

From Misunderstanding to Religion Tolerance in CDIO-Based Multidisciplinary Course

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ABSTRACT

The goal of this paper is to explore how students' misunderstanding about Muslims or Islam is directed toward religion tolerance via a CDIO based multidisciplinary course. Muslim people are one of the most misunderstood groups in many countries or areas, Taiwan included. When young students are asked about their first impression on Muslims or Islam, some would associate them with terrorists or even ISIS members. Even for those who have positive impressions on Islam, the way Muslims eat, wear, pray or marry could confuse them and thus lead to misunderstanding or bias. Partly thanks to the governmental efforts to create a Muslim-friendly living environment in a top-down manner, Taiwan is listed as one of the top 10 Muslim-friendly non-OIC (Organization of Islamic Cooperation) destinations. However, there remains a lot of space to enhance people's understanding about Muslims or Islam and a CDIO-based course in the university works. In this multidisciplinary course studied, students were required to share, examine, review and then develop their understanding about Muslims or Islam under the CDIO educational framework. This course encompasses four phases: conceiving, designing, implementing, and operating. In the phase of conceiving, students shared, discussed and compared their common knowledge about Muslims or Islam. In the phase of designing, students searched for relevant information online to clarify if their understanding was correct. Obviously, the information from social media was confusing or misleading. Therefore, in the phase of implementing, students acquired first-hand information by dialogues with one professor who knows Islamic culture a certain degree and Muslims from Malaysia and Burkina Faro to further check their original understanding. In the phase of operating, students revised ideas and thus cultivated not only a better understanding of Muslims or Islam but also more respect for cultural diversity. It is expected that students gain correct knowledge about Muslims or Islamic culture from this CDIO-based course in a systematic manner.

KEYWORDS

Muslims, Islamic culture, CDIO, multidiscipline, educational platform

Muslims are one of the most misunderstood people on earth, the same in Taiwan. In Taiwan, according to the data from Ministry of the Interior, around 300,000 Muslims are living here and most of them are migrant workers and then international students as well as Taiwanese Muslims. The government has devoted to improving the living quality of Muslims, especially in terms of things in daily lives, for example, dining habits and religious activities. Actually, in the survey of Mastercard-Crescent Rating Global Muslim Travel Index 2019, Taiwan was ranked number three in the most Muslim-friendly country, improving 2 spots compared with the previous year. Even with the positive truth, many Taiwanese misunderstand Muslims in different ways. In one course of Feng Chia University, students were asked about their first impression of Muslims, over 60 percent of students mentioned negative things such as terrorists, 911 attack, or suicide bombing attack. As education is aimed to guide young students to be open-minded global citizens, accepting multiple cultures, this course studied was designed to teach Islamic culture based on the CDIO educational framework. It is expected that students learn things about Muslims and Islamic culture in a solid manner through the process of Conceive-Design-Implement-Operate initiative.

COURSE INTRODUCTION

Feng Chia University, established in 1961 in Xitun District of Taichung City, is one of the most popular universities in Central Taiwan for international students. One of the key factors is that there is Chinese Language Center where many international students started learning Chinese and ended up studying degree programs in Feng Chia University. In 2020, the data from Feng Chia University Office of Finance illustrated that around 1,078 international students registered courses and around 180 of them are Muslims, mostly from Indonesia and Malaysia and the others are from Turkey, Burkina Faso, Egypt and other countries. The campus has been friendly to young learners from all over the world. However, owing to some stereotypes, many students have confusing or even incorrect understanding about Muslims. Therefore, one course of General Education was designed to guide students through CDIO framework to learn multidisciplinary issues and one of the issues is Muslim and Islamic culture.

Course Purpose

The course name is Travel and Multidisciplinary Learning and it is an elective course, open to all students of all majors. This course aims to interpret the significance of travel and its connection to the multidisciplinary learning of history, geography, culture etc. The core contents include training students to learn the ability of making travel plans, to cultivate humanism quality, to respect different cultures so as to become high-quality global citizens loving homeland and having global view as well.

Participants

There are 53 students in this class and 15 of them are international students, mainly from China including the mainland, Hong Kong and Macau and also one from Japan.

Reading Materials about Muslim and Islam

The reading material is an article titled My Muslim Friends in Indonesia from a book *Travel and Multiple Learning* (Deng, Liu & Hsueh, 2018) and the content describes how a Taiwanese traveling to Indonesia observed and learned the Islamic culture from the interaction with local Muslim girls. The main issue of the reading materials is about girls' clothes. One of the conversations between the writer and the female Indonesian Muslim was as follows:

"I once asked my Indonesian friend when she could take off her hijab. She replied, "Only when I am at home or when I am with just girls can I take off my hijab." I asked furthermore, "So, like now, is it impossible, right?" She replied, "You are right. It is impossible, because there are two males here. Even when I am at home, if a man comes to my house, I still have to put on my hijab."

COURSE DESIGN

The course was designed to introduce the students to Muslims and Islamic culture. It was based on a four-phase education framework: conceiving, designing, implementing, and operating. The whole process lasted for two months with the expectation for students to learn things not only from their own way of gaining knowledge but also from the real experiences of Muslims,

The Phase of Conceiving

In the phase of conceiving, students were asked to discuss, in small groups of 5 or 6 people, the images they had about Muslims and Islamic culture based on their understanding. It is worth noting that none of the students in that class had any Muslim friend. The top four most discussed issues were as follows. The first one is terrorism. Students mentioned that many terrorists are Muslims, for example, those who attacked the World Trade Center complex in New York City and many horrible attacks happened in Middle Eastern countries and they were carried out by Muslims. One student mentioned that Muslims tend to take revenge on people who are not kind to them. Another student even said jokingly, "Don't make them angry. Otherwise, maybe they will put a bomb in your place someday." The second one is marriage.

Many students said Muslim males can have 4 wives and admitted that they knew this from the media. However, when being asked why male Muslims can have 4 wives, students replied that they neither understand nor try to find the answer, not to mention the underlying condition that allows it to happen. The third issue was dining. Almost all students knew that Muslims do not eat pork and some mentioned they noticed Halal restaurants in some places. Several students also realized that Muslims are not allowed to drink alcohol and said all the things are regulated in Koran, which for Muslims is like the Bible for Christians. The last issue is freedom of women. Based on the discussion of 4 wives for Muslim males, some young students treated it as the deprivation of women's freedom. Moreover, as one student mentioned that it was until the recent 2 years that women in Saudi Arabia were allowed to drive, many had more debates about women's freedom, wearing hijab in hot weather included.

The Phase of Designing

After the small groups' discussion, the teacher did not make any comment except for appreciation for the inspiring and precious sharing. In the phase of designing, students were asked to choose some issues they were concerned, try to get more information from any source or materials, and then organize the information. Two pictures of students' assignments showed their efforts and interests; one focused on things in everyday life of the United Arab Emirates (Appendix A) while the other compared different things between Saudi Arabia and Egypt (Appendix B). All the students got the information from the Internet, Chinese or English websites. Most issues were what they had discussed in the class but a couple of new issues were also demonstrated, for example, Ramadan, divorce, and education.

The Phase of Implementing

In the phase of implementing, guest speakers were invited to talk to students face to face in the class. The first guest was a female Taiwanese professor who traveled in Brunei and did some research on Islamic culture, the second guest was a Muslim guest professor from Malaysia, and the last guest was an international Muslim student from Burkina Faso. They joined the class to share their experiences about Muslim and Islamic culture with students and to answer students' questions which basically came from their homework but were not limited to those issues.

The Phase of Operating

In the phase of operating, students, after gaining more deep knowledge, personal experiences, and especially some revised information from guests, students shared their updated

understanding about Muslim and Islamic culture as well as their feeling in the whole learning process in the small groups. It was obvious that students expressed their thoughts and opinions in a more serious and thoughtful manner. Besides, the issues discussed were more various, ranging from things in everyday life to the meaning and the influence of religions.

DISCUSSIONS

From the whole process, students' interests changed a little bit. In the phase of conceiving, when students first discussed Muslims and Islamic culture, students freely and hotly discussed their knowledge of terrorism, marriage, dining and women's freedom. By contrast, when meeting with guest speakers, probably because of two guests' identity as females, not to mention that the Malaysian speaker was wearing a hijab, students paid more attention to the women's clothes. In addition, highly inspired by the teacher and the guest speakers, student also uttered questions about marriage and women's freedom. The points from students' interaction with 3 guest speakers are as follows:

Females' Clothes

Students were curious about how it feels wearing the hijab all the time especially in the summer as in Malaysia, where the Malaysian speaker lives, it is very hot in the summer. Students asked directly how women could tolerate the heat and also wondered what their hair looked like under the hijab and whether they organized their hair as well even though it was covered by their hijab. The Malaysian speaker gave good answers to all. She said, "No, it's not that hot. Maybe it is because we have gotten used to it. Besides, the materials for the hijab in the summer are unique; it feels quite cool. According to their custom, females need to wear the hijab upon the first period, in their teenage years. It shows that we are not girls any more but women, being able to get pregnant and become a mother. Therefore, we need to cover our hair with the hijab. I have been wearing it for more than 20 years since I wore the hijab for the first time." She continued, "Without the hijab, our hair style is just like yours. Some grow long hair while others have short one. We also decorate their hair with pins and other things. Some even have their dyed, but not me (smiled). In fact, we would wear a little elastic hat to fix the hair first and then wear the hijab, so that the hijab will not slip away easily." She also added, "I am single, so I basically follow my parents. I was told when young that wearing a hijab is a must and so I did it. By contrast, in Jakarta, the modern city and also the capital, comparatively more women do not wear hijabs. In Aceh, every girl wears a hijab."

Marriage

Marriage is undoubtedly a very interesting issue for all the students, which could be observed from young learners' curious faces and eager eyes. When being asked if it is true that Muslim males can have 4 wives, the Burkina Faso student nodded firmly and even added more, "Yes, we can have 4 wives, and when we wanna have the second wife, we even do not have to get the consent of the first wife." At this point, many younger learners in the classes almost shouted and said, "No way!" However, that student gave more information immediately, "But, nowadays, very very few males have the second wife; we are even unable to financially support one wife and how can we have the ability to have the second wife?" Everybody laughed. He explained further, "More wives for one man has been allowed because originally in ancient times when most people were poor and men tended to die young owing to wars, capable men would assist women by means of marriage. It was highly proclaimed and appreciated by families of both sides. Otherwise, in the old society when women were only expected to have babies as wives and mothers, plenty of women might be staying at home for the whole life, single, poor, lonely. By contrast, in the modern society, most women work independently and marriage of one wife and one husband is overwhelmingly popular."

Freedom of Women

With regard to the issue of women's freedom, the Malaysian speaker laughed, signed a little and said, "No, I don't think women's rights are deprived in any way, not at all. In our family, community, society and even in the whole country, women are treated equally." She explained in a very smooth and understanding manner, "I know many people are debating about this but most of them didn't understand us, neither asked how we felt. They tended to use the sense of value of judge and that is incorrect. Once again, I enjoy all the freedoms as you do. Now, I can get rid of my hijab but I chose not to. And I am proud of being a Muslim." In fact, it is put crystal clear that "Islam gives to women the rights it gives to men (Hendi, 2003). The other guest speaker, the professor who traveled in Brunei, also added in a more theoretical tone, "Yes, only when we are in the environment do we have the right to judge how it feels, wearing the hijab, praying 5 times a day, not eating pork... In fact, when I was in Brunei, I saw many women doing what we do here, playing sports, going shopping, enjoying the big sales in the department stores, eating out and driving. They looked happy and several people I chatted with also expressed their satisfaction about the society and the government." It is no wonder that students showed more concern about women's right as one of the most common misconceptions about Muslims is that "Muslims place little value on women, family life, and children," according to online source *Encounter the World of Islam*. As to the issue of driving which was just open to females in Saudi Arabia, both female speakers said it is really up to the country and once again it should not be judged by outsiders easily. Two professors encouraged students to study a specific issue from a broader and deeper perspective.

One issue that many students mentioned in the beginning but skipped in the end was terrorism, which was supposed to be polite to guest speakers. This issue is indeed one of the most sensitive and confusing issues because most people fail to understand “terrorism is but one form of religious violence” (Garfinkle, 2018). In fact, many religions institutions play different parts in all terrorist attacks all over the world. It just happened that after September 11 attack in the United States of America, Islamophobia grew stronger in a sharp way and it mainly “directed at Muslims or those perceived to be Muslims” (Kaplan, 2006). Contrary to terrorism, what people should understand is that “the word Islam means peace and also surrender” (United States Commission on Civil Rights. District of Columbia Advisory Committee, 2003). For mutual understanding among different religious beliefs, there is still a long way to go.

CONCLUSIONS

The course in this study ultimately aims to improve young learners’ ability to cultivate humanism quality and to respect different cultures in order to become high-quality global citizens. Via the course based on CDIO educational framework, students were guided to enhance their understanding about Muslims and Islamic culture in a gradual and systematic manner. From the phase of conceiving where students just described things from their shallow knowledge to the phase of operating where students tried to explore the truth from alternative methods, such as asking guests questions, students obviously turned to be more careful when expressing things about Muslims and Islamic culture and to be inspired to think deeply about related issues. On the other hand, one issue was discerned in the learning process and should be treated seriously for future courses.

The issue is that the information on the Internet could be confusing, misleading or even incorrect. For instance, some information that students got online in the phase of designing was found to be very different from or even contrary to what guest speakers mentioned in the phase of operating. Therefore, the problem of over-relying on the Internet should be solved. It is worth noting that the guest speaker from Burkina Faso corrected one student’s assignment and was shocked how incorrect the online information was (Appendix C). In addition, one student even apologized to the teacher for the stereotype he previously had (Appendix D) after the whole learning process. In other words, the CDIO platform not only let students gain certain knowledge in a solid way but also let educators review the teaching methods.

In the end of the semester, when being asked what issues they hoped to dig further, 33 out of 53 students replied Muslims or Islam, which shows students realized their misunderstanding or even ignorance about this religion as well as the culture. The other issues included freedom

in everyday life, power of religion, passion for religion, racial discrimination, Arabic Spring, idea revolution, mutual respect, the appreciation or and respect for cultural diversity. It can be seen that students have been inspired through the CDIO training.

Muslims are not strangers for people in Taiwan. There are around 300,000 Muslims in Taiwan and, for migrant workers, most of them are care takers in the families or hospitals or workers in factories, which helped solve different social problems such as senior citizens' welfare and labor shortage. On holidays, they always get together in public places such as the train station in Taipei and ASEAN Square in Taichung. They chat, share food and information about their hometowns. They sometimes sing and dance together. About women's clothes, some wear hijabs but others don't. During Ramadan, the 9th month of the Islamic calendar, around June in 2020 of the western calendar, Muslims fast from dawn till dusk and many employers would offer flexible schedules for them to carry out their religious obligation or to celebrate their special festivals.

More cultural and religious education on campus will contribute to the friendliness of Taiwan as a whole. Moreover, this study showed that the CDIO-based course (educational platform) is functional and useful to enhance young learners' knowledge of .Muslims and Islamic culture. It is expected that the knowledge students' gained lead to more religion tolerance, mutual understanding and respect among people of different religions or cultures.

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Appendix A

The United Arab Emirates

- × It is forbidden to eat pork and drink alcohol. Foreigners can buy and drink alcohol in designated hotels and shops.
- × During Ramadan, drinking, smoking and eating in public places and streets are prohibited from sunrise to sunset.
- × Arabs regard their left hand as unclean, so they should use their right hand to pick and drop things to each other. Of course, large items can be delivered with both hands.
- × Large events usually separate men and women. If there are Arab women present, they generally do not shake hands with the man, and the man just nods and smiles to greet him, not to be too enthusiastic. If a woman reaches out her hand actively, she can shake hands with her. During the event, men and women can talk but do not take photos of women in black robes to avoid trouble.

Appendix B

| | Saudi Arabia | Egypt |
|-----------------------|---|--|
| ① Drive | Women were forbidden to drive. (But they are granted the right to drive since 2018) | female can drive. |
| ② hijab | Women must wear a full-length black hijab appearing in public. | women can choose wear or not to wear the hijab and it doesn't have to be black |
| ③ Inheritance | daughters receive half what is awarded to their brothers. | They distribute the inheritance equally between male and female heirs. (depend on the logic principle) |
| ④ Apply for a ID card | female need the permission of a male guardian. | They just need to prepare the required documents. |
| ⑤ Marry and divorce | need the permission from their male guardians. | The spouses can mutually decide. |
| ⑥ Education | Young Saudi women are among the most educated in the Muslim world. (Young Saudi women are more educated than male) | Female are less educated than male. |
| ⑦ Religious freedom | Conversion from Islam to another religion is punishable by death as apostasy. | Free |
| ⑧ Second language | English | English and French |
| ⑨ wearing | Female cannot appeal their skin | female can wear skirt or short-sleeves cloth |

Appendix C

| | Saudi Arabia | Egypt |
|-----------------------|--|---|
| ① Drive | Women were forbidden to drive. But they are granted the right to drive since 2018 | female can drive. |
| ② hijab | Women must wear a full-length black hijab appearing in public. | Women can choose wear or not to wear the hijab and it doesn't have to be black |
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| ⑨ wearing skin | Female cannot appeal their skin | female can wear skirts or short-sleeved clothes |

Appendix D

收件者: 薛珍華;



Sorry for my stereotypes of Muslims.
appolpgise for my ignorance.
This is today's homework.