their Arabic studies linguistically and culturally. Because of these Arabic classes and more specifically because of the culture portfolio, students were able to gain firsthand experience in learning how to be a global citizen of the world, which is part of the university’s mission.

## Free Choice

The free activity was the one choice that students felt the most capable to adjust to their interests and curiosity. Some went to restaurants, visited Arab families, worked with refugees, listened to songs, cooked

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an Arabic meal, wrote about Henna and Arabic folkloric dancing, attended weddings and *Eid* celebrations, tried learning calligraphy, attempted wearing Islamic clothing in public as a form of awareness, or researched a topic of their own related to the arts, politics, the economy, media, and/or global events, to name a few. Many participants pointed to enjoying the activities and said that they suggested them to others too. On some occasions, students even mentioned having to provide a rationale to their American friends for engaging in such activities, which allowed them to promote awareness as well as get practice in reflexively negotiating their own cultural attitudes outside the classroom space.

### **Literature**

As with other portfolios, reading an Arabic story in translation provided students with deeper linguistic and cultural insights, despite a number of students reporting it was sometimes hard to understand all of the messages in the text. The reasons for this hardship were due to it being their first encounter with Arabic literature, preconceptions and misconceptions of Arab cultures, and the linguistic challenges of uncovering metaphors and symbolism. Even with these difficulties, students highlighted how the stories helped them “dispel such broad generalizations” (Zena, culture entry 5, April, 2012) and admire the authenticity of the writing due to their abilities to find human connections across cultures, pay attention to ironies, and reflect on events they may have been exposed to in other portfolios. They also noted being attentive to different literary styles, encountering societal values and individual choices, and being surprised by unconventional social topics like love and gender, for example.

As a result of engaging with Arabic literature, most participants shared that their prior image of Arab world cultures was “limited/minimal” (Zena, survey, April, 2012), “lumped” (Crystal, survey, April, 2012), “homogenous” (Khan, survey, May, 2012), and “westernized” (Cary, survey, April, 2012). This was largely due to their reliance on the media and other interdisciplinary university courses in history or political science for information about the Arab world. In some cases, it was also due to their own religious practices or those of friend or family members who were heritage speakers. Very few students had actually travelled to the Middle East or had firsthand exposure to Arab cultures.

When asked how the choices they personally adopted for their culture portfolios had shaped their developing knowledge of the cultures of the Arab world, students responded passionately to their significant level of growth in knowledge as well as awareness of several sensitive issues related to attitudes, values, and perspectives. For instance, a number of students wrote about awareness of political problems in the Middle East, as well as of gaining different perspectives on occupations and their effects on civilians and children, particularly in light of watching movies or talking with immigrants. They also emphasized the diversity of the Arab world in terms of dialects, customs, political concerns, and societal values. References to arts and sciences in early and modern Arab cultures, literary styles, colonization’s influence on regions, and religious schisms are but a few of the topics students revisited with new insights in their portfolios, or referred to reading in other participants’ portfolios posted on Blackboard.

### **Challenges and Changes**

Given the range of topics highlighted in the portfolios, the verities of students’ investments, majors, and backgrounds were naturally reflected in their responses to their favorite assignments, and the challenges and strengths regarding the value of the culture portfolios. Most students, though admitting the time and

effort commitment involved, expressed their love for the portfolios and how personally invested they were in their learning.

Despite this investment, the students remarked having a number of difficulties with the portfolio. When asked about the most difficult entry in terms of access and/or reflection, 13 students responded that the short story entry was a challenge. Difficulties included access to “good” literature (Nili, survey, May 30, 2012), especially online, “interpreting the cultural meanings and importance” (Cary, survey, April 30, 2012), and confusion due to “translation” (Hamad, survey, 2012; Suma, survey, 2012). While only five students said the chat with a native speaker was a challenge due to fear and anxiety factors, 10 students mentioned it was in fact the easiest due to easy access to the Arab heritage community available both at the university and in the larger community. Chatting thus became like a mini immersion experience for some, especially those who visited native homes and neighborhoods to conduct interviews. Building friendship, practicing their Arabic, exploring firsthand traditions and artifacts, and reflecting on cultural norms was also mentioned as part of the fun of chatting.

In addition to the short story being a challenge, an almost equal number of students referred to the lecture as either the most difficult entry or the easiest. Of all the participants, 4 students found it the hardest while 3 confirmed it being the easiest. While some noted challenges related to the time of the lectures and commuting, others referred to the large number of lectures available on campus that were facilitated by different interdisciplinary fields and the general campus’s interest in nurturing globally aware citizens. As for the films, seven participants found them to be an easy and enjoyable entry due to the interactive aspect and audiovisual engagement with language and culture, particularly in regards to the politically charged global events. A few referred to difficulties such as interpreting cultural norms, attempting to listen while following captions, and time issues. This free activity was highly rated, however, as it fostered students’ own investments and research on a more specific and personal basis. Since all entries were in English for first year Arabic students, they were given the chance to socialize with language and culture outside classroom contexts at their own comfort too, which undoubtedly impacted their sense of ease with some of the assignments.

## CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

There is significant research on fostering the growth of an intercultural learner through diverse aspects similar to the culture portfolios highlighted here, although most studies focus on just one aspect, like chatting with natives in study abroad contexts (Cadd, 2012) or using films as a pedagogical tool in language classrooms (Sturm, 2012). Currently, recommendations to provide contextualized learning opportunities away from textbooks in real communities are highly encouraged and becoming more visible (Glynn, 2013).

This contextualization also works to satisfy a great deal of students’ curiosity about the *Other* both in terms of linguistics and cultures. As Ryding (1994) suggested, an attractive approach to teaching and learning Arabic needs to be “combined with a lively and informed introduction to Arab culture” (p. 27). Culture portfolios are a mechanism that combines various aspects of content and task-based teaching with direct and indirect applications of critical language awareness as a pedagogical tool to problematize students’ understanding and awareness of ideological links between language, culture, identity, and power.

The ideological connection between teaching Arabic as a foreign language in the U.S. and current rapid shifts in the global sociopolitical and cultural contexts between the U.S. and the Arab world is

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significant. The field of Arabic is at the center of a new “critical juncture” (Duncan, 1991, p. vi), impacting the roles of teachers in the classrooms and the need to move beyond traditional contexts of learning and teaching. With the particular focus on new technologies in contexts of globalization and digital media, new kinds of linguistic and cultural projects are needed that employ multimodality and digital applications for new kinds of learning, as suggested by Cope & Kalantzis (2010) in “New Media: New Learning.” Obviously, demands, challenges, and possible tensions as to a teacher’s commitment to time and institutional support are part of the issues to be considered here as well.

More research on pedagogical tools that foster becoming an intercultural learner is needed in Arabic classes, particularly with the heightened political, religious, and sociocultural attention being afforded to the field. More research is also needed to support Arabic programs within their home institutions through alignment of missions to attract the humane and financial resources required to sustain the program’s growth and teacher development initiatives.

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## ENDNOTE

- <sup>1</sup> Ethnicity was defined by the students themselves. Hence, “Europeans” does not assume all Europeans are a homogeneous group linguistically or racially. The same applies for other ethnicities as well.