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## It's an X Thing: You'll Never Understand

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## **IT'S AN X THING: YOU'LL NEVER UNDERSTAND**

**Mark Schaub**

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WITHOUT A DOUBT, the most rewarding teaching experiences of my career in higher education have been those when I've had the privilege of teaching at universities outside my home nation, the United States of America. What made them so rewarding was the challenge—and excitement—of adapting to another culture and a new environment. The adaptation to a new culture rarely happens with a short visit, and the most illustrative experiences for learning how to teach in different cultures came with my long-term stints overseas.

### **“We Can't Expect Better From the Students”**

Early last year I was able to fulfill a lifelong dream of being a Fulbright lecturer. For 5 months, my family and I lived in Poland, where I taught at a longtime partner university to my home institution. My assignment was to teach graduate-level business communications courses and one undergraduate course entitled “U.S. Business Culture.” Both of these courses presented me with numerous intercultural learning experiences, although an experience from one course in particular comes to mind.

Two students working on a joint report turned in a document that was obviously plagiarized. In fact, it took me all of 10 seconds to Google the original paper they had copied verbatim. This was the only time all semester that I found—even suspected—plagiarism. Much of that had to do with my unique assignments, many of them relating to semester-long service-learning projects the students proposed and completed. And I knew that plagiarism was something I needed to be vigilant about, just as professors in the United States need to be vigilant, especially when their paper assignments drift too

far toward the generic. In the back of my mind was a column by an American Fulbright professor who had taught in Poland the year before:

In short, with some notable exceptions, I find Polish student performance mediocre. Primary blame, I believe, rests with university policy. Given three attempts to pass any class, why should most students care? Negative results have no lasting consequence. I see this with startling clarity during finals week in January, a bacchanal of student malfeasance. First to arrive are the papers from my seminar, several plagiarized from the Internet. I fail seven. Then comes the final examination for my lecture course, where I witness more flagrant cheating than I have ever seen. . . . This experience was shattering for me. It violated the ethics and respect I consider essential to education, but I found myself affected in some deeper way. I believe I must have harbored unexamined romantic illusions about Poland tracing to my adolescent support for Solidarity, subconsciously associating Poland with social idealism. No longer. This new Poland will take some time to assimilate. But don't worry. None of my students failed. Not really. They all now receive their second chance. (Phelps, 2005, p. C2)

When I asked faculty and staff at the university what I was to do, none showed the least bit of surprise, although three—including my supervisor—said the students should fail the entire course, as I was planning. Furthermore, they insisted that I report the students to the dean of the college, going so far as to provide me the name and address of the presiding dean. But several faculty and staff had a very different reaction and thought my intention of failing the students for the course, or even failing the students for the final project itself without allowing them to redo the whole thing, was an overreaction on my part. “How can you have such unreasonable expectations for the students, when our own government leaders plagiarize and cheat?” one asked. “It is known that many faculty here at the university don't cite their work properly. So you can't fail the students for what the faculty are doing too,” advised another. So there was clearly a range of different views on this matter, far different than what I have experienced in dealing with plagiarism cases on U.S. campuses. It is my guess that if I return to teach in Poland 10 years from now, those arguing for less pity will be more numerous and the group arguing for “second chances” will be smaller.

## Will I Ever Understand?

I had made cultural blunders early on in my position as an instructor at the American University in Cairo. I had, for example, stated personal views that costly and environmentally damaging burial rituals were illogical, compared to simple cremation. This was during a class discussion of an Orwell text after I'd been in Egypt all of 2 weeks. I apologized for my insensitivity and ignorance of Muslim burial practices and—I think—successfully moved on with that class and then dozens of others in which I learned more and more from my students about Egyptian and Arab traditions. But after having been in Cairo for almost 3 years (of my total of 6½ there), I was still surprised, even stunned, by my lack of understanding of other elements of Egyptian culture, all of them related to women.

My recollection of the situation is quite vivid: I was about a half hour into a session with a student in my office one day, in which we were going over and over why the current draft of her “I-Search” paper project was not compelling. It appeared to me that she wasn't really saying anything, which was somewhat surprising, given that this particular student was one of the brightest and most opinionated students in the class. The daughter of a wealthy and politically powerful Cairene family, her essays and reports were generally insightful and well written.

“Do you know anyone who has actually been raped?” I boldly asked her.

“Oh, no!” she gasped. “Do you?”

“Yes, several,” I replied. “One is very close to me, and another I dated for a while.”

After a pause, the student looked at me and asked, with genuine curiosity, “Did they then marry the rapists?”

This bright young woman—who, like most of the students in my classes, did not wear a *hijab* over her hair—found it hard to imagine a college-aged woman “dishonored” by rape who would not accept a marriage proposal from her attacker. I was far more perplexed, finding it difficult or even impossible to imagine the concept of how marriage between attacker and victim could “make right” a violent crime. Indeed, just a few months later, there was a much-publicized Cairo court case in which a convicted rapist was given the option of jail time or proposing marriage to his victim. And the following

April, my spouse and I tagged along on a bird-watching outing in the Egyptian countryside with a colleague who was an avid birder. As we stood by an irrigation canal, my colleague commented, without pulling the scope away from his face, “Last week with the Cairo Birding Society, we were in this same spot, and we found a woman’s head here by the road. Honor killing.” I’m still perplexed.

### **We All Are Ambassadors**

Only one third of the students in my U.S. Business Culture course were Polish. The rest were other European students visiting for one or two semesters—most often as part of the ERASMUS exchange program between European universities. I taught students from Austria, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Serbia, Spain, and Turkey, and they were a delight. They were smart, eager to participate, and well prepared. Like many non-U.S. students, they were well-informed about world politics and history. But they were also, in many ways, a tough crowd in that they carried a strong bias into the course: an anti-U.S. bias. This was particularly relevant, given that the focus of the course was “U.S. Business Culture.”

Polish students, and Polish citizens generally, like the United States. On the Pew Global Attitudes Surveys of the past several years (Pew Research Center, 2006), the percentage of Poles with positive attitudes toward the United States has been about 60% higher than that of populations of Western European nations, including France and Germany. My experiences in the classroom this semester have paralleled those figures: The Polish students tended to view U.S. business culture favorably, whereas the French and German students uniformly expressed negative views toward the United States and U.S. business culture.

At times, I felt that the anti-U.S. sentiment was not entirely rational. Indeed, all the students were business majors at their home institutions, and most desired to work for multinational corporations. Several of them solicited my assistance in reviewing applications for jobs or internships with U.S.-based companies, the same companies they also listed as “evil” or “heartless” in written assignments. I concluded that a degree of the anti-U.S. sentiment was a result of their views on President Bush and recent foreign policy moves (primarily,

the war in Iraq). Having taught in the Middle East and having traveled regularly abroad these past 3 years, I was certainly not surprised by the negative attitudes toward U.S. foreign policy.

Totally unrelated to my teaching last year, I befriended a Spanish-New Zealander who had been living in Kraków for nearly a decade. As I shook hands with him to say my last farewell before departing Poland, he said something that surprised (and bothered) me. “You’re the first American I could talk to; you give me hope for your country.” It bothered me because it revealed his bias (and perhaps ignorance). But it also encouraged me—reinforcing my own bias that this business of international education is a positive force in this world in countless ways. We all are ambassadors, both at home and abroad.

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## TEACHING IN CAIRO

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THE WAY TO Cairo is convoluted. In my case, I know a Canadian professor who had taught at Sadat Academy for Managerial Sciences before and who knew that the academy needed a professor for an early summer term. I exchanged a few emails with the academy’s administration, attached a CV, and 2 months later found myself on a flight to Cairo out of Atlanta, via a short layover in Paris. I had never been to Egypt but had taught a short course in public relations in London some years ago, so I knew not to place too much reliance on expectations. Fortunately.