

In Abu Dhabi

Steven Van Zoost

So there I was, staring at the bulletin board outside a grade five classroom in a girls' school in Abu Dhabi. It was a simple display: three students' colouring of the same photocopied letter-sized paper, centred in the middle of the bulletin board. Yet it kept my attention. In fact, I am still thinking about this bulletin board.

Why did the teacher choose three student pieces? What about the other students in the class? I could feel my cultural background shaking its way to the foreground of my mind's eye. My cultural and teaching paradigms were being exposed. Was I assuming that not all students were valued in this classroom because there was no physical evidence of their school work on display? If students' work was out of sight, were the students therefore out of the teacher's mind? You can see my predicament. I was shaken by the recognition of my own perceptual lens and I was curious about this teacher's paradigm that chose three student pieces and left the rest of the bulletin board space empty.

Why these three students' work? Were they deemed the best work in the class? What if certain students in the class never had their work honoured on the bulletin board throughout the school year? Would that matter to them? I had a hunch that these were not random samples but were selected to represent "world class," "premiere" products – words that I had seen used to advertise hotels, watches, and restaurants in Abu Dhabi. Perhaps, if it's not "world class" it's not worth posting on the bulletin board. Was I understanding this emerging and changing cultural trend in the United Arab Emirates or had I gone too far in trying to relate the desire to build the world's tallest building with intention of posting the "best in the class" on the bulletin board? Can cultural values be understood from interpreting a teacher's bulletin board display?

My task, I should tell you, was to be short-term assessment consultant and there were plenty of cultural values and pedagogical principles to think about. You need not venture far from your classroom, however, to think about how cultural values are entangled with assessment practices. What does "active listening" look like? Does it involve eye-contact? Really? For all families, cultures, generations, and communities? I admit that it's complicated. My time in Abu Dhabi helped me to think in a broad sense about how assessment practices are connected to cultural values.



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For one, the value of time is considerably different among cultures. This is true among Nova Scotia communities where the pace of life and sense of immediacy can differ greatly. When it comes to assessment, educators commonly expect students to reflect on their past achievement and set learning goals for their future learning. Progress and growth are understood to be connected to students' achievement over time, and students are expected to value these time-sensitive processes. In cultures that stress the importance of the present and consider the past and the future of less value, students may struggle with understanding the value of setting goals or planning long-term assessment events. While my time in Abu Dhabi helped me to recognize how time, as a concept, can privilege some students and disadvantage others, this occurs in our own classrooms in Nova Scotia as well. Students who by necessity or tradition “live for the day” may not readily value the practices of reflection or setting goals for the future. By contrast, students who live in homes that practice reflection and goal setting may be advantaged in some of our classroom assessment practices that ask students to self-assess, set goals, and develop projects that continue over longer periods of time.

Thinking back to the bulletin board, I wondered why a colouring exercise at grade five and why a photocopy of the same scene? Was knowledge understood to be fixed and uniform, definable through a series of lines? Was freehand drawing or imagination discouraged or not considered useful or possible? Surely I was colouring the picture all wrong. My cultural lens was distorting my interpretation. My reaction exposed how I have come to value “choice” in the classroom—albeit this choice is rarely true to the sense of the word. Students choose which book they would like to read, determine what questions are most relevant to their lives, and sometimes choose who they work with in the classroom. These choices, however, are always restricted. Students *must* choose a book, a question, or a partner,

and from within the parameter set by me as their teacher. Looking at the bulletin board in Abu Dhabi, I suddenly compared the restrictive choices in my classroom to the three photocopied colouring pages on display. I considered how “choice” in my classroom might be a training ground for a consumerist culture of choosing between products, Coke or Pepsi, without providing options for students to resist the selection process and to learn how negotiation and creativity are practical skills for solving problems within and beyond the classroom. I even worried that I might be contributing to the generation of a culture of entitlement by encouraging students to participate in forced selection processes where students are rewarded with “getting what they want.” I may have over-thought my reaction to the colouring pages on the bulletin board, but at least, I thought, this teacher was clear about what the limits of the students' choices entailed – colour.

One day in Abu Dhabi, having rung the “man-bell” to enter the all-girls school and speaking with a veiled elementary school teacher via a translator, I learned more about the student composition in her classroom. I asked questions about the range of students' backgrounds, abilities, and interest in schooling. I continued to think about how assessment practices advantage and disadvantage students with cultural backgrounds that are different from that of the teacher or different from the dominant culture of school. I came to see that all teachers are in positions of being cultural interpreters and negotiators. Assessment practices create a space where these interpretations and negotiations become exposed, can be examined, and can be put on display – perhaps even on a bulletin board.

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