

Making “Americans”
of Qataris:
Reflections on
Serving in a
Middle Eastern
Writing Center

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INTRODUCTION

One morning recently I entered the university where I work as an Assistant Professor of Writing and came face to face with a freestanding vertical poster for our Crossing Boundaries Lecture Series. This seven-lecture series "reflects the cross-disciplinary nature of the featured speakers who . . . are representatives of excellence in design thinking," and all seven lectures are open to the public ("VCUQatar Presents," par. 6).

This colorfully illustrated combination of reds, white, and blues (America's patriotic colors, no less!) was placed prominently to the right just inside the University entrance where it inevitably caught my attention. It proudly proclaimed, "CROSSING BOUNDARIES," across the top, and its message was poised right at my eye level:

**"CONTE
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& ARTI
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THE AFR
ICA"**

Unfortunately, the word *artists*, in red-edged outline letters, dissolved into the red of the background illustration, and it took me *days* to figure out the word. I wondered how many of our students, most of whom are non-native speakers of English, had deciphered the message. Would the public be able to read it? As a writing professional, I felt ashamed that the University was promoting such an illegible message to hundreds of visitors. What covert messages was it conveying? How many people gave up trying to read it before they understood we were inviting them to something? Did it alienate anyone, not just against the series, but also against the University itself?

I did not produce this poster. I work in the Writing Center, and this type of writing is beyond the scope of my job description and my service to the University. . . . *Or is it?* As this question caught in my mind, I began to wrestle with not just it, but with some other disturbing questions as well: *What does it mean to serve? Whom does the Writing Center actually serve? What does writing center service include, and where are the boundaries of that service?*

In search of answers to these questions, I embarked on the following journey.

VCUQATAR WRITING CENTER: EARLY DAYS

Virginia Commonwealth University in Qatar (VCUQatar) is a branch campus of the School of the Arts at an American University located in Richmond, Virginia. We opened in Education City with 24 female Qatari students in 1999 as Shaqab College of Design Arts employed by Qatar Foundation. Today we are a full-fledged branch campus of Virginia Commonwealth University, and we are co-educational with approximately 215 full-time students. Our programs now include Bachelor of Fine Arts majors in Fashion, Graphic, and Interior Design and in Painting and Printmaking; a minor in Art History; and an MFA program in Design Studies.

Originally our writing center consisted of whatever English faculty was available to spend time in an unstaffed classroom computer lab working one on one with students. One English faculty member assumed more responsibility than did the others for the loosely structured writing center and tutored in this lab, keeping a few rudimentary notes on her work with students. She continued working with me when I arrived in 2004 as the first person hired full time to work in the VCUQatar Writing Center.

Because we were a fledgling female university desperate for students during this time, we were accepting some young women with TOEFL scores as low as 470 on the written exam despite a stated admission requirement in the low 500s. Our student population also was expanding to include not just Qataris but also young women from neighboring Gulf countries. Although most of these students could understand oral English and speak it passably themselves, reading and writing in English were very difficult for many of them.

"OMANI A"

One Omani student with whom I worked extensively during this time was a young woman whom I will call "Omani A." I met her when she was a freshman because she was very nervous about her ability to write in English and consequently started coming to the Writing Center in September—very early in her first fall semester.

My very first appointment report for Omani A read,

This appointment didn't work out. Although I repeated 1-1:30 several times to . . . [her] and pointed to it on the book, she still didn't arrive until 1:30, apparently thinking the appointment STARTED then rather than ENDED then. Unfortunately, my next appointment was already here, so we didn't keep this appointment. (Hodges, " 'Omani A' Report," 28 Sept. 2005)

This was one of my earliest encounters with a different cultural understanding of time. Although my philosophy and intention were to "respect the culture," I realized that this student would never succeed in an American university unless she adapted to the "time is money" attitude of Americans. Thus, I unexpectedly found myself adding an exception to my "respect the culture" philosophy in addition to teaching a new cultural attitude along with writing. Although teaching this new "course content" certainly was unexpected, it was, and still is, necessary. Especially as freshmen, many of our students arrive with insufficient study and time management skills, not to

mention some immature attitudes. Although all freshmen take University 101, which addresses these problems, for some students the lessons taught in that course require greater reinforcement than one semester can provide—after all, we are, in essence, attempting to change a student's way of life. Having clearly stated, publicly advertised guidelines for Writing Center appointments that one can enforce makes dealing with these problems much easier and also aids the process of "Americanizing" traditionally casual time attitudes and various behaviors that no longer work well in the modern business world.

Subsequent reports for Omani A repeatedly emphasized her many writing problems, mostly arising from a limited ability to use English and a lack of previous training in thinking skills. I also discovered a stubborn streak in this student when an English professor assigned a Critical Response Paper about a source that Omani A later would use in an argumentative essay. One of my reports for her work on this assignment explains how I coped with this trait:

I am concerned that . . . [Omani A] does not understand the nature of this assignment because she kept straying from the article into her own ideas. After several explanations about this, I decided that she would be able to use her ideas in her paper later, that it would be ok to document them here [within the Critical Response Paper], and that she could use them to illustrate what the article was saying. So, you will see a good bit of . . . [Omani A's] voice in this assignment. (Hodges, " 'Omani A' Report," 9 April 2007)

This report illustrates my intention to balance a mutual collaboration with both professor and student, hopefully informing both rather than alienating either, an admittedly delicate and precarious stance. I gently tried to persuade Omani A to accept what I knew to be the intended strategy for this assignment, but in the face of her repeated refusal, I felt that I had to be the one to "give in" in order to maintain her trust in our relationship.

During the writing center appointment, I try to regard the student as "boss" and myself as an informed advisor/consultant who respects the student's freedom to choose whether to take my advice. This means that sometimes I must value the relationship more than being right or enforcing my rules or opinions. Maintaining the relationship we have established usually means that there will be many more future opportunities for me to teach this student, and in cases where the student refuses to accept my guidance or instruction, first-hand experience often teaches what I could not. That said, in order to maintain a relationship of trust between the professor and myself, I feel an obligation to let the professor know that the student has refused my advice. This also alerts the professor that additional work may be necessary with this student.

By the end of Omani A's senior year, her appointment reports were discussing our dealings with *ideas* much more than with language mechanics. She had made tremendous progress in her use of the English language as well as in her self-confidence. My last report for her illustrates these changes: "We talked about 'cultural jamming' in particular because it is one of the topics . . .

[Omani A] wants to discuss and because it was a new term to me that she enjoyed telling me about" (Hodges, " 'Omani A' Report," 23 April 2009).

"MISS B"

One example of a student's learning from "first-hand experience" occurred about four years later with another freshman given an assignment by a Design professor who, despite several requests, had not provided the Writing Center with assignment copies. I will call this student "Miss B" because of her always addressing me as "Miss." The first report of my work with Miss B, whose professor had required students to come to the Writing Center as part of their grade for an assignment, described her as knowing ". . . a lot about writing, such as the intro-body-conclusion structure and contents and the meaning of a thesis. She really didn't want to come here . . . because she is bothered by being structured in her writing, although she does love to write and writes a lot" (Hodges, " 'Miss B' Report," 9 Sept. 2008).

As I came to know this student better, I progressed from regarding her as sometimes sullen and usually uncomfortably remote and independent to valuing her quick intelligence and respecting her fear of having her creativity and independence stifled, possibly because she is a female who comes from a male-dominant society.

As with Omani A, I was unable to persuade Miss B to approach her assignment in what I suspected was the intended manner. As mentioned, I had no official copy of the assignment, and Miss B never brought in her assignment sheet but was certain about her explanation of what was expected; however, I had trouble understanding the relationship between what Miss B was doing and what I thought would be more relevant for her design class. Consequently, I was nervous about our work, but Miss B did reassure me that she had reviewed the professor's instructions in Blackboard and was responding to them appropriately. I was not completely surprised when I received an email from Miss B's professor soon after she graded the assignment:

Dear Jean,

[Miss B's] paper is well written BUT COMPLETELY off the point. The point was to look at the work and speak about how the work impacted her own work and to speak about the influences historically and on her. Not the woman at all but the photograph and the idea of photography. It is too bad. She will actually get a very bad grade for the well written paper. It is an issue with the understanding of the assignment.

I may need your help understanding how you help the students. I feel that they should show you the assignment and explain the expectations. I feel really bad for her. She just did not get it and did not ask me either. (Professor, "Email to Hodges No. 1," 18 Oct. 2009)

Of course, I was upset with the student's grade as well, but Miss B knew that I had questioned what she was doing and had tried to persuade her to take a different approach. When I spoke with Miss B, she was sad but mature enough to recognize and accept her own responsibility.

My greater problem concerned the second paragraph written by the professor, which sounded to me as though *I* had misunderstood the assignment, which, of course, was true. This professor's trust in my work clearly was damaged—a signal of more problems to come if our relationship were not repaired. Consequently, I took advantage of the implied invitation to explain how I help students by promptly responding to this professor:

. . . I . . . asked [Miss B] to tell me about the assignment, but I had to rely on what she told me because she did not bring a copy of the assignment with her (as students are supposed to do). Unfortunately, I didn't have a copy myself and don't have access to your Blackboard course, so I could not check the assignment myself and redirect us. When one of her emails mentioned that she had reviewed the instructions in Blackboard and added material about Bernhardt's influence on her, I felt a little relieved that she had actually reviewed the instructions again. By then I did not suspect that she was misunderstanding the assignment.

To avoid just this type of problem, we ask the student to bring the assignment in to their appointment. Knowing how students are, we also ask faculty to send us syllabi and assignment instructions at the beginning of each semester, and we request being included in Blackboard as students when the professor is using it to accompany the course (again, each semester). . . .

Despite our best efforts, sometimes experiences like this one happen. I don't know what more we in the Writing Center can do to prevent them, but I am open to suggestions. (Hodges, "Email to Professor," 18 Oct. 2009)

The professor's reply was both gracious and helpful:

Jeanne,

I will add you on my blackboard. Is there anyone else I should add? The students have a 5 page paper due next week. I will attach the assignment in case. Please let me know if you have questions.

I still want the students to come to you for help knowing what it is they need to do by asking their professor until they are sure. If they seem unsure, please send them back to me. It is important that they do the 5 page paper well because it will be the basis for the completion of the project.

Thanks for your help. (Professor, "Email to Hodges No. 2," 18 Oct. 2009)

At last, I had access to the "official" information I needed because the professor now understood why it was important. She took the final step toward repairing our relationship by assuring me through her statement, "I still want the students to come to you for help," that she did trust the work I was doing with students. Although the solution she offered to the problem ("asking their professor until they are sure") is what I naturally would have recommended to the student or done myself had Miss B seemed unsure, this experience reinforced the necessity of procedures we already had established, and it strengthened our arguments in favor of them. In addition, it emphasized the importance of establishing and maintaining good relationships with faculty and actively educating them about the work of the Center. Because the faculty is a dynamic group, maintaining our relationships with them and actively educating them about writing center work are ongoing processes that I learned neither to take for granted nor to ignore.

"Omani C"

In addition to educating faculty about the Writing Center's needs and work with students, several times I have unexpectedly discovered myself "educating" them in yet another way. As a writing teacher, I emphasize the importance of analyzing the targeted audience before writing because the audience's specific background knowledge and needs will require various specific strategies for communicating successfully with them. Similarly, professors tailor their lesson plans to fit their targeted audiences, the specific students enrolled in a given class. Because many of us at VCUQatar now have lived in Doha and worked in our American-style university for several years, we sometimes fail to realize how very different our students' cultural backgrounds can be from our own, as well as the extent to which cultural knowledge impacts a text. Our experiences in Qatar have made us "semi-hybrids" of American and Arab cultures, so we find it very easy to forget that our students are not necessarily the same variety of "semi-hybrids" that we are. This forgetting, sometimes combined with limited availability of culturally suitable texts, makes an occasional misjudgment in choosing course materials inevitable. Perhaps the example that we in the Writing Center experienced most strongly because of the number of students we saw concerning it involved a poem the students were analyzing in one of their English courses. The poem was "Traveling Through the Dark," by William Stafford, and one of the students who struggled most with writing a paper about it I'll call "Omani C."

Although Omani C entered VCUQatar with a TOEFL score on the handwritten exam in the upper 400s and admittedly struggled with written English, she was dedicated to improving her writing and to completing her degree. Consequently, she was an almost daily client in the Writing Center who was improving slowly but surely. She was a junior when she took this English course, and she already had composed some original poetry for this class with some success, as my report to her professor indicates:

[Omani C] wanted to be sure that her poems said what she intended to say, so I read through each of three and explained to her what I got from them line by line. There were only a couple of words that she used incorrectly or unintentionally, and we discussed what she meant and how to reword these items. . . . I especially liked her short poem, "SUN," which consists of three lines beginning with words that spell out *sun*. She uses some clever ideas in this and her other poems. (Hodges, " 'Omani C' Report," 24 Sept. 2007)

Stafford's 18-line poem is about his finding a dead pregnant deer on the edge of a narrow road at night. His first instinct is to roll the body off the road into a canyon to prevent another motorist's swerving to avoid it and consequently hitting an oncoming car, perhaps causing more deaths. Just after passing the deer, he parks the car and returns to drag the deer off the road by light of the car's tail-lights. This is when Stafford discovers that the deer is pregnant and the fawn is alive. As he faces the moral dilemma of whether to dispose of both the deer and fawn or to try to somehow rescue the fawn, he imagines his car and the surrounding wilderness as living things waiting and watching for his choice. He thinks "hard for us all" but finally pushes the doe over the edge of the road.

Most of the students struggled with enough words in this poem that they did not understand the scene setting. For example, most did not know the meanings of *canyon*, *wilderness*, and *fawn* and had no life experiences to help them imagine them. In addition, the concept of *metaphor* was new to most of them, and they found the metaphors of the car, the wilderness, and the doe especially hard to grasp. My report to Omani C's English professor was somewhat typical of those written about students in the course who visited the Writing Center:

The poem and its analysis seem especially hard for [Omani C]. We worked through each of your comments, but she had an especially difficult time understanding the metaphor of the man and his car (which represents technology). I explained many aspects of this metaphor at length, but [Omani C] still did not really grasp or feel comfortable with it. Again, her life experience came into play because she did not understand that the road was unlighted by street lights and bordered on both sides by a cliff and trees so the man could not just drive off "into the desert" to get around the deer as SUVs do here. That the car was "alive" (purring) seemed absurd to her! We also talked about the metaphor of the heap and the doe, and she seemed to grasp this one better. We also discussed deer words: *buck*, *doe*, *fawn*, and *rack*. (Omani C, "Report," 1 Oct. 2007)

Working together with students struggling though this poem helped both the English professor and those of us in the Writing Center discover just how wide the cultural divide between our Arab students and us Americans could be. The experience taught us deeper awareness of and respect for the subtle influences with which culture can permeate a text.

Service

The online dictionary, *Merriam-Webster.com*, defines *service* in nearly a dozen different ways, but the one that I think best applies to writing center work is "contribution to the welfare of others" (Definition 2.c). It describes very simply the act of beneficial giving without tying the gift to any particular group. This is important because writing centers serve their institutions as well as their clients and the profession, among many other constituencies. However, even knowing that I would serve numerous constituencies when I entered writing center work, I did not realize some of the complexities involved that I now see emerging.

One example of these complexities is illustrated in Omani A's example above. During my very first encounter with her, I found myself giving her something unexpected: authoritarian rule enforcement. I had thought I would be tutoring her in English writing skills, but her failure to arrive at the stated and reinforced appointment time dictated the need for a more important lesson in following instructions and managing time. Consequently, I became parent or administrator instead of English tutor, serving not only the student's imminent learning need but also indirectly serving any future persons who would expect and depend upon her to keep an appointment on time and at the correct time. I do not even know who these future persons may be, just as I do not know who are the previous persons in the fabric of her behavioral instruction. Yet I have now joined this latter group, adding my voice to theirs in this student's experience. Judging from Bringhurst's statement above, even though I did not set out to offer this type of service, I have an ethical obligation to "contribute to the welfare of" this client of the writing center who is self-damaging her opportunity to gain the writing assistance she needs.

Similarly, both Omani A and Miss B were sabotaging their opportunities to learn the lessons intended by their professors because they refused to accept the guidance I was offering them. By limiting my attempts to convince them of better strategies based upon my longer experience with their professors, I allowed each student to choose her own way, thereby learning from its consequences. Although the consequences were especially painful in the case of Miss B, I believe that they were less severe than those she would have encountered later in her professional life had she not learned to consider and evaluate seriously the advice of others. Once again, not only were two students served as writing center constituents but also unknown future others who would benefit from what these students had learned from these experiences.

More directly related in time, two professors were served by Miss B's and Omani C's experiences. Miss B's professor came to understand the importance of supplying the writing center with syllabi and assignments and learned how the Center supports the work that she does with the student. Both Omani C's professor and I came to see the poetry text from a completely different perspective—that of the student whose culture is very different from an American's culture. This new perspective has continued to influence the English professor's choice of reading materials and has helped sensitize me to cultural problems with other classroom

materials and textbooks that I can call to the attention of others. Thus, not only have two specific faculty members been served in these students' experiences, but also future professors and students may benefit from the selections of more culturally appropriate classroom materials.

Experiences with Omani A, Miss B, and Omani C, among many other students and faculty members directly served by the VCUQatar Writing Center, have convinced me that Bringhurst's "many constituencies" have farther-reaching implications than we usually recognize. Not only do we serve those clients who walk through the writing center door to meet with us in person, but we also serve wide-ranging "phantom clients" whom we may never meet. Their lives, too, are impacted by our work with the writing center's various constituencies, and when we serve those constituencies effectively, those indirectly impacted benefit as well.

Ethics

While I have now come to regard service and those served by the writing center in more flexible terms than I had previously thought, one ethical boundary has continued to disturb me. It concerns the university's instructions to provide an American-style education to students of Qatar and other diverse cultures. Too often it seems to me that we, perhaps unintentionally, disregard the student's culture in favor of American habits, styles, materials, and values, and sometimes it feels as though we are trying to replace their native cultures with our own. I especially wrestle with this issue when a student brings in a paper in which the professor has crossed out beautifully poetic language in favor of the concise, direct language of the American business world or when a professor makes numerous changes in wording so the resulting text reflects his or her preferred synonyms rather than the student's voice. By recognizing the student as "boss," writing center tutors attempt to avoid these types of corrections.

Although American English has become the *lingua franca* of the global business world, I am not convinced that it must be written *exactly* the way that Americans use it. Have we Americans not insisted that the world learn *our* language long enough while we make few efforts to learn anything about others' languages? As we continue to diversify and globalize, I suspect that we Americans eventually will have to recognize that these are *mutual* processes affecting not only *them* but *us* as well.

Interestingly, the "Crossing Boundaries" poster that first stirred my questions about service, ethics, and boundaries was written in "American English." Whether it successfully communicated its message—its most important purpose—is questionable. As we continue navigating through communication in a global world, trying to make Americans out of anyone else, I think, will fail. In actuality, crossing the boundaries of other cultures through carefully and sensitively crafted communication will change *us* as much as it does *them* because we will learn about each other. What will emerge will be neither American nor Qatari but a *global* citizen endowed with the richness and understanding of both cultures.

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