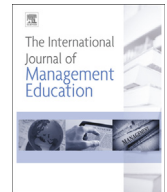


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Research notes

Supporting Emirati females leadership skills through teaching them how to debate: Design, assessment, and considerations

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ABSTRACT

In response to the emerging need in the United Arab Emirates to empower young women and prepare them for future leadership tasks, a debate teaching intervention was organized in two phases at a public University in Dubai. During that intervention, 137 female Emirati students were taught the basics of debate and then participated in a debate session on a topic of general interest (Dubai EXPO 2020). Results show that participants observe a clear change in how they perceive themselves as leaders as a result of the intervention. Moreover, their leadership discourse as measured in terms of the persuasiveness of their expressed arguments at a group level was seen to improve more when the debate format followed had a formal structure than when it was flexible. Implications are discussed regarding the transformative learning function of debate as a training tool and its effect on leadership self-efficacy.

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1. Introduction

Although there has been an increasing consideration of female competence in both educational and professional fields at a global level (United Nations, 2015), the shortage of women in leadership positions still remains an international reality. In developing countries, mostly in Africa and Asia, women empowerment is the strategic focus of a plethora of organizations as well as a hot academic topic (e.g. Buskens & Webb, 2009; Moghadam, 2007). In more conservative societies, the challenge of moving from traditional patriarchies to more globally accepted hierarchies is evident, especially in contexts of continuous development and contact with western populations and cultures, such as in the United Arab Emirates (Neal & Finlay, 2008). Yet it is claimed that nowadays “Emirati women are well represented in all echelons of society, including the political arena, diplomatic corps, judiciary and the commercial sector” (UAEinteract, 2015) irrespective of what ‘good representation’ translates to in the UAE.

This is also becoming more evident in the educational section in the UAE. Currently, there is a clear rise in the success of female graduates where according to Al Abed, Vine, and Potts (2007), 95% of Emirati females enrolled in secondary schools apply to colleges and universities, and females account for more than 70% of university graduates (Madsen & Cook, 2010). Moreover, females generally tend to perform better than the males during their university years. Whether they opt for employment or not, their leadership role in the Emirati society under transition is highlighted by both male and female

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leaders of the country. For instance, the current Minister for Foreign Trade, Her Excellency Sheikha Lubna Bint Khalid [Al Qasimi \(2007\)](#) made her point about women empowerment very clear with the following statement: “The benefits of having women as agents for social change through taking a more visible role in society is not limited to paid employment [...] These women, whether they are doctors or home-makers, are on the front lines of our community in transition” (p. 34).

Despite all these efforts, however, Emirati women are still poorly represented in the private workforce, and even less in higher management positions. The reasons do not necessarily relate to the role that UAE governments play and which seem to be fully supportive of female empowerment, but rather to “employment conditions, personal choices and cultural norms” ([UAEinteract, 2015](#)). For instance, while it is expected that a high percentage of the government employees consist of Emirati females (as result of the Emiratisation practices), Emirati women still face many obstacles in the private sector from both their line managers (who are mostly expatriates), as well as from their female peers who are in decision making positions ([DWE, 2012](#)). Last but not least, a great barrier reported by most working female Emiratis is the balance between family and work ([Al Suwaidi, 2012](#); [Lambert, 2008](#)) and the socio-cultural expectations of their role as housewives and mothers, that would be impossible if they were to take on additional responsibilities outside the domestic arena. However, these beliefs are proven wrong by the increasing number of role models in the region, who manage a balance between their personal and professional lives. Sheikha Lubna, the first UAE female minister, and Dr. Houriya Kazim, the first UAE female surgeon are two of the most predominant female models in the region ([Augsburg, Claus, & Randeree, 2009](#)).

In sum, Emirati females are simultaneously encouraged to acquire University diplomas while facing difficulties in their absorption by the workplace, which is generally limited in terms of leadership responsibility, as well as high socio-cultural expectations of their domestic roles. Despite the great progresses in issues of gender equality in the UAE, it is still culturally justified and very often expected that the women stay at home to raise the kids. Given the great numbers of Emirati young women who pursue academic studies and the evident requirements of the UAE nation to support leadership initiatives of any kind, higher education adopts a transformational role, more meaningful than the one that it already has. Under this context, many educators have adopted paradigms that help release the creative and motivational capacities of the young adults in the region, especially women ([Madsen, 2009](#); [Madsen & Cook, 2010](#)). However, the role of debate as a transformational tool that can help inspire leadership practices has been neglected as a teaching tool in the UAE context.

This paper studies the usefulness of debate as an integrated practice of teaching leadership skills in female classrooms at a federal University in Dubai. More precisely, we make the claim that teaching leadership and teaching debate share the same goal, namely to help participants transform their learning into a meaningful and potentially life-changing experience. In the process of self-transformation into “leaders” or “debaters” the same type of transformative learning takes place: participants (must) feel that they have full control of what, how and why they learn what they learn in order to be able to transfer their learning insights into practice. Our second claim is that teaching future female leaders, in our case female Emirati business undergraduates, how to debate, we actually provide them with a tool of transforming their passive, submissive, and often silent self into an empowered, communicative, and self-perceived leader. The paper is structured as follows: In section two we establish the connections between the main concepts treated, based on literature; in section three we present the method, the debate intervention, and the instruments used for assessing the change in participants' leadership self-efficacy and communication skills; section four presents the findings of both the quantitative and qualitative data analysis; finally sections five and six include the discussion of the findings and the conclusion of the study.

2. Literature review

2.1. Learning and teaching leadership

It is broadly argued that business schools have “lost their way” in regards to teaching both undergraduate and graduate students what they really need in order to succeed in their future careers ([Bennis & O’Toole, 2005](#); [Bhandarker, 2008](#); [Garcia, 2009](#); [Hawawini, 2005](#)). This is based on deficiencies in current educational programs, specifically the lack of “hands on” experience ([Pfeffer & Fong, 2002](#)), the need for more multidisciplinary approaches to current business challenges ([Bennis & O’Toole, 2005](#)), the lack of breadth in managerial decision-making ([Smith, 2003](#)), as well as weaknesses in addressing the challenge of everyday management ([Garcia, 2009](#)). In response, scholars have proposed a number of ways to address the gaps between ‘learning’ business and ‘doing’ business. When it comes to leadership teaching, the same dearth described above for business education in general is observed ([Garcia, 2009](#); [Tourish, Craig, & Amernic, 2010](#)).

In under developed regions such as the United Arab Emirates (UAE), the introduction of leadership programs and initiatives is still at its infancy ([Al Suwaidi, 2012](#); [Madsen & Cook, 2010](#)). The main reason is that only recently has education been promoted as a principal means to achieving and sustaining the country’s continuous growth and development. At the same time, the need to support leadership through education has become more evident in the UAE and is currently expected from the local young generation. In all three federal higher education institutions in the UAE, a transformational agenda is an explicit part of their Business undergraduate education. These institutions clearly state their aims of “empowering [Emirati nationals] with the academic, professional and leadership competencies necessary to achieve success as effective leaders within the competitive and dynamic national and global business context” ([Zayed University, 2014](#)), “preparing graduates for future leadership” ([United Arab Emirates University, 2014](#)) and of “integrating business expertise and skills needed in a rapidly evolving society ([Higher Colleges of Technology, 2014](#)).

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