

1-1-2020

Finding the familiar in the strange: transcultural learning as rihla رحلة at an Australian university

T. Dobinson

Maggie McAlinden

Edith Cowan University, m.mcalinden@ecu.edu.au

P. Mercieca

T. Bogachenko

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.ecu.edu.au/ecuworkspost2013>



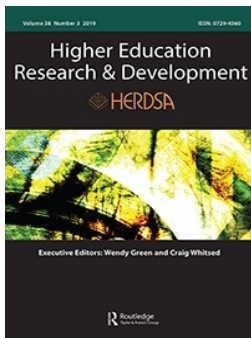
Part of the [Education Commons](#)

10.1080/07294360.2020.1765317

Dobinson, T., McAlinden, M., Mercieca, P., & Bogachenko, T. (2020). Finding the familiar in the strange: transcultural learning as rihla رحلة at an Australian university. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 1-15. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2020.1765317>

This Journal Article is posted at Research Online.

<https://ro.ecu.edu.au/ecuworkspost2013/8599>



Finding the familiar in the strange: transcultural learning as *rihla* رحلة at an Australian university

T. Dobinson , M. McAlinden , P. Mercieca & T. Bogachenko

To cite this article: T. Dobinson , M. McAlinden , P. Mercieca & T. Bogachenko (2020): Finding the familiar in the strange: transcultural learning as *rihla* رحلة at an Australian university, Higher Education Research & Development, DOI: [10.1080/07294360.2020.1765317](https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2020.1765317)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2020.1765317>



© 2020 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 04 Jun 2020.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 325







View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Finding the familiar in the strange: transcultural learning as *rihla* رحلة at an Australian university

T. Dobinson ^a, M. McAlinden ^b, P. Mercieca ^a and T. Bogachenko ^a

^aSchool of Education, Curtin University, Perth, Australia; ^bSchool of Education, Edith Cowan University, Perth, Australia

ABSTRACT

Diverse university campuses present an ideal context for fostering transcultural learning. Despite the potential that this diversity presents, universities in Australia have yet to make use of this opportunity. The pilot study described here investigates an informal learning experience created by the hosting of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) funded Arab Film Festival Australia (AFFA) on an Australian university campus. By imagining and exploring new ways in which universities can encourage transcultural learning and bring students and academics together, this pilot project identified the potential of informal learning to facilitate transcultural understanding and challenge assumptions about Arab cultures. The strategic adoption of informal learning activities to immerse diverse members of the university community temporarily in Arab cultures and contexts via carefully curated film screenings and other related events show potential to facilitate transcultural learning on university campuses. We found that such strategies have the potential to deeply engage members of the university community in transcultural dialogue and learning with themselves and others.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 23 April 2019
Accepted 21 March 2020

KEYWORDS

Internationalisation;
transcultural learning;
interculturalisation;
antiracism; diversity; social
justice; intercultural
education; informal learning;
inclusion; engagement

The internationalisation of Higher Education has led to expectations that local and international students (and staff) will learn from one another through interacting on campuses (Leask & Carroll, 2011; Marginson, 2003). Yet research continues to show that the mere presence of local and international students and staff on campuses is insufficient to guarantee intercultural interaction (Colvin, Volet, & Fozdar, 2014; God & Zhang, 2019; Lantz-Deaton, 2017; Leask & Carroll, 2011). Where interaction does occur, it is usually among students from similar backgrounds (Dunne, 2009; Harrison, 2015; Montgomery & McDowell, 2009). Thus, the ‘intercultural potentials of international education’ remain ‘largely unrealized’ (Marginson & Sawir, 2011, p. viii) with limited ‘shaping’ of the intercultural environment on campus by the rich and diverse university community (Colvin et al., 2014, p. 442).

Internationalisation in the Australian context focuses mainly on the marketised form (Marginson, 2004) from which it first emerged, and is primarily driven by economic

CONTACT M. McAlinden  m.mcalinden@ecu.edu.au

© 2020 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

interests. Attempts to develop the intercultural dimension of internationalisation have largely been superficial (Knight, 2010) despite the potential that the increased diversity on university campuses presents to develop transcultural understanding, enhance social justice and reduce racism. Further, the divide between international students, monolingual in English local students, local students who speak heritage languages, and indigenous students is also being questioned (Barker, 2019; Jiang, 2011; Jones, 2014). There has been a call for *interculturalisation* in opposition to *internationalisation* in which the interests and needs of students, previously seen as different, are now seen as intersecting and requiring some of the same institutional strategies. Transcultural learning on campus can benefit the entire university population so we designed a pilot study to explore the potential of informal learning to facilitate intercultural understanding. We used a set of key concepts drawn from post-structural, sociocultural perspectives of language and culture in higher education to inform the study which we outline next.

Culture

In this study, we conceptualise *culture* as multiple, incomplete, dynamic, relational, and discursive (Risager, 2006). Culture is a discourse that is socially constructed through and within particular contexts (Kramsch, 2011). However, we also acknowledge the prevailing *large culture* view which sees culture as an immutable, stable, fixed, homogenous entity bounded by national, religious, or other categories (Byram, 2013; Freitag-Hild, 2018; Holliday, 2016). We propose, in tandem with this large culture perspective, a *small culture* paradigm in which the term culture refers to shared feelings, beliefs, values and behaviours that develop within any small group (Holliday, 2016). We see this small culture view as inclusive of different ways of 'knowing, seeing and belonging' (Erasmus, 2010, p. 397) which are necessary for successful intercultural learning.

Transcultural learning

In a similar way, we view intercultural understanding as a constantly evolving social practice (Adapa & Hathaway, 2014; Kramsch, 2009) which enables people to communicate successfully in intercultural encounters (Deardorff, 2006). However, the concept of the *intercultural* is commonly used to refer to the phenomenon of communication between people across cultures, which are often understood as nation states. In contrast, the notion of *transcultural dialogue or learning* (Guilherme & Dietz, 2015) has been proposed to challenge the dominance of the Western worldview, which often views culture in essentialised, monolithic terms. This emergent notion of the transcultural involves the development of a Thirdness (Kramsch, 2009): a '... risky circulation of values across historical and ideological time scales ...' involving '... the negotiation on non-negotiable identities and beliefs ...' (Kramsch, 2009, p. 18). Within this conceptualisation, there is no unitary notion of culture as it relates to nation state, religion, or language. By creating opportunities for transcultural understanding, universities may be able to move beyond interactions in which particular beliefs, emotions, behaviours and values are positioned as more 'powerful' and 'dominant' to a new positioning which foregrounds 'mutual dialogue and respect' (Ryan, 2011, p. 635). Through this process, the 'reciprocal incompleteness' and mutability of one's own and other cultures is recognised (de Santos, 1995, p. 340 as cited in Guilherme & Dietz, 2015, p. 3).

Finding the familiar in the strange

In seats of formal learning, such as schools and universities, little attention is paid to ‘unplanned’ or informal learning (Rogers, 2014, p. 16). Yet research suggests that informal learning can serve the goal of social justice in education, particularly in relation to marginalised people (Kraidy, 2017, p. 158; Rogoff, Callanan, Gutiérrez, & Erickson, 2016). Informal learning has always taken place on university campuses. For example, international students join clubs, attend social events, or join in library tours to meet other students, all of which have been shown to encourage both in-class and after-class interaction among students from different backgrounds (McDermott-Levy, 2011; McLachlan & Justice, 2009). Shepherd and Rane (2012, p. 6) suggest that the concept of a *rihla* can provide ‘deeper understanding’ of host cultures and context. The *rihla* has its origins in Arabic language and Muslim culture and has been translated as *journey* or *travel*, but has at the core of its meaning the idea of a *quest* for knowledge that is ‘non-regional, nonconformist, and diversifying: The traveller seeks ways to harmonize, appreciate, and find the familiar in the strange’ (Abdul-Jabbar, 2019, p. 258). After Behar (1996, p. 14), we conceptualise the participants in the study as *travellers* who participated in intercultural and interdisciplinary dialogue with themselves and others in relation to the experiences they encountered.

Using media, film and literature to mediate learning opportunities

Media, film and literature can enhance understanding of distant others and draw attention to injustices and inequalities, but may also reinforce harmful cultural stereotypes and assumptions (Guterman, 2013; Jenkins, 2003). Characters from Arabic cultures in mainstream Western film are often depicted as ‘backward, wild, cruel, bloodthirsty, crude, sex-crazed, stupid, dishonest, conniving or menacing’ (Alaswad, 1999, p. 2) and there is a constant recycling of stereotypical, essentialised markers of Arab identity in Western film (e.g., desert and camels) (Alaswad, 1999). Film also reflects the evolution of the image of Muslim-Arab political violence in the media (Guterman, 2013) and, as public perceptions of Arab cultures worsen, it is hard not to consider the influence of film and media on these perceptions (Foster, Cook, Barter-Godfrey, & Furneaux, 2011). Discourses emphasise, but can also confuse, differences between Arabs and non-Arabs, Muslims and non-Muslims (Alaswad, 1999; Guterman, 2013). Added to this is the continuing association made between the Muslim Australian community and political violence (Green & Aly, 2011; Mansouri & Trembath, 2005).

On the other hand, educators have used film and other related mediums to reduce and challenge racisms. Following Benjamin (1969, pp. 237–241), there has been a long tradition of problematising commodified mass art in the humanities, where film viewing has been used to raise consciousness via its break with more reverential modes of aesthetics in high art. However, as Cutting (2016) has pointed out, films, as narratives, can both reinforce and subvert normative cultural values. Despite, and because of, these tensions, films, and particularly foreign language films, which interweave language, culture and context, are a useful starting point for ‘looking through the lenses of other cultures’ (Pegrum, 2008, p. 143).

Educators have been using film and texts to mediate identification and cultivate empathy with ‘distant others’ (Boler, 1997, p. 255) as a step towards reducing racism

for decades. Yet these approaches may be ineffective and even reinforce prejudice without consideration of the role of emotions and power (Boler, 1997, 2004; Jones, 1999; Ullman & Hecsh, 2011; Zembylas, 2012). In particular, such readings or viewings of distant others, often in situations of trauma, can encourage 'pleasurable detachment' and 'comfort' (Boler, 1997, p. 259) in which 'the spectacle of diversity is enjoyed' (Jones, 1999, p. 299). Typically, the reader/viewer is a passive consumer of the lives of others from a safe distance. Fiction/media allows this safe distance, even when it provokes strong emotion, so the viewing or reading about others may not be enough to generate genuine empathy and transcultural understanding. To address this, 'strategic empathy' (Zembylas, 2012, p. 113), derived from Boler's 'testimonial reading' (1997, p. 263), has been proposed. In this approach, the observer/viewer is supported to manage their own discomforting emotions while seeking to understand the emotional roots of racist ideas in themselves and others. Strategic empathy helps people to understand and interrogate their own assumptions, privileges and complicity in creating the social forces that create and maintain prejudice and racisms and other forms of social injustice. Zembylas argues that critical pedagogies are not adequate to address the common resistance that arises when members of divided communities are called on to confront troubled knowledge such as the material consequences of racisms. He argues that attention to emotion through strategic empathy can support people to engage with their own and other's pain through which a re-humanising can occur in which other points of view can be recognised but not adopted (Zembylas, 2012, pp. 120–122).

Our approach was to bring local students, international students and university staff together in cultural events which were thought-provoking, but welcoming. We chose Arabic language films specifically created to break down stereotypes of Arabic culture and mediate strategic empathy towards distant, and maligned cultures in an entertaining, provocative, but respectful manner.

Research design and methodology

The study was interpretivist-interactionist in nature. It was designed along the lines of an intrinsic case study (Simons, 2009; Stake, 2013), exploring the potential of informal learning opportunities to mediate thoughts and observations that might facilitate transcultural learning. The pilot study focused on Arab and non-Arab background students initially. This was considered important in the context of growing division between Arab and non-Arab background people in Australia and elsewhere (Aly, 2010, 2013; Green & Aly, 2011; Mansouri & Trembath, 2005). Two Arabic language films were screened publicly on campus curated by the Arab Film Festival Australia (AFFA) and Information and Cultural Exchange (ICE), Sydney, a community arts organisation association that works with disadvantaged, vulnerable and emerging communities, artists and creative producers. The films were written and directed by Arab-background artists and were not typical of Western representations of the Arab world. All films chosen had the potential to promote respectful, critical conversations about issues that were common to human social experience as well as provide windows into the diversity within cultures that are often perceived as monolithic.

The first film (*Barakah Meets Barakah*) was set in Saudi Arabia. It explored a relationship between a wealthy, young Muslim woman and a working class Muslim man who was

a member of the religious police. The second film (*Halal Love*) featured a Muslim family living in Lebanon. It challenged gendered identity by depicting a wife who convinces her husband to take another wife in order to ease her own workload in the house and to give her a break from sexual duties. It was expected that these films would raise questions, subvert stereotypes and reflect a small culture view that would resonate with Arab and non-Arab background audience members. The films were released in 2016 and set in Saudi Arabia and Lebanon. *Barakah Meets Barakah* was written, produced and directed by Mahmood Sabbagh (2016). *Halal Love* was written and directed by Assad Foulhadkar and produced by Gerhard Meixner, Roman Paul and Sadek Sabbah (2016). Free screenings of the films over two nights were followed up with interactive mingling over free tea, coffee and food. The event brought the Arab Film Festival to Western Australia for the first time, and was the first time for it to be housed on a university campus.

Participants

Over 130 people attended the film screenings. The audience comprised students, staff and members of the broader community and were fairly equally divided between Arab and non-Arab backgrounds. Of these, 9 students and 9 staff expressed interest in talking about their experiences after the events. Of the students, six had Middle Eastern heritage – see Tables 1 and 2 for participant information. Where participants reported having a dual national heritage they have been listed with both nationalities.

Table 1. Academic staff interviewed about the films.

Pseudonym	Area	Background
Sally	School of Education	Croatian Australian
John	School of Education	British Australian
Yoshi	School of Education	Japanese Australian
Jody	Humanities	Anglo Australian
Eva	Language Teaching Centre	Anglo Australian
Tina	Humanities	Irish Australian
Jill	School of Education	Anglo Australian
Mai	School of Education	Chinese Australian
Hilda	School of Education	Anglo Australian

Table 2. Students interviewed about the films.

Pseudonym	Area	Background
Mumtaz	Masters Education	Egyptian Australian
Omar	Bachelor Chemical Engineering	Omani international
Nahad	Masters Occupational Therapy	Iraqi international
Jing	Bachelor Media	Chinese international
Mahmoud	Bridging Course	Omani international
Francisco	PhD Engineering	Colombian Australian
Leila	PhD Design	Jordanian Australian
Amy	PhD Librarianship	Portuguese Australian
April	Bachelor Nursing	Anglo Australian
Sahar	MA AppLing	Saudi Arabian international

The three primary researchers were Anglo Australian academics who had all lived and worked in Arabic-speaking contexts for significant periods of their lives. As intercultural educators and researchers, we wanted to explore new ways of facilitating understanding between Arab and non-Arab background students and staff. The fourth researcher, a recent international postgraduate student, was paid for her role in the project as a research assistant.

Data collection and analysis

Data were generated via semi-structured and in-depth conversations with students and staff and from vox pop videos with audience members after the film screenings. In our in-depth conversations with participants, we explored their responses to the films, their intercultural interactions on campus, and their views of such events to facilitate deeper intercultural interaction on university campuses. In this article, we focus on our analysis of the data related specifically to participants' responses to the films; if and why they liked the films, what issues were of concern or interest to them, and their views on how daily life was portrayed in the films. Findings related to participants' perceptions of the value of such events and their intercultural interactions on campus are yet to be reported.

Analysis of responses followed a Miles and Huberman (1994) model of data reduction, data display, conclusion drawing, and verification. Data from 18 interviews of about 50 min each were reduced inductively and then organised with all irrelevant data discarded. This initial stage involved inductive open coding of all of the data and revealed codes which were then compared and sorted into nine sub-categories as illustrated in [Table 3](#).

Table 3. Initial coding.

Expectations
Similar to own background
Differs from own background
Differs from own experience of the Arab world
Drawbacks
Issues/themes/critical thinking
Learning
Realistic representations
Unrealistic representations

Nine sub-categories were then merged to form three main themes: emotional identification, learning from the unexpected, and shared concerns. These themes, and their contribution to transcultural learning, form the basis of the findings and discussion below. Permission to conduct the study was granted by the university's Human Research Ethics Committee.

Emotional identification

All participants related emotionally to the films, identifying with the human social situations and characters depicted. This finding reinforces the human capacity to relate through a sense of shared human experience, which is an essential element of understanding others:

Actually, we feel as we meet our brothers and sisters because we would spoke their one language, Arabic language, and we share our culture, even about the foods. We call it this ... and you call it this ... and we find the difference between the small things. (Sahar, Saudi Arabian international student)

Many of the Arab-background participants said that they identified emotionally with the language and representations of *large cultures* in the films, even though the films were not set in their countries of birth. The films reminded them of cultures and countries with which they identified strongly and this moved them:

It was very also nostalgic for me because I've lived in the Middle East for twenty years of my life and I'm half Egyptian, so a big part of me is from there ... and so hearing the Arabic and seeing the jokes, it made me laugh a lot, you know, I'm far away from there now, so it was really lovely. (Mumtaz, Egyptian Australian student)

Omar, an Omani international student, identified strongly with *Barakah Meets Barakah*. He identified in general with the representation of Arab culture:

I am from Oman, which is like Saudi Arabia; we're similar to each other. Their background is almost the same. So we have *Barakah Meets Barakah*, which was like representing our real life like how we lived there. (Omar, Omani international student)

The ability to see your own cultural practices arises from the way films document 'who we think we are or were, but also reflect changes in our self-image' (Belton, 1996, p. 2). At the same time, seeing your own country with fresh eyes from the distance involved in studying overseas can also accentuate this critical perspective, as there is often some useful, contingent discarding of 'cultural baggage' (Louie, 2005, p. 23). The Arab-background participants expressed feelings of pride and validation that the language and culture that they were strongly associated with were being publicly presented in a positive light:

Arab Film, is really a good things or a good event that's ... to do it here. I feel so proud. Because always we heard the Hollywood, the Bollywood, but no one talk about the Arab's film. (Sahar, Saudi Arabian international student)

In contrast, however, some aspects of the films mediated negative emotional responses from participants who felt let down at times by what they perceived to be the reinforcement of stereotypes in the films or unrealistic portrayals or representations of life in the region. Mumtaz, an Egyptian Australian student, for example, argued that the way divorce was depicted in *Halal Love* was unrealistic. She argued that people could not just say 'I divorce you' three times to end a marriage. Under current Islamic laws, it is far more complex than that, she argued. Similarly, Mahmoud, an Omani international student felt that the 'old and broken' portrayal of Saudi Arabia did not reflect his experience:

... the way of living in Saudi Arabia, they didn't show the-the good way of living ... everything was old and broken. They were living in old houses. Like that ... I think maybe even the middle class don't live like that.

Leila, a Jordanian Australian student, worried that audiences might believe all Arab countries to be like Saudi Arabia. She said that the director may have been 'painting a more extreme version' of Saudi life as a cinematic technique to get the audience's attention

more easily. These observations facilitated deep and meaningful conversations, which were only possible due to the students' knowledge of Arabic cultures.

The films generated deep reflections on the complexity and multiplicity of Arab cultures, while addressing some discomfiting topics. Overall, participants responded to the films in a positive way. They felt happiness, surprise, pride and curiosity in relation to the content of the films. These findings suggest that the films were successful in part due to their humorous, but nuanced portrayal of cultures in Arab countries, and their capacity to be thought provoking and emotionally engaging.

Learning from the unexpected

Participants were very surprised by the films and had their assumptions and preconceptions challenged, especially the staff. They commented on behaviours that they did not expect to see:

... they were different to what I had expected, the Saudi one. Uhm, I was amazed that there was a woman could walk in the streets and I was so amazed. (Eva, Anglo Australian staff)

They were also surprised to see issues that they could relate to, and many commented on how funny they found the films:

... so it was, you know, issues that hit everyone in life but in different shapes and forms, um, were really demonstrated nicely through the movie. Um, I think possibly the fact that there was so much humour involved was quite surprising for me. (Tina, Irish Australian staff)

... that made laugh and that made me laugh, where, uhm, there were things that I guess would make me laugh in my own life ... (Hilda, Anglo Australian staff)

Much of the humour in the films centred around the unexpected. For example, Saudi men dressing in women's clothing to perform in a play, or a woman begging her husband to get another wife to help her with the housework. This element of the films facilitated the process of *rihla* whereby travellers seek ways to find and appreciate the strange through something familiar.

The cultural diversity represented in the films also challenged participants' preconceived ideas about religions, social classes, and cultures in the region. Nahad, an Iraqi international student, when asked about *Barakah meets Barakah*, noted what surprised her:

... like, you know, they [Saudi Arabia] kind of went back in terms of development, like they were so Westernised and now they are like, you know, ladies can't drive and all that. So I found that fascinating because I did not know that history ... even though I'm Arab, I've never gone and watched that stuff ... yeah, that was a real eye opener.

Jing, a Chinese international student, referencing the large culture paradigm, did not expect to see so many similarities between her own culture and those represented in the films: 'I was thinking that Lebanese society was more traditional than Chinese ... but surprisingly, you know, Lebanese society was quite more open-minded and tolerant ... they are not very different from us'.

Relating to experiences of distant others through mediums such as film or literature can mediate empathy (Boler, 1997). However, this sense-making through similar or shared

beliefs, feelings or behaviours alone may not be sufficient for transcultural learning to occur. As discomfort or dissonance arises, and is rejected, then ‘strategic empathy’ (Zembylas, 2012) can be included to support transcultural learning. Staying with discomforting emotions that arise when confronted with behaviours and worldviews that conflict with our own can cause us to gaze at our own reflections (Boler, 1997, p. 259), which can lead to genuine transcultural learning.

Leila, a Jordanian Australian student, said the film *Barakah Meets Barakah* really ‘surprised’ her because it critiqued Saudi Arabian society:

I knew that it’s gonna be critical, but like even within the Arab culture, the way that we critique our culture seems sometimes it seems that there has been a cliché within our own critique, but I found that film to go beyond that. So, I was pleasantly surprised.

Participants were keen to learn about different cultures and contexts in their quest to learn:

I like to get to see new peoples to see how is the way of their thinking ... so I can improve like living my life in a better way ... (Omar, Omani international student)

The participants expressed astonishment at seeing relationship issues expressed so openly in the films, and at female characters having more freedom than they imagined:

One thing I have thought about Saudi Arabia was that women are very marginalized ... And yet in that film, the female character seemed to have a lot of the power. (Jill, Anglo Australian staff)

In our conversations with participants, they applauded the level of openness, self-criticism, and humour used in the films to present some very serious and taboo issues:

The fact that there was so much humour involved was quite surprising for me ... that lovely, light-hearted state of things, and the way people look at things, and the way characters can be quite outspoken. (Tina, Irish Australian staff)

The humour and focus on human social issues in the films created opportunities for transcultural learning to occur. The films were successful in countering the stereotypical images of Arab cultures often seen in news coverage and the media (Guterman, 2013). The small culture view of human social behaviour that was evident throughout the films enabled participants to relate to the characters and issues in the films, even though they may have been strange and unfamiliar in some ways.

Shared concerns

The films promoted learning because they raised issues or concerns ‘in other people’s households’, which the participants saw as both different and similar to their own:

What I took away was the way in which we all have the same desires, the same problems, but because of the cultural ways, restrictions and opportunities of our respective cultures, we find different ways to solve those problems. (April, Anglo Australian student)

The issues and concerns included love and relationship issues, gendered identities, parental expectations and control (patriarchy), socio-economic status, religion (public and private lives), traditional versus modern life, individual versus community wellbeing, identity, globalisation and multi-faceted life. Participants were keen to talk about their own experiences and beliefs and provide critical perspectives on these issues.

Participants found the depictions of women in the films to be very relatable, particularly in relation to the power that women were afforded in the films:

It seems that women have a lot of power in the family ... and still have choices of freedom, despite all kinds of rules around. So, I feel that I actually share that ... I am from China so I actually share some commonalities, you know, Chinese women and Arabic women, I could relate because we have a lot of cultural rules in the family too, so especially for women, but we find ways to navigate through it. It's the same. (Mai, Chinese Australian staff)

They were also able to understand significant and controversial cultural differences like polygamy in *Halal Love* by identifying with the female characters:

It's ok, for example, for a woman who is seeking to get a wife for her husband, because she wanted the break, you know, like I don't care if you sleep with her or you have sex with her, who cares, I want somebody helping me with all these horrible stuff I have to do every day. And I thought so many women could actually relate to that. (Sally, Croatian Australian staff)

The focus on issues of human social relationships in the films, even within very different cultural contexts meant that, regardless of their backgrounds, the participants were able to relate to shared concerns with the characters and situations presented in the films. These shared concerns have the potential to mediate transcultural understanding and, therefore, highlight how informal activities such as carefully curated film events and post film discussions can capitalise on shared human concerns, which foster empathy and learning.

Discussion and conclusions

Not everyone was convinced about the value of informal cultural events to mediate transcultural learning. Two academics queried the assumption that students want to be singled out or highlighted. They wondered if events such as the film festival 'created situations which were artificial' and commodifiable (Mooers, 2009, p. 37). Such activities distract from issues such as racism on campus, and rather than being a 'demand from below', multiculturalism is an 'ideological elaboration' from above, a 'manufactured affair' (Mooers, 2009, p. 36) of cultural festivals and food fairs. These sanitised versions of transcultural learning may reinforce shallow cultural stereotypes, feeding prejudice and racisms. As Bourn (2011) observed, universities need to move from a position of internationalisation in which the dominant culture is privileged while all other cultures are represented by token events such as Harmony Days. Transcultural learning opportunities need to be interwoven implicitly and explicitly in all aspects of higher education for meaningful intercultural understandings to occur. While events like these films screenings are open to accusations of tokenism, using carefully curated films featuring complex issues can initiate meaningful intercultural interaction and understanding.

We recognise that for critical transcultural perspectives to develop further, risks need to be taken to include discussion on the issues and questions raised through this pilot study. We decided not to facilitate a dialogue between the participants in the first instance, due to concerns that we might unwittingly create a space for racist views and anti-Arab sentiment to be expressed. We had been forewarned of the risks, and limited value, of forcing students to interact (Leask & Carroll, 2011). When asked what kind of related events participants would be willing to participate in, they suggested a forum in which they could discuss issues and questions after film screenings:

- Participant: And people ... wanna be able to ask, um, questions. I wonder if it could be something like that.
- Interviewer: Yeah, actually we did think of that ... when we were organizing the event. We weren't quite sure, again, ... that's has been a risky business ... is someone on the other end gonna be offended or ... ?

The inclusion of post-viewing forums, which bring audiences together in carefully mediated critical conversation, may lead to more 'real living' (Buber, 1958, p. 25) on campus in which questions and issues can be raised in an informed, empathic, and safe environment.

The level and depth of engagement of participants with the films and the critiquing of the event itself were all indicative of engagement and learning. The value of the films and the entire informal learning event was apparent in the willingness of people to attend the event and by the number of participants eager to engage in in-depth discussions about the films afterwards. There was a sense that participants valued the opportunity for deeper conversation about culture, and that typical social events on campuses may not provide them with the opportunities to do so. This may also be exacerbated by a pervasive drinking culture in Australia, which means that many university social clubs are not safe spaces for students who do not drink alcohol.

Our research points to the potential of carefully thought through (strategic) informal learning activities to create safe spaces that can foster critical thinking and reflection with 'outsider' (Leask & Carroll, 2011) values and perspectives within a dominant culture. These spaces can function as safe houses in which productive and equal relationships can be developed that go beyond a surface level (Knight, 2010). Many participants were keen to discuss what they had seen and to extend this discussion to their own personal circumstances. Despite some participants feeling (like Mooers, 2009) that the films may have promoted stereotypes about the Middle East, such observations were also valuable opportunities to harness critical discussion and raise issues to be contemplated.

Our event, and related research was only possible through collaboration and financial support from the university and a small external research grant. The project relied heavily on our university departments, community groups, educators and researchers in intercultural education, student bodies, and professional and academic staff. Our event involved the student Guild, the Omani student society on campus, the Arab Film Festival Australia, and Information and Cultural Exchange, Sydney. We also relied on the goodwill of colleagues to help us to organise and set up the event. If universities want the internationalisation of higher education to go beyond the superficial attempts that currently proliferate (Knight, 2010), they need to actively engage the expertise of researchers and educators in their institutions to collaborate with professional staff, students and community organisations to develop more meaningful and rigorous strategies.

Many staff attended the films and were deeply engaged, which indicates the potential of events like the film screenings to address the gap in staff development that has already been identified by other researchers in higher education (Cushner & Mahon, 2009; Leask & Carroll, 2011). Intercultural learning strategies such as those identified by Adapa and Hathaway (2014) can also be harnessed to foster transcultural dispositions of all staff and students. The film screening event and related activities were, as Shepherd and Rane (2012) suggest, the start of a *rihla* towards 'a deeper understanding' (p. 6) of the

dynamic nature of cultures that make up the Arab world. This *rihla* could be incorporated into professional learning for students and staff on interculturalised campuses.

By watching foreign language films, and focusing on Arab films in particular, participants in the study were able to start deconstructing dominant media images of themselves and others and reconceptualising their understandings of Arab cultures. Transcultural learning, it seems, can be facilitated by the use of such stimuli to evoke emotional identification, lessons from the unfamiliar, and shared concerns. Enhancing critical and cultural awareness with strategic empathy may eventually lead to more constructive and transformative exchanges in relation to misunderstood and misrepresented cultures and regions (Sifakis & Kordia, 2019). However, as Pegrum (2008, p. 143) suggested, ‘critical awareness is of little value if it does not lead to change’. Exposure to carefully curated foreign language films and follow-up one-on-one conversations alone will not be sufficient to enhance mutual understanding among divided groups of students and staff, but, as our research has indicated, it can provide a first step in a *rihla* towards deeper interaction and transcultural learning on university campuses.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by the Council for Arab Australian Relations [grant number BO11]; and the School of Education, Curtin University [grant number 2045].

ORCID

T. Dobinson  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1790-0016>
M. McAlinden  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2933-6371>
P. Mercieca  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7693-7655>
T. Bogachenko  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8655-2727>

References

- Abdul-Jabbar, W. K. (2019). The intercultural deterritorialization of knowledge: Al-Ghazali and the enunciation of the educator’s *rihla*. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 24(3), 318–331. doi:10.1080/13562517.2018.1542378
- Adapa, S., & Hathaway, T. (2014). Intercultural sensitivity training toolkit: Augmenting academic engagement patterns. In A. Kwan, E. Wong, T. Kwong, P. Lau, & A. Goody (Eds.), *Research and development in higher education: Higher education in a globalized world* (Vol. 37, pp. 1–9). Milperra, NSW: Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia, Inc.
- Alaswad, S. (1999). *Hollywood shoots the Arabs: The construction of the Arab in American culture*. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Temple University, Philadelphia.
- Aly, A. (2010). *A study of audience responses to the media discourse about the ‘other’: The fear of terrorism between Australian Muslims and the broader community*. Lampeter: Edwin Mellen.
- Aly, A. (2013). A new normal? Australian responses to terrorism and their impacts. In D. Antonius & S. J. Sinclair (Eds.), *The political psychology of terrorism fears* (pp. 156–171). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

- Barker, M. (2019, November 28). *Interculturalisation in settler contexts: Perspectives from Australia and Canada*. Paper presented at the internationalisation in higher education symposium: Sustainable approaches to research, teaching and learning and leadership, Sydney.
- Behar, R. (1996). *The vulnerable observer: Anthropology that breaks your heart*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Belton, J. (1996). Introduction. In J. Belton (Ed.), *Movies and mass culture* (pp. 1–22). New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Benjamin, W. (1969). The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction. In H. Arendt (Ed.), *Illuminations* (pp. 253–264). New York, NY: Schocken.
- Boler, M. (1997). The risks of empathy: Interrogating multiculturalism's gaze. *Cultural Studies*, 11(2), 253–273. doi:10.1080/09502389700490141
- Boler, M. (2004). *Feeling power: Emotions and education*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Bourn, D. (2011). From internationalisation to global perspectives. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 30(5), 559–571.
- Buber, M. (1958). *I and Thou*. (R. G. Smith, Trans.). New York, NY: Scribner Classics.
- Byram, M. (2013). Foreign language teaching and intercultural citizenship. *Iranian Journal of Language Teaching Research*, 1(3), 53–62.
- Colvin, C., Volet, S., & Fozdar, F. (2014). Local university students and intercultural interactions: Conceptualising culture, seeing diversity and experiencing interactions. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 33(3), 440–455.
- Cushner, K., & Mahon, K. (2009). Intercultural competence in teacher education. In E. K. Dearsdoff (Ed.), *Handbook of intercultural competence* (pp. 304–320). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Cutting, J. E. (2016). Narrative theory and the dynamics of popular movies. *Psychonomic Bulletin & Review*, 23(6), 1713–1743.
- de Santos, S. B. (1999). Towards a multicultural conception of human rights. In M. Featherstone & S. Lash (Eds.), *Spaces of culture: City, nation, world* (pp. 214–229). London: Sage.
- Dearsdoff, D. (2006). Identification and assessment of intercultural competence as a student outcome of internationalization. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 10, 241–266. doi:10.1177/1028315306287002
- Dunne, L. (2009). Discourses of inclusion: A critique. *Power and Education*, 1(1), 42–56.
- Erasmus, Z. (2010). Contact theory: Too timid for 'race' and racism. *Journal of Social Issues*, 66(2), 387–400.
- Foster, N., Cook, K., Barter-Godfrey, S., & Furneaux, S. (2011). Fractured multiculturalism: Conflicting representations of Arab and Muslim Australians in Australian print media. *Media, Culture & Society*, 33(4), 619–629.
- Fouladkar, A. (Director, Writer), Meixner, G. (Producer), Roman, P. (Producer), & Sabbah, S. (Producer). (2016). *Halal love* [Motion picture]. Dubai: Razor Film Production.
- Freitag-Hild, B. (2018). Teaching culture – intercultural competence, transcultural learning, global education. In C. Surkamp & B. Viebrock (Eds.), *Teaching English as a foreign language* (pp. 159–175). Stuttgart: JB Metzler.
- God, Y. T., & Zhang, H. (2019). Intercultural challenges, intracultural practices: How Chinese and Australian students understand and experience intercultural communication at an Australian university. *Higher Education*, 78, 305–322. doi:10.1007/s10734-018-0344-0
- Green, L., & Aly, A. (2011). How Australian Muslims construct western fear of the Muslim other. In H. Vella Bonavita (Ed.), *Negotiating identities: Constructed selves and others* (pp. 65–90). New York, NY: Rodopi.
- Guilherme, M., & Dietz, G. (2015). Difference in diversity: Multiple perspectives on multicultural, intercultural, and transcultural conceptual complexities. *Journal of Multicultural Discourses*, 10(1), 1–21. doi:10.1080/17447143.2015.1015539
- Guterman, K. (2013). The dynamics of stereotyping: Is a new image of the terrorist evolving in American popular culture? *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 25(4), 640–652.
- Harrison, N. (2015). Practice, problems and power in 'internationalisation at home': Critical reflections on recent research evidence. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 20(4), 412–430.

- Holliday, A. (2016). Revisiting intercultural competence: Small culture formation on the go through threads of experience. *International Journal of Bias, Identity and Diversities in Education*, 1(2), 1–13. doi:10.4018/IJBIDE.2016070101
- Jenkins, P. (2003). *Images of terror: What we can and can't know about terrorism*. Hawthorne, NY: Aldine de Gruyter.
- Jiang, X. (2011). Why interculturalisation? A neo-Marxist approach to accommodate cultural diversity in higher education. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 43(4), 387–399.
- Jones, A. (1999). The limits of cross-cultural dialogue: Pedagogy, desire, and absolution in the classroom. *Educational Theory*, 49(3), 299.
- Jones, E. (2014). Graduate employability and internationalization of the curriculum at home. *International Higher Education*, 78, 6–8.
- Knight, J. (2010). Higher education crossing borders; programs and providers on the move. In D. B. Johnstone, M. B. d'Ambrosio, & P. J. Yakoboski (Eds.), *Higher education in a global society* (pp. 42–69). Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Kraidy, M. (2017). *Hybridity, or the cultural logic of globalization*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- Kramsch, C. (2009). Third culture and language education. In V. Cook (Ed.), *Second language learning and language teaching* (pp. 233–254). London: Routledge.
- Kramsch, C. (2011). The symbolic dimensions of the intercultural. *Language Teaching*, 44(3), 354–367.
- Lantz-Deaton, C. (2017). Internationalisation and the development of students' intercultural competence. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 22(5), 532–550. doi:10.1080/13562517.2016.1273209
- Leask, B., & Carroll, J. (2011). Moving beyond 'wishing and hoping': Internationalisation and student experiences of inclusion and engagement. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 30(5), 647–659.
- Louie, K. (2005). Gathering cultural knowledge: Useful or handle with care? In J. Carroll & J. Ryan (Eds.), *Teaching international students: Improving learning for all* (pp. 17–25). London: Routledge.
- Mansouri, F., & Trembath, A. (2005). Multicultural education and racism: The case of Arab-Australian students in contemporary Australia. *International Education Journal*, 6(4), 516–529.
- Marginson, S. (2003). Higher education reform in Australia – an evaluation. In H. Eggins (Ed.), *Globalisation and reform in higher education* (pp. 133–163). Buckingham: Society for Research into Higher Education: Open University Press.
- Marginson, S. (2004). National and global competition in higher education. *The Australian Educational Researcher*, 31(2), 1–28. doi:10.1007/bf03249517
- Marginson, S., & Sawir, E. (2011). *Ideas for intercultural education*. New York: Palgrave-McMillan.
- McDermott-Levy, R. (2011). Going alone: The lived experience of female Arab-Muslim nursing students living and studying in the United States. *Nursing Outlook*, 59, 266–277.
- McLachlan, D., & Justice, J. (2009). A grounded theory of international student well-being. *Journal of Theory Construction and Testing*, 13, 27–32.
- Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Montgomery, C., & McDowell, L. (2009). Social networks and the international student experience: An international community of practice? *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 13(4), 455–466.
- Mooers, C. (2009). Multiculturalism and the fetishism of difference. *Socialist Studies/Études Socialistes*, 1(2), 33–54.
- Pegrum, M. (2008). Film, culture and identity: Critical intercultural literacies for the language classroom. *Language and Intercultural Communication*, 8(2), 136–154.
- Risager, K. (2006). *Language and culture: Global flows and local complexity*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Rogers, A. (2014). The classroom and the everyday: The importance of informal learning for formal learning. *Investigar Em Educação*, 2(1), 7–34.

- Rogoff, B., Callanan, M., Gutiérrez, K. D., & Erickson, F. (2016). The organization of informal learning. *Review of Research in Education*, 40(1), 356–401. doi:10.3102/0091732X16680994
- Ryan, J. (2011). Teaching and learning for international students: Towards a transcultural approach AU. *Teachers and Teaching*, 17(6), 631–648. doi:10.1080/13540602.2011.625138
- Sabbagh, M. (Director, Producer, Writer). (2016). *Barakah meets Barakah* [Motion picture]. Saudi Arabia: Arsenal Germany.
- Shepherd, G., & Rane, H. (2012). *Experiencing Australia: Arab students' perspectives and perceptions informing enhancement strategies*. Paper presented at the 23rd ISANA conference, Auckland.
- Sifakis, N. C., & Kordia, S. (2019). Promoting transformative learning through English as a lingua franca: An empirical study. In T. Fleming, A. Kokkos, & F. Finnigan (Eds.), *European perspectives on transformation theory* (pp. 177–192). Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Simons, H. (2009). *Case study research in practice*. London: Sage.
- Stake, R. E. (2013). *Multiple case study analysis*. New York, NY: The Guildford Press.
- Ullman, C., & Hecsh, J. (2011). These American lives: Becoming a culturally responsive teacher and the 'risks of empathy'. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 14(5), 603–629. doi:10.1080/13613324.2011.589172
- Zembylas, M. (2012). Pedagogies of strategic empathy: Navigating through the emotional complexities of anti-racism in higher education. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 17(2), 113–125. doi:10.1080/13562517.2011.611869