Implementing a 'pedagogy of interruption': worth the risk

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Abstract

This paper explores the work of the educational theorist Gert Biesta in a setting outside of the context where it was originally developed. It aims to address how Biesta's approach can help educators and policy makers question the philosophical underpinnings of education in the UAE and thereby start a conversation that is currently absent in this context. The paper comprises three elements: first, an overview of Biesta's educational theory is given with a focus on 'subjectification' and his self-titled "pedagogy of interruption". Secondly and in brief, I use Biesta's framework of educational dimensions to analyse the philosophy underlying education in the United Arab Emirates using published government documents and media sources. Thirdly, I report a small-scale qualitative analysis of a specific educational space, three General Studies Courses in a UAE tertiary institution, to investigate the 'risky' possibilities involved in implementing a pedagogy of interruption. I find that despite a dominant policy discourse that discounts subjectification, there are significant opportunities for students to develop a strong sense of self. These opportunities are created by a small but strongly motivated group of teachers and taken up, on the whole enthusiastically, by students. However, my assertions are limited by a number of challenges which warrant further research. This paper hopes to provide a meaningful contribution to the limited discussion regarding the aims and expectations of education in the Middle East, and finds a pertinent philosophical grounding for liberal studies teaching in a tertiary context. As such the paper will be of value both to policy and decision makers in the Middle East and to teachers and trainers who teach in multi-cultural and international contexts.

Introduction

This paper was stimulated by discussion of a topic that is rarely addressed in the United Arab Emirates (UAE): *What are the aims of education?* It engages with the work of the contemporary European educational theorist Gert Biesta, who believes that education entails a "beautiful risk" (Biesta, 2014). I engage with Biesta's work on three levels: firstly, I offer an overview of Biesta's own answer to the question, which involves engaging with the complex concept of subjectification, central to his thesis. In his theory of education we come across "a pedagogy of interruption" entailing communication between, and uniqueness of, people in society. Implementing this pedagogy is, philosophically and pedagogically, a risky affair. Through a reading of government policy and strategy documents I briefly explore the philosophical aims of education in the UAE in order to situate the wider context. I then focus on a specific educational context, three General Studies Courses at a tertiary institution in Dubai. I investigate and exemplify opportunities for initiating subjectification within this sphere using an additional theoretical tool: the work of Lynn Davies (2006), which revolves around pedagogy for interruptive democracy.   I argue that our students benefit enormously from educational opportunities like this, despite the risks involved; nevertheless, I conclude with a brief discussion of issues that may prevent the initiation of this approach in education.

Biestan thought

Freedom and subjectivity

Throughout Biesta's body of work an orientation towards freedom is evident. Biesta acknowledges the tradition from which his ideas emanate when he states:

> by connecting [...] education with the idea of freedom I situate myself explicitly within a particular educational and political tradition that has roots in the Enlightenment. (Biesta, 2010b p.129)

However, where Kant's notion of freedom is

> an autonomy of the will, the freedom of the rational individual to follow the dictates of his own reason by adhering to [...] universal moral laws (Newman, 2003, parag. 3),

Biesta's notion of freedom is deeply inspired by Foucault's conceptions of a network of relational power and of the individual who lives as part of this network:

> Freedom must be seen as a practice, a critical ethos of self, and as a struggle that is engaged in by the individual within the problematic of power. It necessarily involves a reflection on the limits of the self and the ontological conditions of the present – a constant reinvention and problematization of subjectivity. (ibid. parag. 39)

Biesta's freedom too, is linked to power and to the freedom of others:

> We should not think of freedom as sovereignty [...;] I have rather made the case for a 'difficult' notion of freedom, one where my freedom to act, that is, to bring my beginnings into the world, is always connected with the freedom of others to take the initiative, to bring their beginnings into the world as well, so that the impossibility to remain "unique masters" of what we do (Arendt 1958, p. 244) is the very condition under which our beginnings can come into the world. (Biesta, 2010b, p.129)

Biesta states that

> education [...] should always also have an interest in human freedom and this is what lies behind my insistence on the importance of the subjectification dimension in education" (Biesta 2010b p.75).

Throughout Biesta's philosophical development the notions of freedom and subjectification persist. Before proceeding further, a definition of *subjectivity* is required in order to situate Biesta's theories: subjectivity is

> patterns by which experiential and emotional contexts, feelings, images and memories are organized to form one's self-image, one's sense of self and others, and our possibilities of existence. (De Lauretis, 1986, cited in Ball, 2006, p. 701)

This is how each of us becomes a *subject* (in the sense used in poststructuralist literature): a person who is the recipient of actions and the contributor of actions; it is how we *find ourselves* in a world of plurality and difference, not only of culture, religions, color, race or history but also as uniquely individual beings. It shapes how we relate to people who are not like us and how they respond to us. Our own being and coming into being is a direct result of the responses of others (Biesta, 1998). Biesta argues that there are three essential domains to education: *qualification*, *socialization* and *subjectification* (Figure 1 below) (Biesta, 2010b, pp.19-22); and orientation towards freedom is situated in the domain of subjectification.

Biestan aims of education

Biesta proposes a theoretical framework in which discussions about the aim of education can be situated (Biesta, 2010a, p19). He posits that good education is a composite process comprising three

dimensions (Figure 1): qualification, socialization and subjectification (ibid, p.19). Of these, qualification is the easiest to define:

> A major function of education [...] lies in the qualification of children, young people and adults. It lies in providing them with the knowledge, skills and understandings and often also with the dispositions and forms of judgments that allow them to 'do something' – a doing that can range from the specific ([...] training for a particular job or profession [...]) to the [...] more general ([...] the teaching of life skills [...].] It is particularly [...] connected to economic arguments, i.e. the role education plays in the preparation of the workforce [...] and to the contribution education makes to economic development and growth. (ibid, p.20)

The function of socialization, on the other hand, is

> to do with the many ways in which, through education, we become part of particular social, cultural and political 'orders' (ibid, p.20)

This can be seen in the way that cultural norms and values are passed (both implicitly and explicitly) from generation to generation and thereby "insert individuals into existing ways of doing and being" (ibid, p.20).

Contrastingly, Biesta argues that subjectification is the opposite of socialization:

> it is precisely *not* about the insertion of 'newcomers' into existing orders but about ways that hint at independence from such orders, ways of being in which the individual is not simply a 'specimen' of a more encompassing order. (ibid p.21).

He suggests discussions should surround

> the kind of subjectivity – or kinds of subjectivity – that are made possible as a result of particular educational arrangements and configurations orders, ways of being in which the individual is not simply a 'specimen' of a more encompassing order (ibid).

and that, in agreement with other prominent philosophers in both the analytical and critical traditions,

> any education worthy of its name should always contribute to the processes of subjectification that allow those educated to become more autonomous and independent in their thinking and acting (ibid).

Figure 1: Biestan framework of educational aims.

James, A. (2014). Implementing a 'pedagogy of interruption': worth the risk. *Learning and Teaching in Higher Education: Gulf Perspectives*, *11*(2). http://lthe.zu.ac.ae

A pedagogy of interruption

Biesta's philosophical praxis has developed around four interlocking themes (Figure 2), two of which relate to the conditions/modes of education: first that education takes place in an 'impossible' space, an in-between space of difference and plurality, which, paradoxically makes education possible (Biesta & Vanderstraeten, 2001) and secondly that education involves an emancipatory 'ignorance'/risk. Within these modes, two inter-locking notions are found: *uniqueness* and *coming into presence*; these concern the continual birth and re-birth of the subject (person) (Biesta, 2010b). Biesta's pedagogy of interruption is described in greater depth in James (2013a and 2013b).
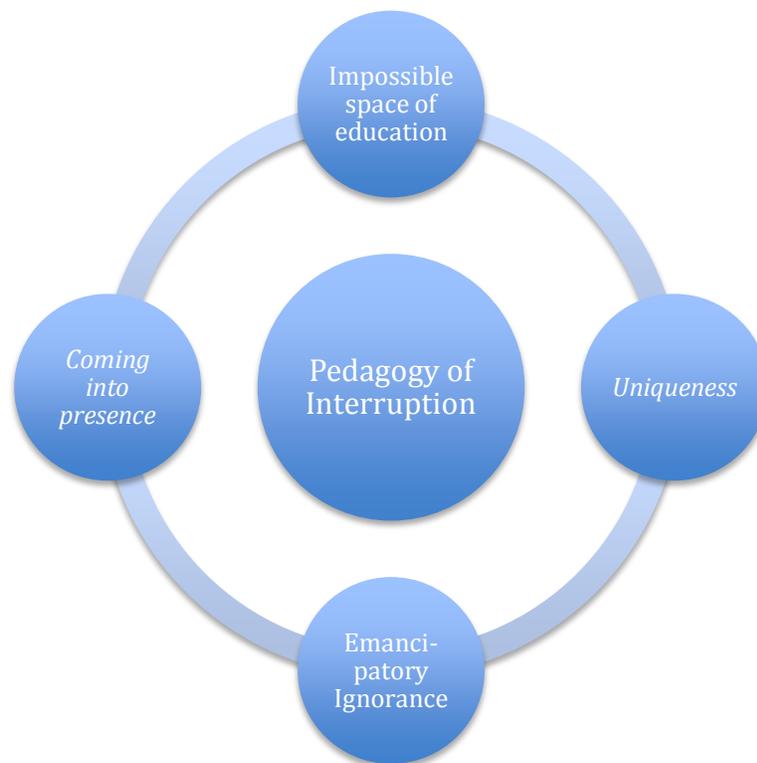

Figure 2: Four themes of Biestan educational theory.

As an educator working in higher education in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) two questions arise:

1. What, in terms of the Biestan framework, are the overarching philosophical aims of education in this context?
2. Are Biestan ideas appropriate in a setting that is politically, socially and culturally different to those where they were originally conceived?

The remainder of this paper concerns these questions. I begin by exploring the philosophical aims of education in the UAE (according to limited available published sources) using the Biestan framework, and consider whether the over-arching conditions are apposite and opportune for subjectification. I approach the second question by considering a specific educational space though small-scale qualitative analysis of three General Studies courses in a higher education setting in the UAE.

Aims of education in the UAE: a summary analysis

Grand narratives and the aims of higher education

Educational policy analysis is problematic in the UAE as government policy documents are not in the public domain. However, philosophical underpinnings can be interpreted from the documentation on official government websites and from media statements. Using publicly-available sources, I will attempt to construe the philosophical foundations which inform the goals of education.

Vision 2021 (UAE Government, 2012) a ten year national strategic plan, emphasizes qualification, with a focus on developing "the full potential National Human Capital" (ibid, p.16), a "Knowledge-based and highly productive economy" (ibid, p.18) and "first rate Education" (ibid, p.23). The notion that education should 'qualify' citizens to work pervades the discourse of this document and, despite contextual differences of a socio-cultural and political nature, echoes of Western concepts are apparent. The tone and direction set throughout the entire document demonstrates an alignment to Human Capital Theory summarized thus:

> education is positioned as the driver of skills and qualifications, which will fuel the growth of human
> capital, driving the knowledge economy [... with the assumption] that measures of personal
> happiness and fulfillment will be found within the capacity to work. (James, 2013, p.9).

The Ministry of Education strategy (Ministry of Education, 2010) focuses less on grand narratives of education and more on performative targets, but nevertheless mirrors the same themes, with the first strategic objective paying allegiance to human capital theory: "ensure high quality curriculum is in place so that students are best prepared for the knowledge economy" (ibid.) Additional UAE higher education documents (*UAEU* [UAE University] *Strategic Plan*, 2013; *HCT* [Higher Colleges of Technology] *Strategic Plan*, 2012) support this assertion.

Socialization is also prominent in Vision 2021 discourse, exemplified as follows:

> Upholding the legacy of the nation's founding fathers: the Federation will continue to rise in the
> national consciousness to represent the defining point of allegiance for all Emiratis. This sense of
> common destiny and of belonging to one nation will bind all citizens together in building their shared
> future. (UAE Government, 2012, p.10)

The word "allegiance" is important here; it refers to the traditional tribal bonds of society (Heard-Bey, 1996, p.404) and reminds the audience of both the collectivist and paternalistic nature of society. The emphasis on socialization came across in the National Day 2012 announcements which introduced the new UAE "Charter for National Values and Ethics which aims to raise a generation of Emiratis who are aware of their responsibilities towards their nation, families and society" (Salama, 2012) and the introduction of Emirati Studies as a mandatory course in all federally funded tertiary institutions (Shabandri, 2012). Education is thus expected (as elsewhere) to play a central role in the socialization of citizens into the existing and developing cultural, economic, religious and social order of society.

Analysis

I believe these documents and media statements accurately represent the general tone of UAE policy discourse. Notwithstanding an intensive reading, the discourse demonstrates the paucity of explicit opportunities or openings for subjectification as an educational aim alongside a lack of philosophical support.

The broad educational polices in the UAE reflect, as one might encounter in developed countries (White, 1990 in Gilead, 2009, p. 564), an educational agenda that places human capital theory adjacent to the

strengthening of social cohesion. Necessarily, subjectification tends to be excluded. Gilead (2009) explores the strain between economic and social interests in which is found the problematic issue of how to reconcile the rhetoric of human capital theory with the push for social cohesion. Having analysed various socio-economic models which purport to do just this, he concludes that

> the tension between the pattern of behavior assumed by human capital theory and the one required by the conception of social cooperation [...] cannot be resolved. There is no easy way to combine the demands of human capital theory that people act as a rational wealth maximizer with the conviction that transcending self-regarding behavior is essential for cooperation. (p. 565)

To summarize, then, the aims of UAE education are articulated in two interlocked yet seemingly incompatible discourses: one calls for the individual to educate himself to better his material chances in life, and a second calls the individual to work hard for the common good. These portray contradictory messages, and unmask the similarities between UAE policy discourse and those of Western liberal nations (Lolich, 2009). It is precisely *within* Western liberal nations those jurisdictions that Biesta makes the call for greater incorporation of subjectivity into the educational framework: thus the challenges that emanate from this paradoxical philosophical discourse are certainly not unique to the UAE's domain.

Initiating subjectification in tertiary General Studies courses in the UAE

In this section I attempt to investigate the question of whether Biestan ideas are appropriate in a setting politically, socially and culturally different to that where they were conceived. As has just been described, educative notions of qualification and socialization have been imported from other settings, incorporated and localized into current grand narratives of strategic educational policy in the UAE. However, the absence of subjectification in educational policy does not necessarily mean that it does not occur in educational *practice*.

Notions of subjectivity rise out of the broadly secular Enlightenment and humanistic traditions; in the West it can be argued that potential for subjectification in education has potential because Western thought has a history of (at least in principle) supporting emancipatory discourse and dissensus in Biestan fashion. Biesta states that (Western) teachers have a natural empathy towards emancipation when he says

> Many educators see their task not simply as modifying or conditioning the behavior of their students. They want their students to become independent and autonomous, to be able to think for themselves, to make their own judgments and draw their own conclusions. (Biesta, 2010a, p.39)

Given that many of the expatriate teachers in federally funded tertiary educational institutions are western educated, I believe it is valid to ask whether it is possible that ideas and processes of subjectification have also (perhaps inadvertently) been imported and are being incorporated into HE in the UAE.

Although Biesta stresses that his theories do not provide a methodology or outcomes, in order to investigate their potential and to be of value to teachers practical pedagogical suggestions do need to be postulated. He asserts that current trends in education are based upon "the *eradication of risk* and *a desire for total control* over the educational process" (Winter, 2011, p.540, emphasis added); therefore we need to consider a pedagogical praxis that does incorporate Biesta's insistence on risk in education. In order to do this I take as a starting point "Education for Positive Conflict and Interruptive Democracy" (Davies, 2006, p. 1029). Davies works in post-conflict/war zones and multi-cultural urban Britain, yet her language and philosophy echo Biesta's and are therefore apposite for our context. Her pedagogical ideas contain three central components – identity work, deliberation and creativity (ibid., p. 1036) and

her tenfold recommendations for an interruptive school incorporate elements where opportunities for the subjectification could arise (ibid. p.1036-7).

The setting: institution, faculty and students

The investigation is located is a federally funded tertiary educational institution in Dubai, the largest city in the UAE. Courses are based on an American collegiate system, with Major and Minor courses delivered in English, most students' second language. Given the standard of primary and secondary education in the government system, many students would not meet academic requirements that might be expected in a Western tertiary institution.

The students in the study are in their 3rd and 4th Year of Applied Media, Business and Education programs. They are all Emiratis (tertiary education is free for Emirati citizens) and on this campus the majority of students are female. Due to operational factors, occasional classes are mixed gender and some data from male correspondents is included in this study. Students' ages range from 22-35; some students are full-time students and others are working students who are continuing their studies in the afternoons and evening.

Faculty referred to in the study are all Western-educated to Master's Level and teach on a combination of the courses described below. Their nationalities are British, Australian and New Zealander, three female and one male; one is British-Muslim, the others are non-Muslim with experience in the UAE ranging from eight to sixteen years.

Anonymity has been preserved in all cases: faculty and student names have all been changed.

General Studies courses

The three General Studies courses concerned are taught across a variety of Bachelor's programs: Business, Applied Communications, Information Technology, Health Sciences and Education. They are taught over a 16-week semester with four contact hours a week between teachers and students. The courses are taught through a combination of online work, research and lectures and assessed through research essays/reports, presentations, online readings and reflections and final computer-based tests.

Intercultural Intelligence (ICI)

The Intercultural Intelligence course is adapted for second language learners from Cultural Mapping and Navigation materials developed by KnowledgeWorkx® (KnowledgeWorkx, 2011), a Dubai-based business consultancy, specializing in intercultural intelligence. They use two models to frame the basis of the ICI course: *Three Colours Worldview Theory* and *12 Cultural Dimensions* (ibid). Three Colours Worldview originates with Muller (2001) and is diagrammatized in Figure 3 (ibid).

Cultural Dimensions (Table 1), was developed from Hofstede et al.'s (2010) cultural dimensions and incorporates the work of various other intercultural researchers (Yoder 2011). Both these models have the weakness that they could be labeled as essentializing culture, but faculty do their best in their lectures, examples and interactive explorations of these concepts to avoid this. The strength of using both of these models is that they have self-assessment tools that our students undertake and then receive personalized feedback; both tools provide useful and neutral frameworks from which to analyse their own self-culture, Emirati culture and surrounding cultures present within the UAE. More details on the teaching methodology in this course can be found in James & Shammas (2013).

Figure 3: Three Colours Worldview (KnowledgeWorkx, 2011).

Table 1: Cultural dimensions (KnowledgeWorkx, 2011).

12 Cultural Dimensions		
Material	**Growth**	Personal
Tradition	**Outlook**	Innovation
Conceal	**Expression**	Reveal
Inclusive	**Connecting**	Exclusive
Rules	**Decision-making**	Relationship
Direct	**Communication**	Indirect
Directed	**Destiny**	Directive
Community	**Accountability**	Individual
Situational	**Relationships**	Universal
Formal	**Context**	Informal
Time	**Planning**	People
Achieved	**Status**	Ascribed

Historical Perspectives on the Arab World (History)

In this institution, this course has three main topic areas: the Early Islamic Era; the Golden Age of Islam and the Ottoman Empire. The first of these covers the early history of Arabia and the coming of Islam to the Arabian Peninsula up to the end of the Ummayid Caliphate. The second topic is a research-based unit based on historical social and intellectual developments. The third topic looks at the political and economic history of the Ottoman Empire and in particular focuses on the strengths and weaknesses associated with the rise and fall of Empire.

Faith, Justice and Globalization (FJG)

This course looks at the interactions between these three concepts. The first topic of the course looks broadly at range of world faiths and compares and contrasts beliefs and practices. The second defines broad notions of justice and globalization. Further concepts are then introduced: the environment; education; war and conflict; faith-based diplomacy; and economic justice. These are used as the basis for discussions, reports and presentations.

Research questions

I frame my research questions as follows:

I.   In what ways is subjectification initiated in my teaching institution in the UAE in three General Studies courses?

II.   In what ways are spaces of plurality and openness created and maintained in this context?

Methodology and data collection

Using a naturalistic approach adopted by Findlow (2013) I have sourced data and ideas both "purposively and opportunistically" (ibid, p. 116) within the organisation. This means that the data is drawn from both formal interviews and informal conversations with teachers of the courses concerned, from my own classroom observation of students, from students' reflective writing and research reports, and from a 30-minute post-course focus group with three students (Amal, Kaltham and Bushra) and a post-course online survey completed by 57 students. As Findlow mentions (ibid), the boundaries between research, professional relationships and friendships often become blurred; however, the institutions' ethical procedures were rigorously followed and the names of all respondents, colleagues and workplaces have been changed to ensure anonymity.

Findings

The findings are organized in two sections following the order of the research questions. The first, subjectification (the process of developing (inter)-subjectivity), focuses on students as individuals and their communication and responses with others/the Other. The second, investigates classroom practice in relation to uniqueness/coming into the world and uses Davies' interruptive democracy and engagement with societal and cultural issues to frame the development of spaces of plurality and openness The two questions are not mutually exclusive: there are of course many overlaps in the examples cited. I set out the findings and analysis together in a discursive fashion, intermingling events, incidents, experiences and data with my own and other's interpretations. Through my interpretations of data I hope to exemplify how and in what ways subjectification as an educational goal is being initiated as "a self-organized criticality [...] from enhanced connectivities within an organisation" (Davies, 2006, p. 1029).

Promoting subjectification: the Intercultural Intelligence course

This section concentrates on data and examples drawn exclusively from the ICI course, as this is where the richest of my data lies to date.

That students need to have a strong and secure sense of self is particularly pertinent in our context: Dubai may be a multicultural city but it is not a cosmopolitan one (Davidson, 2008). Expatriate residents outnumber nationals at ratio of over 9:1 and which has significant consequences for the sense of identity that our students build. Giving students a secure sense of self through "identity building and

handling of difference" (Davies, 2006, p. 1033) is a major focus on this course because as Cockburn states:

> if you lack a secure sense of self [...] you are likely to disown the hated or feared parts of yourself and project them onto the unknown 'other' (1998, p. 214, cited in Davies, 2006, p. 1034).

Survey feedback and reflective essays indicated a very positive response from students in terms of understanding self, Emirati culture and other cultures (see Appendix A). This was reiterated in the focus group. Students commented on how the two theoretical tools, complemented by other course activities, gave them strategies for understanding themselves and their relationships with others:

> Amal: All our courses have been theoretical, talking about things and systems, but this one, it was personal, it talked about our daily lives, it helped us in our daily lives

> Kaltham: I never used to think about these things...honour and shame, or power and fear..but now when things happened...I can just look and think when `I see any acting or reacting ....is this honour, is this shame, is it .....power or fear...it helps me...

> Amal: I value my culture more now, it's not that I learnt anything new about my own culture but just by knowing more about other cultures helps me. *[Focus group]*

Confronting difference in a plurality of ways

Bushra found the iceberg metaphor of seen/unseen culture to be particularly enlightening, explaining that so much of what happens in her own, Emirati culture is unseen and therefore understanding why her own culture is misunderstood by others who only see the "seen" elements of culture. She realized that misunderstandings could easily happen because of this and so became more understanding of the Other.

Kaltham felt it was significant that she had learnt something new about her own culture, expressing surprise when she said "This course it touched us [...] we are all Emiratis [...] but we are **hugely** different". Amal and Bushra agreed too that everyone has their own personal culture that is framed by society and culture, demonstrating a heightened understanding of similarity and difference within their cultural group. This understanding of individual difference within culture was revealing and refreshing for students.

Describing difference in the Emirati context and the exploration of hybrid identity often contrast with state-created conceptualizations of Emirati identity (Partrick, 2009; Vision2021.ae, 2012) that promote a common heritage and production of a common national homogenous identity. Under the surface, most Emiratis are well aware of variety within their society, with its range of tribal, ethnic and religious groupings as well as socio-economic variances. Students respond to this in different ways and to each other in different ways. For Kaltham, Amal and Bushra, this course enabled them to visualize themselves as unique individuals within a culture rather than as a homogenous group, with openness to difference and the Other. They describe how they themselves navigated through their own familial cultures (both Amal and Bushra have Indian mothers) using marriage celebrations to illustrate this:

> Bushra: If it's on the Indian side you know ... we all have to dress up in the Indian style, and if it's Emirati then the whole thing is Arab ... We're a very big family on both sides [...].

> Amal: Yes ... it's just the same with us.

Kaltham, on the other hand, remarked upon difference within her own Bedouin background:

> My family is completely different ... We are from a Bedouin family but ... we have two types to my family [...] My father's side is, like, ... desert Bedouin, and my mother's side they live near the sea: they worked as fishermen. My grandfather he was the sheikh of that area ... We have similar rules

but my father's side is more towards the Islamic ... you know, with hijab and stuff; but my mother's side ... it's all about the individual ... It's not much free, but it's medium. (Focus group)

This group of students were very at ease describing difference and accepting plurality, and I infer from our conversation that the course helped them to navigate this.

Nevertheless, not all students experience tolerance and acceptance. Fatma, a student from a tribe in the Northern Emirates, was keen to explore the underlying issues of ethnic and tribal differences that arise when choosing a spouse. She approached me several times wanting confirmation that it was acceptable to investigate this topic, worried about what the other students would say, and worried that she might hurt someone's feelings or offend others' sensibilities. Her personal point was that tribe and ethnicity shouldn't matter. In the discussions that arose after her presentation, it was clear that while some students agreed with her, other students invoked traditional norms leading to a very tense situation in the classroom. Investigations into the increasing number of Emirati women who are choosing to marry foreign husbands revealed that students believed it was only possible to do this if you had a high socio-economic status. The difference in perceived freedoms for the wealthy brought up disgruntlement at the disparity of choice and inequality bestowed upon those from lower social status. The important point here is not the accuracy of each student's beliefs, but that there is an awareness and a discussion of difference within the Emirati community that conflicts with the homogenous, state-envisioned national identity. Articulation of difference and surfacing of a plurality of lives allows for inter-subjectivity to occur.

Models of culture: Worldviews and 12 Dimensions

The students interviewed all agreed that the theories contributed to their personal development and in particular with their interactions with others, from both their own and other cultures:

Bushra: I didn't know these things existed... Whenever I deal with people at work, I go back to the 12 Dimensions. I think: am I [...] direct or indirect? So it helps me with my customers every day.

Kaltham: Well... I work in [Immigration ...]. I meet maybe 160 cultures in my daily transactions. Maybe some of them reveal and some of them conceal, and I need to know how to deal with these different cultures and people.

Before studying the 12 Dimension Model, students undertake a 72-item online self-assessment which gives a personalized report on where each student sits on the scale for each dimension along with a descriptive paragraph for each one. The personal nature of the feedback that students receive from this tool is a source of insight, self-affirmation and self-discovery. In an assessed essay, that requires students to reflect on the self-assessment results, Marwan, one of the male students, demonstrated how he sometimes finds it difficult to communicate respectfully with those people who gained their positions through personal or family connections – a relatively common phenomenon in this context – and how he personally considers himself not interested in people's ethnicity or backgrounds but rather achievement oriented. He acknowledges that within his culture this may be difficult but his self-awareness, his understanding of himself within his culture, has grown. The neutrality and non-judgmental nature of the self-assessment affirms for students their individuality and uniqueness, allowing for subjectivity to appear. Kaltham sums this up by writing in her reflection that she felt there were "wonderful points" written about her personality and that she felt powerful as she read them: they made her feel strong, but at the same time revealed some weaknesses which she resolved to focus on and strengthen.

Dissensus

Dissensus arose between Bushra and Amal in their contrastive views on Dubai's tourism industry and the number of expatriate residents. Whilst acknowledging that there were many positives about the course and insights into a variety of cultural differences, Bushra still felt afraid for her own culture. She mentioned her fears: that the indigenous culture, shifting over the past 50 years from a traditional, pastoral society to a modern nation state, is being overwhelmed by global imports, ideas and traditions. She expresses her powerlessness in the face of decisions made by a ruling system of which she has no part, confirming Foucault's idea that freedom is

> a practice, a critical ethos of self, and [...] a struggle that is engaged in by the individual within the problematic of power. (Newman, 2003, parag. 3)

Amal on the other hand stated:

> I'm not afraid; I know that 80% of tourists just come for the luxury lifestyle, but I feel that the 20% who come to know about our culture are an opportunity. I see it as an opportunity for us to teach them about us and our culture [...] and maybe something good will come.

With the rapid pace of social change, it is not surprising that insecurities surface, but it is how they are addressed and responded to that is at question. Returning to the earlier definition of subjectivity, it is about how we become a subject – both a recipient and a contributor of actions; it is about how we respond to people who are not like us, about our own selves and being. Bushra and Amal respond in different ways to the same situation; each of them is neither right or wrong, better nor worse. Their words of acceptance to each other indicate that they understand this and that each is free to respond as they will. Both empathize with the other, accepting a different perspective, contributing to the formation their own self-image and sense of self, and that of the other. This, I believe is a positive reflection on the course.

Rancière, a central influence on Biesta's educational philosophy, insists that

> the student must see everything for himself, compare and compare, and always respond to a three-part question: What do you see? What do you think about it? What do you make of it? (Rancière, 1991, p.23)

This pedagogy is forceful and challenging and requires students to speak, to give their opinions. It is a method we use throughout the course. Echoing Rancièrean methodology, my colleague Tracey describes how she uses a *Describe, Interpret, Evaluate* activity (Intercultural.org, 2014) which demonstrates the impact of people's tendency to make instantaneous judgments. She feels that making students aware of how they are both subjects who judge and the subject of judgment is a profound learning experience that alters the way they interact with others. In acknowledging that they 'jump to judge' before they interpret or evaluate an action, a situation or a response, student are forced to accept that they are simultaneously perpetrators as well as victims, guilty as well as innocent. In her experience, this activity heightens awareness of bias and stereotyping, thus shaking student' sensibilities and forcing them to re-imagine themselves and others in alternative ways. This, Biesta refers to as the continual rebirth of the subject.

The accumulation of each incident, event, experience, conversation and discussion that occurs over the course of 16 weeks contributes to making visible the reality of living in a world of plurality and difference, which engenders the continual process of subjectification (Mercieca, 2012) and promotes opportunities for subjectification to occu

Creating and maintaining spaces of plurality and openness

This section is organized in two parts where the first focuses on the *praxis*, the methodology and classroom practice; the second part focuses on the *nature of the classroom environment* and the *relationships* that are built between the participants.

Classroom practice and activities: demonstrating *uniqueness* and *coming into the world* through interruptive democracy

Findings are drawn from all three General Studies courses and include classroom events and instances, planned and unplanned, which reflect features of Davies' interruptive democratic pedagogy (Table 2). Further details of particular methodologies and classroom activities in the ICI course are detailed in James & Shammas (2013) but due to issues of space I focus on one example from each course, following this up with a thematic analysis that links the three courses together.

Table 2: Abridged version of Davies' Pedagogy of Interruptive Democracy (2006, pp. 1036-73).

1. Provision of organized and frequent ways to generate dialogue, deliberation, argument, information exchange, empathy and feedback – in multiple channels between teachers and students as equals
2. Encouragement of avenues of belonging - not exclusionary or segregated – promotion of hybrid identity
3. Critical pedagogy and political education which surfaces inequalities such as class, gender and ethnicity with language and media analysis
4. Emphasis on human rights and active responsibilities
5. Learning of conflict mapping which leads to new behaviours and reflections
6. Acknowledgement of unfinished knowledge, unfinished cultures and of fuzzy logic
7. Creativity, play and humor to heal and to interrupt dogma
8. Risk-taking and limit testing which pushes the organisation towards the edge of chaos and to creative emergence

Example 1: ICI Course: Cultural Conflict presentation

One of the most powerful assessment tools in the ICI course is the Cultural Conflict presentation: students choose and research an inter- or intra-cultural conflict that has meaning to them in their lives and analyse it using Worldview Theory. Topics have included women's dress code, uses/misuses of the hijab, illicit sexual relationships, marriage partners and cultural faux pas in advertising; gender inequality and consumerism are increasingly chosen by the female students. As these are rarely discussed publicly in Emirati society, students embrace the opportunity to air their views in an open yet neutral forum. These possibilities create dissensus: the representative order is interrupted by giving students a voice, yet not judging them on their voice. "The learning of conflict mapping and conflict resolution skills and dispositions" leads to "new behaviours and new reflections" (Davies, 2006, p. 1037).

Humour, creativity and play come up in the execution of the presentations. Intra-cultural conflicts are often acted out, with students taking on roles such as the traditional mother-in-law and the new Emirati daughter-in-law or the son bringing home his new Eastern European wife to meet his mother for the

first time. Bringing humor to serious issues can allow for exploration of multiple perspectives in a creative, neutral manner and classroom discussion of various perspectives.

Two concepts *unfinished knowledge* and *unfinished culture* are situated within the research process and the actual presentations. Unfinished knowledge refers to the notion that knowledge, and what there is to know, is always expanding and always changing; it is fluid and evolving. Unfinished culture in a similar way refers to the fluidity of culture within a culture; it is a rejection of essentialist depictions of culture. Kaltham explained how helpful she found the presentation on the conflicts that can occur when two families with different forms of etiquette are united by a marriage for example:

> Before, [...] I thought every Emirati family had the same rules; but now I know that if you go to visit Amal you have to make an appointment. This is not the same as at our house, where you can come at any time of the day and night and we can talk about what we have on this day: this is a very old hospitality tradition, from the Bedouin; but now I know not all Emiratis are the same.

Both Kaltham and Amal acknowledged that Amal's family etiquette is becoming more common as society changes, that traditions are changing and that not all families feel it necessary to teach their children the old traditions. All three students expressed feelings of nostalgia and loss at this change, yet conversely they had all earlier referred to themselves as strongly innovation-oriented in the Outlook dimension. I interpret this as a very poignant expression of the process of subjectification: the continual, never-ending process of loss and gain that both Arendt and Biesta describe (Biesta, 2010b). It is the risk that has to be taken in order for subjectivity to reinvent itself.

In terms of critical pedagogy and political education, the presentations also initiate subjectivity. When an issue or topic directly contravenes religious mores and values, for example extra-marital or homosexual relationships, discussion can get heated and dissensus arises. Debate tends to revolve around justice and solutions to perceived problems: *should adulterers have the death penalty or not*? was an issue that divided one of my classes, but the more critical point was that students began to realize that the justice system of the country, which they had assumed to be based on Islamic law, in fact is in many ways based on secular law. Another contentious presentation concerned the law which disallows Emirati women from passing on citizenship to their children. By surfacing inequalities of gender, class and other social differences, students are forced to assess their own positions in a complex world of multiple differences and identities.

Example 2: History: Five Pillars of Islam – Beyond the Ritual

As History teachers, it frequently feels risky embarking on the Early Islamic Era. Students' resistance can be palpable, with teachers informed that students took the subject at school, implying they have nothing to learn. When it is pointed out that they often struggle to explain Islamic history to cultural others, some students grudgingly accept. Our observations have shown that despite deeply held beliefs and consistent daily practice, very few students' depth of knowledge reaches beyond the rituals or the individual: Islam as a community, historical or global concept holds little sway. One activity (Appendix B), an evaluative analysis of the Five Pillars of Islam from the multiple perspectives of Spiritual, Practical, Individual, Society and Historical Impact pushes students' creative intellect. Asking students to probe beyond/beneath the ritual to find the underpinning values of each of the Five Pillars is a powerful tool: it makes visible religious universals, for example the concept of Pilgrimage and Charity: it enables students to see Islam as a religion beyond Arabs, beyond the Middle East; and is a powerful intellectual challenge to students' assumptions of what it means to be Muslim. It exemplifies again unfinished knowledge and culture and defies the sometime myopic view of those born to a religion; All the History teachers share the experience of students saying, in one way or another, "we did this all at school in Arabic, but never with the passion and love for the subject that you have shown – we learnt so much".

Example 3: Faith, Justice and Globalization: Faith interviews

One of the riskiest tasks we have ever undertaken was asking students to interview a person from another Faith and present their interview to the class. In this deeply conservative part of the Muslim world, we were surprised at the enthusiasm of the students. Whilst this activity deserves a paper in its own right, it encompassed multiple elements of Davies' pedagogy. It encouraged discussion, deliberation and argument about Faiths and faith, about identity and faith. It opened students' eyes to alternative renditions of Faith. It generated conflict within the group; for example, an interview undertaken with an Emirati atheist generated discussion about identity, family culture and belonging and acceptance, with students wondering how his family deal with his beliefs and wider questions such as "What does it mean to be Emirati?" Every interview gave a different perspective on Faith, and tested incumbent knowledge and awareness. Each perspective had the potential to contribute to new ways of understanding and being, thus maintaining the space for subjectivity to occur as a continuous process of re-imagining, redefining and re-invention of the self.

Example 4: Surfacing fuzzy logic: culture vs. religion in GS courses

For our students, brought up in relatively insular environments in and around a multicultural city, many issues remain unexplained, for a combination of social, educational or familial reasons. On these courses, we are able to encounter many unexplained phenomena, not as a means of expounding the good/bad or right/wrong but as a way of demonstrating that things are not always as they seem. An example that surfaces time and again through these three courses is the 'fuzzy logic' of culture vs. religion.

Introducing the Three Colours Worldviews is a time when this surfaces. Most teachers have a tendency to use 'third-party' examples to illustrate their concepts. One teacher described her experience as follows:

> I decided to use the honour killings in Northern India as my example, an incident I found on the BBC website where two lovers were murdered, dismembered and cremated by their own family members in the middle of the village. I used this to show students how the traditions of caste and honour were stronger than notions of justice and guilt/innocence that we take to be normal in Western countries. I particularly wanted a non-Muslim example, to show that this was cultural not religious. A student [...] put up her hand and said "Miss, can I tell you something?". I said yes, and she told the class of an incident that had happened in Al Ain fairly recently, where an unmarried girl had come home late, at 2.00am rather than 10.00pm. Her father took her to his car, took her to the desert and shot and killed her. He then handed himself in to the police. Of course, all the students were shocked – "But how could he do this? It's wrong to kill someone in Islam. She didn't do anything wrong" – and a lot of discussion in Arabic followed. The same student who had told the story then asked if she could read something to the class. She read a poem she'd written (in the aftermath of a messy divorce, I found out later) – it was called *Useless Traditions*. I can't remember the exact words, but it completely stunned the students and me into silence. We all had tears in our eyes but it was one of the most powerful lessons I've ever taken part in.

This student had experienced first-hand the fuzzy logic of religion and culture. She was able to articulate it in her poems and stories, but the value of the Worldview theories was that it gave her a framework in which to analyze her experiences and her feelings. It gave her answers where previously she had only emotions of injustice and anger. It allowed her, in public, to come into being in a space of openness, and it validated her uniqueness, as the one who had had these experiences.

Differentiating between religion and culture *is* particularly tricky for our students. Using simple examples, one can introduce eye-opening information: Sam, a History teacher, described how he told

his students that Prophet Mohammed's (PBUH) first wife Khadija proposed to him. "Imagine" he asked his students "if you could ask your potential husband to marry you?" The immediate response "Haraam, sir, ayeb sir" (forbidden and shameful) was followed with laughter. Discussion ensued, and students agreed that it is a matter of honour and pride, a cultural tradition but not a religious requirement. Social constructions of religion and culture are shown to limit possibilities of action, implicit in which is agency – in which questions of power and gender surface. In these moments students ascertain that things are not clear-cut, that there is a fuzzy logic which they subscribe to without thinking, without questioning and for some this interrupts their sense of self.

Other issues are so sensitive that even teachers do not feel comfortable: the Sunni/Shi'a split in the Early Islamic Era is one such topic. Exacerbated by current (often state-supported) anti-Shi'a sentiment in the Gulf and with a minority Shi'a student population, these are precisely the type of issues that, according to Davies' interruptive democracy, should be engaged with. Many students who take the History course have also taken the ICI course, and Tracey's approach of tackling the Sunni/Shi'a split as an issue of succession, using concepts of achieved vs. ascribed status, gives students a new way to look the origins of an issue that is currently wreaking havoc in the Islamic world. These simple but sometimes risky classroom endeavours test the limits to which the teachers and students can go, but in so doing they provide trails of dialogue, deliberation, and information exchange which show that conflict is not the only way to approach difficult issues. They build trust and reveal that accepted knowledge and culture are unfinished and can always be challenged.

Summary

To summarise the pedagogy across these three courses: inter-cultural, intra-cultural and interfaith conflicts and differences are explored using introspection, reflection and discussion. We hope to

> encourage avenues of belonging which are not exclusionary or segregated, and the promotion of
> identity which values hybridity, not purity. (Davies, 2006, p.1037)

Engaging with problematic issues interrupts the 'representative' order; previously imagined vistas are created which give deep and powerful insights into how we live in a world of plurality and difference, allowing for students to come into the world (Biesta, 2010a).

Building relationships: a space of trust and openness

It should be obvious by this stage that learning experiences such as these cannot take place without a deep sense of trust and equality between the participants. The creation of a space of openness is a central feature which cannot be understated. The classroom becomes a private place for revelations about society and culture not normally revealed in everyday classroom practice. Some of the teachers explicitly explain at the very beginning of the course that what is said between the four walls of the classroom will stay within them. The open practice within the class was clearly demonstrated in the survey results from the ICI course (Appendix A). The great majority of respondents attested to the open and positive atmosphere in the classrooms including the openness of the teachers themselves.

Whilst agreeing that the development of subjectivity is not confined to the classroom the importance, in this cultural context, of such space should not to be underestimated (Findlow, 2013). Spaces outside the classroom are subject to external influences that may not allow such openness, and consequently the classroom becomes essential for building trusting relationships of honesty and freedom, spaces of where diversity and plurality can be explored and the seeds of subjectivity may be sown. This implements Davies' generation of

dialogue, deliberation, connectivity, argument, information exchange, empathy, feedback and listening between students, between teachers in front of students, and between teachers and students as encounters of equals. (2006 p.1036)

Without spaces such as these, the likelihood is that subjectivity will be either limited or shut down, as Biesta warns (Winter, 2011).

Discussion

The first research question is answered by selected examples and from the voices of students and teachers. The second research question demonstrates how teachers on the courses create and maintain spaces of openness and plurality through their implementation of methodology and practice and by the relationships they build with their students so that it is possible for subjectivity to appear.

It needs to be stated again, Biesta's pedagogy of interruption or Davies' pedagogy for interruptive democracy do not give rise to a particular organized methodology or pedagogy or to a particular curriculum. What is embodied in them is an attitude. In each of the examples I have given, are a grouping of singular instances which create a pattern and symbolize an attitude: this attitude, created, implemented and supported by the teachers of these courses is conveyed to students, as corroborated in survey responses. The attitude is one that subjectivity matters, that it counts, and that teachers believe, whether consciously or unconsciously, that it is imperative not to close it down. I believe this evidences "self-organized criticality and enhanced connectivities within an organisation" (Davies, 2006, p. 1029) that comes from the attitude of a core group of teachers who believe this is essential to students' development.

The production of subjectivity is spontaneous, unplanned; it can happen or not. It happens in interstitial moments, a break between lectures, at the end of a discussion, in the middle of a presentation, even in a corridor, a feedback meeting or a chat at the end of class. It is usually not deliberate or measurable. It is not spread evenly across the board: certainly some students are moved but others will not develop their subjectivity as a result of the course and this highlights the uniqueness of each individual. The evidence that I have gathered demonstrates that these courses create and maintain spaces for subjectivity to be produced. This is an endeavor that can be deemed risky: risky because we, as teachers, cannot predict the outcomes of the events and spaces that we initiate; and risky because the thinking challenges pre-conceptions of society, culture, commonly held beliefs and the accepted wisdom of society. Biesta affirms that this is the "beautiful risk of education" and that "the responsibility of the educator is a responsibility for what is to come, without a knowledge of what is to come" (Biesta, 2010b).

Limitations and conclusions

I have addressed one of the major limitations of earlier renderings of this paper by bringing in the voice of students and teachers. However, beyond the scope of this current version, are a number of limitations that warrant more in-depth research. These relate largely to the UAE's socio-political and economic circumstances; some areas of potential investigation are diagrammatized in Figure 4. I strongly suspect that these have the potential to shut down or limit the appearance of subjectivity in the classroom. It is therefore important to investigate further the impact these issues could have on character building in the nation and whether they impact positively or negatively on the development of subjectification in UAE citizens.

Given the broad similarities between Western countries and the UAE in the underlying philosophies of education, it follows that there may be shared obstacles *within* institutions; these include features of neo-liberalism, in particular, elements of performativity and an increased focus on accountability and evidence (Ball 2006; Biesta, 2010b, pp.28-49; O'Sullivan 2013) meaning that attention is not so much on what is happening in the classroom on an individual level but rather concentrates on quantifiable outputs. These are areas that would merit further research in their own right.

Figure 4: Challenges to subjectification in UAE HE.

Davies argues that pedagogy is not enough – agency and action is required. Students researching definitions of human rights and notions of justice, and priorities within differing cultures and religions is a central feature of the Faith, Justice and Globalization course. Their final research reports on such recent cases as the sentencing of the Christian "apostate" Mariam in Sudan (BBC News, 2014), the abduction of two hundred schoolgirls by Boko Haram in Northern Nigeria (Chotia, 2014) and gender inequality particularly in relation to education such as Malala Yousefzai (Hussein, 2014) in Pakistan have impacted our students deeply. It is clear from their written words that they find many of these issues abhorrent and they are shocked at what is done in the name of their religion. Nevertheless, in terms of agency questions arise: Are our students moved to act? And if so, do they have the power and capacity to speak up and act? Following students post-course, addressing their actions, behaviours and attitudes over the long term would be another subject to investigate.

A final thought is that the notion of subjectivity is deeply embedded in the Western philosophical tradition that evolved over many centuries. Subjectivity, in the autonomous sense used in this paper, is a very individual concern; in this cultural context, until very recently, without wanting to over-essentialise, has had a more collective focus given its traditional make-up. Hence, a potential future research focus could utilize the constructivist-developmental theory approach of Kegan (1994) to assess how different societies have "qualitatively different ways of constructing reality" (Berger, 2010, p.3). Kegan's curriculum of society with three levels (Traditional, Modern and Post-Modern) would seem to offer some interesting applications; of note is that subjectivity is deemed to be integral only to the third tier

(Berger, 2010, pp.6-7). Given the rapid societal developments that the UAE is experiencing, using such a model to assess the applicability of subjectivity to Emirati society could reveal some thought-provoking results.

Subjectification is a concept requiring a highly sophisticated sense of self. At the core of the Biestan arguments is the acceptance that subjectivity cannot be taught or produced and that emancipation/freedom through subjectivity is an *individual* endeavor. However, within the control of the educator is the ability to create and maintain a space where individual, unique subjectivity can appear. The educator holds the key to questions and can in certain ways set the scene for subjectification to be initiated. And yet, if it does not occur, educators should not be surprised or discouraged. People are the products of the political, social and cultural influences that they are born into and in this particular context, these cannot be disentangled from the subject. Nevertheless, I assert the effort is worth the risk.

Acknowledgement

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Appendix A

Selected Survey Results from ICI course

Self Culture

The course helped me think about myself in new and different ways

The course taught me very little about myself that I didn't know before

I value what I learnt on the course

I don't really think the course helped my analyse my self and my behaviour

The course helps me to understand how culture impacts on my behaviour

I have a better understanding of myself having taken the course

0   0.5   1   1.5   2   2.5   3   3.5   4   4.5   5

Average from Likert Scale of 1-5 with 1 = Strongly Disagree and 5 = Strongly Agree

James, A. (2014). Implementing a 'pedagogy of interruption': worth the risk. *Learning and Teaching in Higher Education: Gulf Perspectives*, *11*(2). http://lthe.zu.ac.ae

Emirati Culture

Average from Likert Scale of 1-5 with 1 = Strongly Disagree and 5 = Strongly Agree

(bar chart categories from top to bottom)

- The course helped me to think about Emirati culture in new and different ways
- Emirati culture is not what I thought it was before taking the course
- The course challenged my beliefs about Emirati culture
- The course helped me to understand myself within my culture
- There was little new I learnt about Emirati culture on this course
- Understanding the seen and unseen of Emirati culture was informative to me
- The course helped me to understand Emirati culture

Classroom Experience

There was a respectful and trusting atmosphere in the class	
I felt afraid of what others might think so I preferred to keep my opinions to myself	
We were able to discuss "difficult" cultural issues	
Nearly everyone in the class had the same opinions and ideas	
We had a chance to discuss our views without being judged	
The teacher was open with his/her opinions and experiences	
I was able to express myself freely in the class	
I heard many different opinions on this course	

0   0.5   1   1.5   2   2.5   3   3.5   4   4.5   5

Average from Likert Scale of 1-5 with 1 = Strongly Disagree and 5 = Strongly Agree

James, A. (2014). Implementing a 'pedagogy of interruption': worth the risk. *Learning and Teaching in Higher Education: Gulf Perspectives*, *11*(2). http://lthe.zu.ac.ae

Other Cultures in Dubai and the World

Average from Likert Scale of 1-5 with 1 = Strongly Disagree and 5 = Strongly Agree

- the course helped me to think about other cultures in new and different ways
- I don't think it's important to learn about other cultures
- This course challenged my beliefs about other cultures
- I didn't learn much about other cultures on this course
- Understanding the seen and unseen of other cultures was informative to me
- The course helped me to understand other cultures

James, A. (2014). Implementing a 'pedagogy of interruption': worth the risk. *Learning and Teaching in Higher Education: Gulf Perspectives*, *11*(2). http://lthe.zu.ac.ae

Appendix B

Pillar	Action	Spiritual	Practical	Individual	Society	Historical Impact
SHAHADA	Profession of the creed: *There is no god but God (Allah), and Muhammad is His messenger*	Acknowledges that there is One Creator, and that He has sent messengers and revelation to humankind	Islam forbids worship of idols or images, which also means bowing to false gods or to humans; places limits on materialism	Focuses on the individual's direct relationship with God, without any intermediaries	One simple message universal to time and place; reverence for the prophets and earlier scriptures like Bible & Torah; acceptance of earlier religions	- There is no central religious authority in Islam, no theocracy since no one can claim knowledge of God over others - Limitation on the power of worldly authority over Muslim societies; Islamic jurisprudence = Islamic law system developed - Arabic language of Qur'an spread
SALAT	Five obligatory prayers at the time and in the way taught by Muhammad					
ZAKAT	Giving to the poor and those in need a percentage of wealth beyond basic needs					
SIYAM	Fasting from dawn to sunset during the month of Ramadan (9th lunar month)					
HAJ	Making the journey to Makkah to perform the rites during the pilgrimage season					

James, A. (2014). Implementing a 'pedagogy of interruption': worth the risk. *Learning and Teaching in Higher Education: Gulf Perspectives*, *11*(2). http://lthe.zu.ac.ae