

Brief Encounter with the Taos Institute

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Relational Learning in a Women's College Classroom



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The invitation to write this short piece took me back to my journey working on my relational learning research with Prof. Mary Gergen. This month also marks a year since Prof. Mary left us to the other world. One year has passed and I still think about our journey and relational learning work every day. Mary's strength, graciousness, support, and mentorship over the years will live with me forever. She prized my constructed relational learning approach, appreciated its impact on my women students and graduates, and encouraged me to bring it to light through my relational research via stories of many of these women in their context. Hence, I conducted, with my student graduates, a participative action research, about relational learning, creating dialogic classrooms and including industry linked learning in the marketing curriculum.

My relational learning stories come from the land of Ras Al Khaimah Emirate, in the United Arab Emirates (Referred to as the Emirates or the UAE.) These are stories of my young Emirati women college graduates, with whom I have spent enlightening, enriching and gratifying moments through their learning paths over the last twenty years of my life. These women graduates are now wives, moms, employees, managers, masters, and Ph.D. holders and some even climbed to "Antarctica". They are more enabled women who have transferred their relational learning in the women college, into their respective lives' diverse situations.

Over the years, I have continuously embraced a strong emphasis on Relational Learning with particular attention to dialogues in classrooms and project-based learning where I have strived to link the learning in the many business projects to different industries.

Our Dialogic Classrooms

In a typical dialogic class, I move to the back of the room, and I sit next to my students, I break the barriers between us; we are all learners. I invite the trust, the willingness to dialogue and share. We reshuffle the tables, create circles many times, and sit comfortably in our class. I smile; I listen to their life stories. I listen and listen.

We debate about our Marketing topics, it is not them with me, it is them together, it is them and I am part of them, we become one group, we discuss, talk and share. I come to the classroom and say, for example, today is about tourism and environment, what do you understand by that? Think, reflect, and speak anything you like about it, relate to your life



and to your daily experiences. They speak, engage, get enthusiastic, share, exchange ideas, debate, open up, express their views and learn.

It does not need to be only words. It could be gestures; when I look at my students with enthusiasm, I am conveying a message that I am happy to be dialoguing with them. It can be a drawing and pictures too...it is a dialogue... it is a togetherness! I think it is through our attitude of embracing the other... the togetherness, willing to accept, listen and converse that we co-create learning and possibilities.

Students and I converse about the topics, but I also open the space for students to express themselves. They deviate from the topic sometimes; I am okay with this, I give them the voice, the space, the freedom to express; then I bring them back with a story from the industry that I link to the topic, but particularly to examples from their daily lives related to our marketing topics. They relate better; they open up, they get excited to share. I divide them into debating teams, they live it, and they love it!

I challenge them with unusual questions too, what if? I invite the co-creation of scenarios; I invite the different voices; these young women students get engaged, they get involved, they give feedback to each other. I invite them to voice their opinions; I diffuse an idea and wait... I respect... I say my famous 'bravo'... I encourage the students to reflect on the concepts by linking them to their daily interactions and lives. The students respond as it touches their lives. They consider me an older sister... I break the taboos. I demonstrate respect for the point of view of the students.

Students might refrain at first from participating but with trust built and open atmosphere they start participating, and it is only the beginning of the beautiful flowing of ideas.

Hence, in my relational research stories, I explored how these relational learning approaches have helped young Emirati women students - who have now graduated - learn, change and transform during their college time, acquiring communication skills, and beyond, in their job interviews, starting positions, managerial positions, career paths and in their lives overall.

Using appreciative in-depth protocols, I interviewed 25 of my women business graduates who had experienced relational learning in my marketing courses. I also used appreciative in-depth interviews seeking the insights of three industry representatives in RAK who had helped many of these graduates in the industry-linked projects. The research resulted in a rich description of the stories of these graduates and industry representatives.

The emergent themes showed that relational learning in marketing, in the research context, is an education innovation, an education application, leads to heightened 21st century competencies, and potentially empowers women. This research informs a number of different stakeholders who can act as change agents, helping women students and graduates learn, change and transform.

I leave you with this reflection and welcome yours as well.

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