

Title: Starting with Culture

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Abstract:

Development projects in recent years often attribute project failure to the impact that cultural variation can produce. This article reports on a recently completed USAID literacy training project that was implemented in Egypt and the United States. Using the examples of cognitive dissonance, hierarchy, and cultural attribute training, the author demonstrates how culture can impact project design and implementation and how it can have consequences with regard to project sustainability.

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AEMTEP Project Design

The American-Egyptian Master Teacher Exchange Program (AEMTEP) was a three-year, USAID funded project designed to train teachers of science, mathematics, social studies, and Arabic literacy in Egypt. The intention of the grant was to train approximately 1100 primary teachers from the three rural governorates where female illiteracy was known to be highest: El-Minya, Beni Suef, and Fayoum. The project was implemented in cooperation with the Egyptian Ministry of Education (MOE), the Faculties of Education (FOE) at universities near each of the sites, faculty from California State University, Los Angeles and Sacramento. Other partner institutions included the American University in Cairo (AUC), which provided in-country support for the American trainers, including translation and interpretation services and English language training for the US-bound Egyptian participants. In addition, the Alhambra School District in California hosted groups of Egyptian teachers in a one-on-one shadowing program and provided US-based workshops. The Institute for International Exchange provided logistical support and interface with other Egyptian agencies, and CARE was contracted to take over the project and provide in-service training after the conclusion of the AEMTEP training.

The Egyptian-based segment of the program involved training at each site for two consecutive summers. The first summer workshop provided ten days of training in foundations of education, and the second-year workshop provided twenty days of content

specific training in math, social studies/science, literacy, and language arts. The summer trainings at each site included approximately 350 participants who came from schools in villages surrounding the larger “mother villages” where we worked. Some of the schools and teachers were located nearby while others were located in extremely remote areas.

Before the summer-based training began in 2000, between twenty to forty Egyptian teachers were identified at each site to participate in the US-based training. These potential participants were chosen largely because of their English language proficiency, and they continued to study English intensively before the first summer training occurred. During the academic year following the first summer, these participants, who became known as the Master Teachers, traveled to the United States to participate in a 6-week training program in California.

The US-based training included three components. The first was a series of activities conducted in the Alhambra School district, which oriented the Egyptian teachers to US primary school culture with a series of workshops leading to a three-week shadowing experience. The second component was a series of faculty seminars conducted at CSU, LA and held over the six-week period. And finally, there were a series of three trainer of trainer workshops, during which the Egyptian participants prepared and presented demonstration lessons, which they were asked to deliver during the second summer of training back in Egypt.

A project of this magnitude can be studied and evaluated from a variety of perspectives. The author was involved in all three years of the project, but most closely in the trainer of trainers seminars, the curriculum development of the second year of training and the design and implementation of all cross-cultural aspects of the program.

With this focus in mind, the remainder of this article will examine the ways in which cultural issues impacted the design and implementation. More specifically, this article will examine the issues of a mismatch in cognitive profiles in design considerations, hierarchy, and an on-going need for cultural orientation and reevaluation. The issue of sustainable change within these parameters will also be addressed.

#### Project Implementation and the Interaction of Cultures

One of the most significant factors that affect project implementation is the degree to which cooperating cultures match in terms of their values and beliefs. Project managers invariably must deal with the interface between several different cultures. The more that any two cultures differ, the more the need to attend to how the values of the donor culture might undermine the final effectiveness of the training. As Delens (1999) observes:

Successful projects are usually those in which it is recognized that the cultural rules of the majority, the “beneficiaries,” will play a significant role. If projects are to succeed in bringing about changes in values and attitudes for the purpose of development, there can be no outright imposition of the values of the donor...Project managers can only achieve sustainable transfer of skills and knowledge if they build on indigenous values and attitudes, and bridge the cultural gaps between donors and recipients.

Many development projects in recent years attribute project failure to the impact that cultural variation can produce (Delens, 1999; Holliday, 1995; Leach 1991; Handy, 1981). As a consequence, the importance of culture is increasingly recognized as a crucial variable in the area of curriculum design. Based on the growing awareness of the need for cultural interface, the AEMTEP project attempted to use an informed understanding of cultural differences in curricular design and in the everyday negotiations and personal relationships that developed within the context of Egyptian culture.

In developing a culturally appropriate project, one can only begin to understand the potential problems and the possible appropriate design by first examining the basic values in which the educational institutions are embedded. Geert Hofstede (1980, 1983, 1986) has given us a beginning to understand those values and beliefs. In his early research on corporate cultures, Hofstede (1980) located four cultural variables that significantly impact attitudes toward work and working relationships across cultures. These variables include: **power distance**, a measure of human social inequality; **uncertainty avoidance**, a measure of the societal norm for the tolerance of ambiguity or uncertainty about the future; **individualism**, a measure of the way the individual relates to the collectivity; and **masculinity**, a measure of the extent to which the biological differences between males and females condition their roles in society. In his 1986 work, he extended the context of his framework by examining these four variables in the context of teaching in cross-cultural settings. Hofstede suggests four factors to consider in developing cross-cultural curriculum: 1) differences in the social positions of teachers and students in the two societies, 2) differences in the relevance of the curriculum in the

two societies, 3) differences in profiles of cognitive abilities between the populations, and 4) differences in expected patterns of teacher/student and student/student interaction.

More recently, Delens (1999) has used this model to account for the difficulty in managing efforts to effect sustainable change in English language teaching in Cote d'Ivoire. Delens notes that the mismatch between the French-based educational institutions with a high degree of uncertainty avoidance (and thus emphasizing theory), and the donor English culture which emphasized practical, empirical knowledge, created barriers in achieving sustainable change.

While Hofstede's four variables were an important initial step in analyzing cultural variation when teaching and training cross-culturally, it was limited in its vision of the factors that constitute cultural variation. Brake and Walker (1996) expanded on the research of Hofstede by developing a framework that consolidated the work of a number of interculturalists, including Clyde Kluckhohn, Edward Hall, Milton Bennett, George Renwick, and others. This work has served as a more complete approximation of cultural variability and is instructive for analyzing many of the curricular and interpersonal issues that arose during the AEMTEP project. The Brake and Walker framework suggests 10 variables which are dimensions of all cultures (see figure 1). Buckley (2000) presents a thorough analysis of this framework within the context of teaching, which goes beyond the scope of this article. For the present treatment, it is sufficient to say that cultures tend to emphasize a few of the full set of variables. Those values emphasized might be referred to as the **primary** values. For example, interculturalists agree that individualism, competition, and relativistic thinking are the primary American variables, though the others certainly have an impact on shaping

American culture. When working cross-culturally, primary values that contrast sharply are usually the location of conflict and curricular barriers. Among the Egyptians, we knew from prior research that a strong sense of hierarchy/authority, an intense lack of tolerance for ambiguity or risk, and a framework for thinking that emphasizes absolute truth were at the core of the Egyptian culture. As it turned out, all of these factors came into play in developing and implementing the AEMTEP curriculum.

#### Mismatch in Cognitive Profiles

The goals of the AEMTEP project and the emphases in the training were given to us as a part of the original proposal. To summarize, we were asked to promote the ideas of learner centered classrooms, active learning, reflective teaching, and multiple intelligences. We were also told that the teachers were required to teach within the strict scope and sequence of a state-sanctioned curriculum. From the beginning, we attempted to develop approaches to teaching that incorporated the best practices listed above, but were situated in the content of the Egyptian Ministry of Education curriculum. To a large extent we felt that the training was successful in teaching these practices. The participants were enormously enthusiastic, and during the training sessions there seemed to be genuine “buy-in” on their part. However, it would have been helpful and productive to have had discussions with the USAID program designers and Egyptian educators with regard to the cultural issues that undergirded the project goals.

All of the project goals listed above are embedded in the American “cognitive profile” as Hofstede (1986) calls it. They reflect deeply held beliefs about our society, and in many cases these beliefs contrast sharply with Egyptian beliefs. The learner-centered classroom, for example, is based upon the American conception of teacher as

helper and facilitator. In general, we believe that children construct their own knowledge and teachers are present to provide them with the appropriate environment and guidance in learning how to construct their knowledge. This philosophy contrasts greatly with the Egyptian belief that the teacher imparts knowledge to the student. In the end, we felt that most of the participants and the Faculties who were working with us believed that a constructivist approach had great value, but how or whether they will be able to incorporate that new perspective into an environment based on an authoritarian/hierarchical perspective is unclear.

The goal of active learning is also connected to this constructivist concept. From a U.S. educational perspective active learning is valued because it promotes the child's ability to construct knowledge from his or her interaction. However, active learning involves pair work and group work, which are classroom configurations that minimize the importance of the teacher as the authority figure and that emphasize the child's role in developing his own knowledge. Active learning is also a concept that is undergirded by the belief that learning and knowing are part and parcel of discovery. One "learns" something when she is able to discover it herself through problem-solving. In the Egyptian school system, however, learning and knowing is reflected in one's ability to repeat and memorize. It is too early to know for sure whether using these approaches within the Egyptian MOE scope and sequence creates enough of a bridge to make it salient to the Egyptian teachers. It may be that these Western teaching practices would have had a better chance of being sustained if they had somehow been combined with repetition and modeling, thus giving the Egyptians a even more familiar frame for an unfamiliar approach.

Reflective teaching is also an activity that is deeply embedded in Western beliefs and practices. For reflection to be productive, it requires teachers to question the effectiveness of their own teaching by thinking in retrospect about whether or not it reached all the children in a classroom. The ability to do reflection at all involves one's ability to step outside oneself and to objectively look at what occurred in a classroom in order to improve. When a teacher participates in this kind of activity, he or she risks the possibility of having been wrong or ineffective. This kind of risk is both accepted and valued in the States. However, Egyptians generally avoid just this sort of risk and instead value a kind of thinking that supports and values absolute truth.

It is interesting that in spite of the cultural mismatch with regard to educational beliefs, the trainees saw the value of a constructivist approach and a learner-centered classroom. In all of the trainings substantial buy-in seemed to occur. The question for sustainability will be whether or not a change in values or attitudes can be sustained within a system that is firmly embedded in a conflicting set of values.

In addition, USAID will need to look at whether understanding the crucial barriers to sustainability makes a difference in the long run. It is possible that understanding the barriers does not necessarily suggest the appropriate solution to the problems. For example, we know from past projects that a failure to integrate a training design within the scope and sequence of the MOE curriculum leads to unsustainable change. Now, we are in a position to ask whether it matters for sustainability that we used the scope and sequence as a starting point for curricular design. Moreover, other projects have failed because of a failure to include Egyptians as a part of the training. In the case of AEMTEP, we included Egyptian FOE members in the delivery of the training,

and we transferred the entire endeavor into the hands of CARE, almost an entirely Egyptian group, at the conclusion of the project. Whether or not this makes a difference should be a question we can begin to answer within a few years.

### Hierarchy

One of the complaints often made by the recipients of development projects is their annoyance at the refusal of Americans to work within the hierarchies and power structures of the host countries (Moran and Harris, 1982). Part of this problem is probably due to the American disdain for hierarchy and part of the problem is probably simple ignorance of the significant organizing role that hierarchy plays in many cultures. While this is surely a legitimate criticism of development work in general, the admonition that project personnel should understand all the hierarchical groups and their overlapping relationships is a tall order. During the AEMTEP project we interacted with at least seven different groups who had their own hierarchies and subcultures. These groups included the Faculties of Education at each of the three training sites, the Ministry of Education personnel at each of the sites and in the central office in Cairo, the CARE personnel, the Institute for International Exchange, the people from USAID, the American University, Cairo (AUC) team, including the interpreters who formed their own in-group, and the facilitators from AUC who formed an additional in-group.

Several bi-cultural Egyptians gave us great insight regarding the structure of these groups and their relationships to one another. In addition, several of the AUC personnel helped us deal directly with the different groups and constantly tutored us in appropriate protocol and manners. In future projects, it would be extremely helpful for the American side to have a briefing regarding each group with whom they must cooperate. Such a

briefing might include their backgrounds, their status relative to one another and the Americans, the motivation for their involvement in the project, and their level of cooperation and commitment. In many cases, this information is crucial to the successful implementation of the project and the future sustainability of the project.

One of the major Egyptian groups that we dealt with was the Faculty of Education at each of the training sites. The FOEs formed a distinct subculture of people with whom we had to negotiate. As we came to understand, each site had a distinct FOE subculture. In some cases, the FOEs formed a cohesive group; in other cases, they hardly knew one another. In order for us to organize and implement the trainings, we had to meet with each of the three groups and negotiate a relationship that would allow the project to move forward. We were assisted by the AUC team and by IIE in some cases, but for the most part the relationships that developed were of our own making, and in retrospect it is amazing that they cooperated at all. It took enormous good will and generosity on the part of the FOEs to accept us in and to work with us. The great effort and progress made in developing these relationships is one of the reasons that many have argued for a longer grant.

The Ministry of Education officials also varied from one governorate to another and although we did not work with the MOE as closely as we worked with the FOE, their association with the project was important. In fact, the relationship between the MOE and the FOEs at each site, to a large degree, defines the possibility for sustainability, and it is this relationship that defines some of the most important differences between the sites.

In summary, sustaining the effort requires not only an acceptance of the curricular design and content by the participants. It also requires the development of collegial, non-competitive relationships between both the MOE and the FOE. Without these relationships it is unlikely that any kind of reform can occur. However, the development of such relationships requires a different kind of focus than AEMTEP encompassed. We were asked to deliver teacher training, so the focus was on curricular and pedagogical change. At the same time, it would have been productive for there to have been an effort and focus on leadership training. This would have fostered the top down, bottom up approach to promoting change. In the United States, accredited teacher training institutions are required to show active cooperation between Colleges of Education, public school districts, area community colleges, people who do any kind in-service training, and the actual teachers in the field. When designing future grants, USAID might consider trying to create this type of comprehensive structure in building consensus for change.

The Institute for International Exchange personnel were also embedded in a hierarchy that impacted the training. While IIE is a U.S. based organization, the personnel with whom we interacted were from the Middle East, so it wasn't always clear whose rules we should follow. For example, from an American point of view a contract, once it is signed, is not negotiable except under very unusual circumstances. With IIE, however, we seemed to be engaged, on a regular basis, with renegotiations of the contract conditions. These changes seemed to be based on IIE's fluctuating assessment of what might be good for the program rather than on the original contract conditions, which were drawn from the original proposal. When AEMTEP resisted these changes, because of

our own understanding of contracts, discussions became contentious and IIE indicated that they felt our actions were not in the best interests of the participants. The problem for us was that the IIE culture was unclearly defined. Within American business practices, a signed contract is not negotiable. We understood that in Egyptian culture almost everything is negotiable – particularly in business arrangements, but it wasn't clear for quite a while that IIE was actually operating outside of a Western framework. Because of this confusion and because IIE sometimes failed to respond to our communications, we tended to work directly with USAID as we neared the conclusion of the project. This practice proved to be an efficient process, but it led to a further deterioration of relations between our organizations. This experience, again, points to the crucial importance for strong relationships among those working within and between agencies. Unless the unspoken cultural rules of interaction are clearly articulated, the general goals of the project can be undermined.

The two groups who formed the American University, Cairo team also provided interesting insight on cross-cultural team dynamics. The first of those groups was the interpretation team. Like our American training team, over the three years of the project, the membership of this team changed. For each of the three training sites, AUC provided an Arabic-English interpreter for each American trainer and the chief of party. Also like our training teams, the interpreters, for the most part, were extremely well-traveled and interculturally experienced because of their profession. We found, unexpectedly, however, that hierarchy greatly influenced this group as well. Over the course of the training, we were surprised to find that most of the interpreters had never traveled to Upper Egypt and were almost as unfamiliar as we were with the people of these regions.

We were also surprised to observe that many of them looked down on the Upper Egyptians and on occasion became angry and impatient with the participants. We never expected or considered that the training might be affected by the vast differences in social status between the Cairens who traveled with us and the Upper Egyptians with whom we worked, particularly the participants. However, this issue arose many times during the training and was something that the American trainers had to smooth over and work around. Similarly, the interpreters, we gradually came to understand, had strong political differences with the U.S. government and its foreign policy. This issue also surfaced at several points and had to be smoothed over and dealt with.

The AUC facilitators also formed their own in-group. For the most part, we found them cooperative and helpful, and we did not have any serious conflicts with this group. However, because they were bilingual, they observed the work of the interpreters, and in some cases they created controversy by not agreeing with the accuracy of the interpretation. In several cases, chiefs of party had to intervene to remind them of their roles and their expertise.

In both of these cases, I should rush to add that it was because of the enormous skill, generosity, and kindness of both of these groups that we were able to do our jobs. They saved us from ourselves over and over again, and to a great degree, the overall success of the project is because of their skills and professionalism. This fact should not be overlooked. Yet, once again, it is very interesting to note the importance of culture and personal relationships in the successful implementation of a project.

In summary, the relations of those involved in the project is immeasurably important in terms of sustainability, yet paradoxically, can't be measured. The impact of

the cooperation of MOEs and FOEs can possibly be evaluated by contrasting the outcome of the effort at the three sites because the sites offer such contrasting groups. Moreover, the impact of the relationships between AEMTEP and AUC personnel can be indirectly measured in the final assessments of the participants. In general, however, it seems that the cases where sustainability had the best chance of occurring were the cases where people had genuine differences, but were able to develop respectful, working relationships despite those differences. These are perhaps necessary but not sufficient conditions for successful sustainability. The training groups that managed to create a harmony that would foster sustainability include: 1) the MOE, FOE, and the Master Teachers at Beni Suef and 2) the training, interpretation, and facilitator teams who delivered the training in the three training sites.

#### On-going Cultural Orientation

The final area in which we saw culture impacting the project was in the implementation of the cultural orientations. The cultural orientation components of AEMTEP were complicated by the length and complexity of the project. Some Americans only worked with the project in the United States while others only worked with the Egypt-based segment of the project, and still others worked both in Egypt and in the United States. Each of these groups had different orientation needs. In addition, orientations were held for many of the Egyptians involved, and each workshop was tailored to their specific involvement as well. For example, there were orientations for all Master Teachers who traveled to the U.S. and their families, for the AUC interpreters, for the Faculty of Education members, and in the third year for the

Egyptian participants themselves. Five training approaches were used in the cultural orientation sessions: 1) cognitive training, 2) cultural frameworks, 3) experiential training, 4) culture-specific training, and 5) attribute training. A great deal of analysis could be provided regarding these trainings. However, for this treatment, only the attribute training will be discussed.

In attribute training, trainees learn about how people make judgments about the causes and meaning of culturally different behaviors. The rationale underlying this training is that one event or behavior may have a variety of perceptions or attributes. Triandis (1977) maintains that cross-cultural understanding is greatly facilitated when travelers develop the ability to guess the meanings that hosts will ascribe to their own behaviors or events. This type of training is greatly facilitated when coupled with the use of cultural frameworks.

If the AEMTEP project were continuing or a similar project was starting, this would be one area of emphasis in the cultural orientations. While it is presumptuous and impossible to always “get it right,” I believe it is important for people working cross culturally to begin to think cross-culturally, and attribute training encourages people to try to think like a person from the host culture. This is not to say that you’ll always have the answers, but it is an attempt at relativistic thinking, which is a requirement for developing empathy and cultural understanding.

In the case of the American trainers, some of the most interesting and revealing cross-cultural growth occurred when we attempted to define “isomorphic attributes,” as Triandis calls them. One example occurred when the American trainers decided to adapt and use a values clarification exercise in the workshop at Beni Suef. Values clarification

activities present a situation involving a number of actors in a socially controversial situation. Participants are asked to either judge the morality or the wisdom of the actors in a situation, thus revealing their own values.

In our own exercise, we went a step further, and the American trainers wrote down their own predictions about how they thought the Egyptians would respond. The exercise we chose was the well-known “Alligator River” problem which we adapted to our context and which involved issues of marriage, friendship, loyalty, fidelity, and responsibility. Interestingly, we were all wrong in our prediction. The vast majority of the Egyptian participants made choices isomorphic to the Americans’ own preferences, and we had predicted that they would differ dramatically. In retrospect, the exercise helped us understand some of our own misconceptions about Islam and Egyptian values. Although Islamic societies are conservative in permissible social choices, it was clear from the results that we misunderstood the strong cultural sense of situational morality in Egyptian society. It also pointed out our own need for re-examining some of our basic assumptions about Egyptian society. In short, the shock of being so wrong forced us into unexpected intercultural growth. Because this experience occurred during the training rather than afterward in a debriefing, it gave all of us an opportunity to become more open and more mindful of our own assumptions while we were there.

Although all of the training literature describes and analyzes pre-departure and debriefing orientations, none of it advocates “on-going” training. In most cases, on-going training is not feasible. However, in the case of a project, it is quite do-able and essential to the development of those involved. Moreover, the on-going intercultural growth invariably feeds back into the cultural appropriateness of the curriculum and the delivery

modes. If the AEMTEP project could be repeated, some sort of attribute activity incorporated into lessons at least once a week would benefit both the trainers and the participants.

In conclusion, the three examples of cognitive profiles, hierarchy, and on-going cultural orientation provide clear examples of the ways in which culture impacts the design and implementation of a development project. This impact is felt not only with the participants, but also in the understanding and growth of the trainers and bi-cultural personnel involved. Within a few years, we should be able to answer some of the questions posed by this report regarding sustainability and the value that a culturally appropriate approach brings to the long-term results of such large-scale development projects.

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