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Inclusion, Leadership, and Change**

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Learning Without Borders: Inclusion, Leadership, and Change

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When Education Excludes

Usually, students are welcomed on their first day of school by teachers offering words of encouragement, peers exchanging nervous excitement and a sense of possibility filling the air. It should be a gateway to growth; an opportunity, not a battle. This was not my experience.

“What are all the women doing here? Go to the Nursing School now, where you belong.”

These were the first words I heard on my first day of Law School at Baghdad University. Not that there were many women in the class; we were ten among more than fifty students.

Rather than being welcomed, I was dismissed before I had even begun. The weight of tradition, societal expectations, and institutional bias hung in the room, pressing against every woman who dared to take a seat. In that moment, law school did not feel like an open door. It felt closed; an entrance that would require immense effort to pry open and keep from shutting again.

Exclusion in education is rarely about explicit rejection; more often, it is a slow erosion of confidence, a persistent undercurrent of doubt reinforced by the system itself. It is in the way professors overlook certain students, in the way peers question one’s presence, and in the subtle but unrelenting message that some voices matter more than others.

Impact on Learning Outcomes: A Universal Challenge

As a learner, I couldn’t understand the connection between gender and criminology, the topic of the hour. I also couldn’t understand the dismissive behavior of the professor. He entered the classroom without so much as a greeting, perhaps because he saw the first row full of women. Still, not greeting the class was a stark violation of a core Iraqi value. In Iraq, a greeting is not just a formality; it is a wish for well-being, an acknowledgment of presence, and a marker of respect, especially when welcoming someone into a new chapter of their life.



Did I feel like I didn’t belong? Absolutely. Did I switch gears and enroll in the Nursing School? No. Instead, I swam against the current, year after year, jumping through hoops until I completed my Ph.D. Being a woman didn’t mean I had any less appreciation for justice and fairness, nor did it mean I was any less capable of understanding or interpreting the law. But in an environment that viewed women as out of place, competence was not enough. I had to prove, over and over again, that I had the right to be there.

But as I moved forward, I watched my female classmates disappear, one by one. Each year, there were fewer of us, our presence fading like ink washed away by time. When I finally reached my Ph.D. program, I was the only woman left, surrounded by men, outnumbered in every discussion, and carrying the unspoken weight of those who had been forced to abandon the path. The silence of those absent was louder than the voices in the room. It was isolating, a constant reminder of how easily barriers could turn into walls, closing doors that should have remained open.

Leadership in education is shaped by the expectations imposed on people long before they step into a classroom. Those expectations trickle down, influencing how individuals interact and how power is distributed. During oral tests - where performance outweighed written exams - my male colleagues would always turn to me and say, “*Ladies first.*” It was not an act of courtesy; they assumed that whoever went first would be given the hardest questions. My response was always the same:

“Not when facing danger.”

To me, it didn’t matter who went first—what mattered was passing the test. So, I prepared relentlessly, ensuring no book remained unturned. I knew that, as a woman, I would always be scrutinized more rigorously, held to a higher standard, and tested in ways my male peers were not. I refused to be caught off guard.

While my experience occurred in Iraq, exclusion in education is not bound by geography. In the U.S., students from historically marginalized groups - women in STEM, first-generation college students, students of color, and individuals with disabilities - often face similar systemic barriers. While the exclusion may not be as overt as being told to leave the classroom, it manifests in other ways: underrepresentation in leadership, limited access to mentorship, microaggressions, and implicit biases that shape classroom dynamics.

A 2021 report by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine found that women and people of color in academia often experience a lack of belonging and recognition, slower career progression, and higher attrition rates in doctoral programs. Similarly, research from the Education Trust (Patrick et al., 2020) highlights how Black and Latino students are disproportionately excluded from advanced coursework due to implicit biases and structural barriers rather than a lack of ability.

The lesson is clear: barriers in education are not always explicit, but they are deeply ingrained in systems and perceptions. Whether in Iraq or the U.S., students who do not fit traditional expectations are often made to feel like they do not belong. And when students feel they do not belong, it affects not only their performance but also their willingness to persist.

The cost of exclusion is profound, not just for individuals but for society as a whole. Every student pushed out of academia is a lost opportunity for innovation, leadership, and meaningful contributions. The challenge, then, is not simply to grant access to education but to create environments where all students feel valued, supported, and empowered to succeed.

From Exclusion to Transformation

My learning experience shaped my approach to transformative learning, an educational philosophy that goes beyond the classroom to create meaningful, relevant experiences for each learner. I knew that education should do more than transfer knowledge. It should challenge assumptions, foster critical thinking, and provide students with the tools to navigate real-world complexities. Learning should not be passive; it should break barriers, empower, and transform.

Transformative learning is not about simply relaying information; it is about reimagining how knowledge is acquired and applied. It is about recognizing the barriers that students face and finding ways to dismantle them. It is about making education not just accessible, but engaging, reflective, and, above all, relevant.

This philosophy became the foundation of my leadership in education. I sought to take learning beyond textbooks, designing environments where students engaged with knowledge in ways that connected to their lived realities. Whether teaching law in Iraq, Arabic at the Defense Language Institute, or civic education at the United States Institute of Peace, my mission remained the same: to ensure that learning was not just an academic exercise but a force for lasting change.

Exclusion in education is not just about who is denied access, but about who is made to feel like they do not belong. True leadership in education is not just about ensuring students are present; it is about ensuring they are seen, heard, and empowered to succeed.



Educational Identity

I never perceived myself as the sole holder of knowledge or the dictator of how learning should transpire, even though I had lived under a dictatorship. As an educator, my role has always been to facilitate learning, not to impose it.

Learning is like abstract art - each viewer interprets it differently, yet all acknowledge it as art. Similarly, education should not be confined to rigid structures; it should be dynamic, evolving based on the perspectives, experiences, and needs of learners. True learning is not about memorizing facts but about **challenging assumptions, fostering critical thinking, and equipping students with the tools to navigate real-world complexities.**

My experience studying at Law School shaped my approach to implementing **transformative learning**, an educational philosophy that goes beyond the classroom to create meaningful, relevant experiences for each learner. Learning should not be passive; it should **break barriers, empower, and transform.**

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Breaking the Cycle: Lessons from Exclusion in Education

- ❖ Exclusion is not always overt; it is often systemic and gradual. Being dismissed outright was painful, but what was more damaging was the slow disappearance of my female classmates, a reminder that exclusion is often structural. In the U.S., this is reflected in the lack of diversity in advanced academic programs and leadership roles, where students from marginalized backgrounds are systematically underrepresented.
- ❖ Access to education is not enough, belonging matters. It is not just about who is admitted but about who is made to feel they have a right to be there. In both Iraq and the U.S., underrepresented students face higher attrition rates due to a lack of mentorship, implicit bias, and systemic disadvantages.
- ❖ Educational barriers are often imposed long before students even enter the classroom. Expectations, both societal and institutional, shape who is encouraged to persist and who is expected to walk away. From early tracking in K-12 education to biases in higher education admissions and funding, these barriers affect students' opportunities long before they reach college.

Teaching Beyond the Textbook



Over time, my journey shifted from fighting for legitimacy as a student to shaping education as a faculty member. I found myself on the other side of the classroom, not as a learner seeking validation, but as an educator redefining learning.

As a faculty member, I faced a unique challenge: teaching one of the most resented subjects: legal English. My students dismissed it as irrelevant to their careers, convinced they would never need English in their legal work. And in truth, who could blame them? The textbook I was expected to use dated back to 1920, outdated, disconnected, and uninspiring. Many of my students were directors and managers pursuing degrees to advance their careers; to them, English felt like an unnecessary hurdle rather than a tool for growth.

But education is not about memorization; it's about engagement. As an educator, you cannot inspire learning if you yourself are uninspired. Teaching is not about delivering rehearsed lines; it is about creating meaningful connections between content and students' realities. I was reminded of this when I audited a course in the U.S. where the professor rehearsed not just the material but even the jokes. I attended the same class twice, expecting new insights, only to realize that everything – right down to the humor – was memorized to the letter. It was a performance, not a lesson.

Leadership in education is not about following a script; it is about questioning, adapting, and creating relevance where it seems lacking. I refused to rely on an obsolete book, just as I refused to see my students as passive recipients of knowledge. Instead of assuming they were only after a degree and not true learning, I sought to connect with them, not through judgment, but through relevance.

To do so, I selected a subject that was directly applicable to their daily work: contracts. Contracts were an essential part of their professional responsibilities, and by starting with what they knew, I introduced what they needed to learn. Establishing relatability is key to advancing learning. Once my students saw the connection between English and their professional success, their resistance faded. They didn't just advance their careers; they truly learned.

The resistance I faced wasn't just from the system; it was from the very people I was trying to empower. But over time, something shifted. By meeting students where they were, making learning relevant, and challenging rigid instructional methods, I saw engagement transform. That moment taught me a fundamental leadership lesson: credibility isn't granted; it's built through persistence, adaptability, and breaking the status quo.

Bridging Language, Trauma, and Learning at the Defense Language Institute

Years later, I carried this lesson with me to the Defense Language Institute (DLI) in Monterey, California, where I taught Arabic to military students. Teaching at DLI presented a unique challenge - one that extended far beyond language proficiency. Many of my students arrived injured or traumatized from their deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan. Their battlefield experiences shaped how they perceived the language and culture, sometimes making the learning process an emotional battleground rather than an academic endeavor.

Perhaps being assigned to a demanding language program didn't help matters. Learners at DLI don't choose their languages - languages choose them. The Department of Defense determines language assignments based on operational needs, meaning that a student could be studying Arabic, Chinese, or Pashto without any personal interest or cultural connection to it. This created an uphill battle for engagement, especially when the chosen language carried deep personal or political associations for the learner.



I had to find a way to make Arabic more than just a mandatory subject. It had to become an experience. I turned to creativity, cultural immersion, and unexpected methods to break through resistance.

To make learning engaging, I used Detective Conan, a well-known and widely loved anime. Instead of tedious grammar drills, students had to watch an episode, identify the killer in Arabic, and justify their choice using evidence and reasoning. I spent every free hour selecting images, associating difficult vocabulary with visuals, and crafting learning experiences that made Arabic feel less like an obligation and more like a tool for meaningful communication. I wrote a soap opera in Arabic, introducing narrative-driven learning that made language acquisition feel natural rather than forced. Establishing connection and relatability was key.

But some of my most effective techniques were tied to the senses. Every Friday, I brewed freshly made Iraqi tea with cardamom, serving it from my traditional Iraqi tea set with small silver spoons. Alongside the tea, I brought *klich*a date-stuffed cookies served in every Iraqi home during celebrations. This simple ritual transformed our classroom into a space of comfort, a bridge between cultures where learning became intertwined with personal experience.

Then came the talent show. Students who had spent months immersed in Arabic culture and vocabulary performed skits, songs, and storytelling, demonstrating not just language proficiency but a personal connection to the subject. Through laughter, shared experiences, and the joy of creativity, Arabic became more than just an assigned language, it became part of their identity.

Adapting to Virtual Learning: The Challenge of COVID-19

But the real test of teaching came during COVID-19. Transitioning overnight from in-person to virtual instruction was challenging; how to create engagement, provide meaningful feedback, and move beyond simply sharing PowerPoint slides or textbook readings?

So, I did what I do best: research. I searched for platforms that could offer real-time virtual engagement, and I discovered Nearpod, a tool that allowed instructors to create interactive lessons, engage students in real time, and provide immediate feedback.

With Nearpod, I could take students on virtual visits to Babylon and Ancient Egypt, immersing them in history while teaching Arabic. The platform also enabled interactive writing exercises, where students could practice Arabic script in a way that felt dynamic and personalized.

Years later, when I served as the Managing Academic Director at the National Judicial College, I applied the same principles, designing eleven learning modules using Nearpod to engage judges nationwide in a self-paced, interactive learning experience. The lessons I learned from transitioning to virtual teaching during the pandemic shaped my ability to design effective digital education for professionals at the highest levels.



Lessons Learned: Bridging Language, Culture, and Engagement

- ❖ Cultural immersion fosters deeper learning. When students experience a language beyond the textbook - through storytelling, sensory engagement, and real-world applications - they connect with the subject matter on a personal level.
- ❖ Relatability is key to breaking learning barriers. Students at DLI struggled not because of ability, but because they lacked emotional and practical connections to the language. When I made Arabic relevant to their experiences, their engagement transformed.
- ❖ Education must adapt to challenges, not resist them. Whether teaching in a high-pressure military setting or transitioning to online learning during COVID-19, success comes from rethinking how knowledge is delivered and ensuring it remains interactive, engaging, and impactful.



Dr. Al Moumin and U.S. Secretary of the Interior Gale Norton discussing assisting Iraq's environmental challenges, October 7, 2004

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Dr. Mishkat Al Moumin is a thought leader in education, environmental advocacy, and leadership development. As the Founder and President of The Communication of Success, she advances transformative learning strategies that drive measurable impact. A Brand Ambassador for Quarantine Racism, she advocates for racial equity and inclusive leadership. Baghdad.



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