

# REFLECTIONS ON STUDENT BEHAVIOR AND LEARNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN TURKEY, UNITED STATES, TANZANIA, AND INDONESIA

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## Abstract

Students naturally vary in their behavior and learning habits within any population. Such variations could be more pronounced when going from one country to another. The factors that affect the changes in the students' attitudes and learning abilities can be driven by cultural, institutional, and socio-economic differences in the countries involved. For example, if the students in one country do not have the same level of access to the tools of the modern information technology, such as tablets, laptops, and connection to the Internet, it is difficult for them to utilize the vast amount of information that is available online. Under those conditions, the methods for delivery of information to the students have to be adjusted to meet the conditions in that country. During the last 38 years, I have had the good fortune to teach at universities in four countries that have considerably different cultures and cover a wide spectrum in terms of development as measured by the Human Development Index. These countries are Turkey, United States, Tanzania, and more recently Indonesia. I attained my higher education in the United States as a foreign student experiencing the effects of cultural and economic differences among countries. I also had four children go through three different universities in the United States, which gave me the opportunity to observe the higher educational systems at these universities as a parent. Based on these experiences, I offer some insights on differences in student behavior and education in the abovementioned countries with the hope that my observations will help both the researchers who are interested in understanding the educational systems in different countries and those individuals who are interested in teaching in countries other than their own.

**Keywords** – Student behavior in higher education, cultural aspects of higher education, socio-economic aspects of higher education, teaching at universities overseas, Human Development Index.

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## Introduction

This paper provides examples of different student behavior and learning habits in universities across four countries (Turkey, United States, Tanzania, and Indonesia) based on the author's teaching experience in those countries. Even though it is not an exhaustive research into such

matters and involves a very small population of students and higher learning institutions in the mentioned countries, the examples along with the author's comments, insights, and reflections are presented with the hope that they will provide some help to others who want to venture abroad to teach in universities in other countries or to researchers who are interested in such differences among countries with different cultures and socioeconomic status.

The countries involved span a wide spectrum on the development scale and have quite different cultural patterns. In terms of development, one index that is often used to rank the countries is the Human Development Index (HDI) that was developed under the auspices of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP). The HDI integrates three basic dimensions of human development: life expectancy at birth, mean years of schooling for adults along with expected years of schooling for children, and gross national income per person. In the Human Development Report 2016, published by the UNDP (available online at <http://hdr.undp.org/en/2016-report> ), the HDI for all the countries in the world ranges from a low value of 0.352 to the highest value of 0.949. Within this range, the HDI values for the abovementioned four countries are 0.920, 0.767, 0.689, and 0.531, respectively for the United States, Turkey, Indonesia, and Tanzania. The UNDP classifies the countries into four categories based on the HDI: those with an HDI of over 0.800 are in the very high human development category, those with an HDI of between 0.700 and 0.800 are in the high human development category, the ones with an HDI of between 0.550 and 0.700 are in the medium development category, and the countries with an HDI of less than 0.550 are in the low human development category. As can be seen, the four countries discussed in this paper cover the entire spectrum of development as defined by the UNDP. Even though there is a great variation among

the people in each country in regards to their socioeconomic status, to a first degree, the HDI for a country can be interpreted as an indicator of the country's socioeconomic condition as a whole.

The four countries are also quite different culturally as indicated by different religions, languages, races, geography, and ethnicity of the people in them. Similar to all other human traits, cultural variation is not just from one country to another, but also exists among regions within the countries themselves. However, there are certain trends that are more prevalent in one country as opposed to another. It is not the intent of this paper to identify such differences among the four countries involved. We will suffice to point out some differences in student behavior in these countries that are likely to be related to the students' upbringing and societal norms in the countries. Such differences should not be taken as representative of the countries and their people. They are only given here as examples of the things that one may encounter when moving from one country to another and should keep an eye out for.

The information provided in the remainder of the paper is organized as follows: Historical Background section provides a historical accounting of the author's teaching experience in Turkey, United States, Tanzania, and Indonesia. The stories in the Anecdotes section are given primarily to provide context for the comments and reflections given in the section entitled Discussion and Reflections. The last section is a short summary with conclusions.

## **Historical Background**

This section provides a factual and historical accounting of my experience in teaching or observing the higher educational systems in Turkey, United States, Tanzania and Indonesia. After graduating from High School in Turkey in 1968, and while attending the English Language Preparatory School of the Middle East Technical University in Ankara Turkey, I won a national exam and went, with a scholarship from the Turkish Government, to the United States in May

1969 to complete my higher education. I obtained three degrees; Bachelors of Science, Masters of Science, and Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.), all in Nuclear Engineering, from the University of Wisconsin in Madison, Wisconsin. After working at a private research institute for two years, I moved to Turkey and taught at the Bogazici University (formerly known as Robert College) in Istanbul, Turkey for two years (1980 – 1982). I taught courses in two Departments: Nuclear Engineering and Mathematics. I returned to the United States in 1982 and went back to Battelle Memorial Institute, the same institute that I worked at from 1978 to 1980. In 1990 I transferred to a government owned research and development institute called Argonne National Laboratory (ANL). While working at ANL, I started to teach part time in the evenings at Northwestern University in Chicago, Illinois. I taught in the school of Continuing Studies of the Northwestern University most semesters from 2003 until 2011. The students who were in my classes were mostly working adults who wanted to further their education for self-fulfillment and/or better job prospects.

After retiring from ANL in February 2014, I had the opportunity to go Tanzania in September 2014. I taught at Saint Augustine University of Tanzania (SAUT) in Mwanza, Tanzania for two semesters; first semester of 2014 – 2015 academic year and the second semester of the 2015 – 2016 academic year. In August 2017, I came to Indonesia to teach at Sanata Dharma University for one semester. As I write this paper (early October 2017), I currently teach at Sanata Dharma. I was the parent of one or more students in college every year from 2003 until 2013. One of my children obtained her Bachelors degree from Northwestern University and her Masters and Ph.D. degrees from Indiana University, in Bloomington, Indiana. My other three children all went to the University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign, and obtained bachelors degrees.

## Anecdotes

This section provides some anecdotal stories that shed some light on the observations and insights provided in later sections.

Tanzania Story 1: in 2014, I was assigned to teach a course entitled “Environmental Impact Assessment” to fourth year Civil Engineering students at St. Augustine University of Tanzania (SAUT), in Mwanza, Tanzania. There were 17 students enrolled in the class. Even though I was at the University at the beginning of the semester, it took several weeks before all the students showed up. Things got started on a good footing and we began the lectures. I wanted the students to do a class project, where they would act as a team and jointly write a mock environmental impact statement (EIS) for a civil engineering project of their choosing in Tanzania. They chose to do it for a gold mining project. I thought that this exercise would be a good learning tool for them. The EIS was supposed to be finished by the end of the semester. I shared with the students several EISs written for projects in Tanzania and the United States and showed them some websites for additional useful information. I assigned them homework that required them to visit some of those sites. I was very excited and ready to help the students in any way that I could.

One day, about a couple of weeks after the lectures began, the students did not show up for my class. When I called the Student Representative who was acting as the liaison between me and the class, he told me that they were in a meeting with the Head of Department (HOD) for Civil Engineering and some examiners from a university in Dar es Salaam. He said they would not be able to come to my class that day. Next day I stopped by the Department office and talked to the HOD. The HOD confirmed that the students had to stay at the meeting the day before, which prevented them from coming to my class and told me that the next two weeks the

students were going to a workshop in the afternoons and since all my classes were taking place in the afternoons, they would not be able to come to my classes. He said my classes had to be rescheduled, and the Student Representative would arrange the schedule in consultation with me and his classmates. It took about a week, but I finally worked out a schedule with the Student Rep and had a class with the students in the morning in a different classroom. I had assigned the students a task related to their class project that was due the previous week. When I asked to receive the assignment, there was none forthcoming. After some silence, one student spoke up and said they were not able to do the assignment because they were too busy with the workshop and with their other classes, and that they would give it to me the following week.

The student's response took me by surprise. I felt that the students should not have the right to delay a homework assignment on their own because they were too busy with other tasks and not tell me about it until after I asked. Thinking that these were 4<sup>th</sup> year engineering students and next year they would be in the workforce in the real world, I decided to teach them a lesson. I told them that when they get out of school next year, they would most likely be working for engineering establishments on various projects. I told them that they needed to treat the class project I gave them as one of those projects and me as their project manager. I told them that in the real world if they went to their project manager and told him or her that they could not do his or her project because they were too busy with other projects, they would be fired on the spot. I said to them that they can't delay the assignment I gave them by another week because there were other assignments related to their class project that depended on this assignment, and if this one is delayed, then the others would have to be delayed and when that happened they would not be able complete their EIS by the end of the semester. There was about 30 more minutes left in

the period. I stopped lecturing and told them to work on their assignment the rest of the period and turn it in the next time.

The students seemed a little shook up by my response. They moved their chairs around to face each other and started to work on the assignment. And they did turn it in the next time the class met. But the following week things started to change again. They wanted to reschedule my classes again. They said they had some follow-up work regarding the workshop they had attended. I agreed to the schedule change. However, I found out later that they actually gave my class time to another lecturer who came from Dar es Salaam. SAUT did not have enough lecturers to give all the engineering classes. In fact most of the engineering lecturers were coming from the University of Dar es Salaam or the Dar es Salaam Institute of Technology for short periods. They would lecture intensively for a few days or a week and would go back to their home universities. This would happen several times during the semester. I found out later that it was up to the Student Reps and the students to make time for these lecturers. It seemed that since I was at SAUT all the time, the students felt that they can move my hours around to accommodate the lecturer from Dar es Salaam.

When I found out what was going on, I resisted further requests to change my class times and insisted that the students turn in their assignments on time by email even when they moved my class period to another time. Soon after that the Student Rep for my class informed me that all the students were dropping my class, because it was an elective, and they did not need to take it.

The HOD later told me that there were actually five students who had to take my class to graduate because they were specializing in water resources management and for them this was a required core course. However, the students were sticking together and none of them wanted to continue with the class. The Deputy Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs (DVCAA) for SAUT

got involved and negotiated with the students. It turned out that students were having a hard time in my class because some of them did not have laptops and even those who had laptops did not have easy access to the internet to do the assignments. They also complained that I was being too inflexible. In addition, after they stopped coming to the class and asked the administration that the course be offered again next semester by a different lecturer, they were afraid that, if they came back, I would hold a grudge against them and give them all bad grades.

I assured the DVCAA that I would not give the students bad grades just because they stopped coming to the class. I also told him that I would teach those five students who needed the class to graduate. When this was conveyed to the students, nine of them wanted to continue with the class. By that time, five weeks had elapsed without any classes and I was hesitant to take on more students than were necessary because I wanted to spend as much time as possible with those students who had to take the class. But the DVCAA asked that I take all nine students back. When the nine students returned to the class, the Student Rep, who was one of the returning students, profusely apologized for their behavior and asked that I forgive them as if they were my own children.

Tanzania Story 2: In 2014, besides teaching the Environmental Impact Assessment course to civil engineering students, I also helped to teach two courses in the Geography Department to Education students. The number of students enrolled in both of these classes was over 300. The topics I taught were related to the environmental impacts of water projects in one course and the population and natural resources management in the other course. In both of these courses, the students were so interested in the topics I was teaching and were so eager to learn. As part of the class, the lecturers would divide the students in the class into a number of groups with 10 -20 students in each group at the beginning of the semester. The lecturers then would assign a

specific topic to all the students to research one week and have one of the groups come in front of the class to present their findings to the rest of the class the following week. When I did the same, the students were competing to come in front of the class and present their findings.

Turkey Story: In 1982, I taught a mathematics class on Linear Algebra to mathematics and science majors at Bogazici University in Turkey. When I was reading the final examination papers, I noticed a very peculiar error in one of the papers. Soon I started seeing the same error in seven papers out of a class of about 45 students. The chance of seven students making the same arithmetic error in a long series of calculations was essentially zero. I consulted with the Mathematic Department chair and based on his advice I gave all seven students zero on their final exams. When the students found out that they had gotten zero on the exam, they flocked to my office trying to find out why. I talked to the students individually and asked each student how it happened that he and six others made the same mistake. They all made up stories except one student, who was actually one of the better students in the class and was going into the final exam with an “A” average. He said he gave his exam paper to the student sitting next to him during the exam, and then that student circulated his answer sheet to the others. He apologized for allowing it to happen.

Indonesia Story: As of early October 2017, the time I am writing this paper, I have only been teaching at the Sanata Dharma University for a few weeks. I am teaching a course called Renewable Energy Technologies, to 3<sup>rd</sup> year Mechanical Engineering students. There are 42 students enrolled in the class. By all indications, the students seem to be a dedicated, hardworking and a conscientious group. However, language may be a problem for some of the students. I have been told that this is the first time the students are being taught entirely in English in a class in the Faculty of Science and Technology (FST) at Sanata Dharma. Most of

the students are being extremely quiet during lectures and are not responding to questions. One nice thing about teaching at Sanata Dharma is that the FST has offered to have another lecturer from the university to sit in my classes and help. The same lecturer also seems to be very interested in the topic and is willing to take and archive all my teaching materials for later use. This is exactly what I wanted to do. Being of retirement age and most likely not a permanent fixture at the university, I am happy to transfer all my teaching aids and as much of my knowledge as I can, not only to the students but also to another lecturer who can be the torch bearer for future students.

### **Discussion and Reflections**

In this section I point out some differences in student behavior and learning using examples selected from the anecdotal stories in the previous section. However, before getting into differences, it is worth noting that I also observed some commonalities among the students in all the countries: (1) They all want good grades; they always show special interest in when the exams are, how they are graded, and what grades they get, and (2) although most students are conscientious and honest, there are always few students who will look for opportunities to game the system in order to get good grades.

Differences among the students are in regards to how they study and learn and how they approach to getting good grades. Some students show great interest in the topics being taught and want to absorb as much of the information presented to them as possible, as demonstrated by Tanzania Story 2, whereas some other students want to cut corners and appear to be more interested in the grades than in learning. The differences among the students' behavior in these matters are undoubtedly due to many factors, however, these factors can be grouped under three general headings: cultural, institutional, and socio-economic. Probably the easiest set of factors

to ascertain is related to the socioeconomic status of the students. If the students do not have the tools they need to do the tasks assigned to them, they are likely to fall short in their work. I will discuss the socio-economic factors first followed by cultural and institutional factors.

**Socio-economic factors:** A good example of this is from the Tanzania Story 1, where I assigned certain tasks to the students that required them to access various websites and download some documents in order to do the tasks. Being a 4<sup>th</sup> year engineering students, I expected them to have the tools, i.e., computers and internet access, to do the tasks. But it turned out that some of them did not have computers, and those who had computers, did not have reliable internet connections. So they were having a hard time doing the assignments.

I should have guessed that there could be issues in that regard, because I was having difficulty using the university's wireless system myself; it was too slow and often broke in and out. I purchased a mobile internet flash drive from a telephone company. Even though the cost of the device and the service provided by the telephone company was relatively inexpensive for me, apparently that was not the case for all the students. I learned later that even though SAUT is a private university, many of the students who attend it, get scholarships from the government to come there. Often the government is late with payments and the students have to struggle to make the ends meet.

Socioeconomic factors could have an impact on the students' learning habits and abilities inside a country as well. For example, in the United States, because of the way the primary and secondary school districts are funded, the schools in the affluent suburban communities are well off financially and can afford to hire better teachers by paying them higher salaries. The students in those communities tend to have easy access to all the materials they need for school and to tutors if needed. The same students also tend to go to better universities with continued support

from their families. Whereas the students in poor inner-city school districts do not have all the same amenities and often come from families who are not as educated as the suburban families and can not help their children with school work. These students when they graduate from high school attend small community colleges close to home for the first two years and then transfer to a four-year university or go directly to a four-year university obtaining financial aid in the form of scholarships or student loans. To achieve a high-level of learning and to be successful, these students need to work harder than the wealthy suburban kids.

Having been born into a rich suburban family, however, could also have a negative impact on the students when they go to college. Because of their upbringing and not having experienced any financial hardships, these students tend to have less of an appreciation for the value of money and time. They can be more wasteful and behave in ways that are irresponsible. In that regard, the students from poorer families often work at part time jobs while going to school and have a better appreciation for the money and their education opportunities. The same can also be said about the adult students. As mentioned under the Historical Background section of this paper, most of the students I taught at Northwestern University were adult learners who had regular daytime jobs. These students were like sponges. They wanted to get as much out of the classes they were taking as possible, because they knew what it meant to them in real life.

**Cultural factors:** Cultural factors that affect student behavior and learning are harder to identify and circumvent. I will list four specific examples in this regard:

1. I found that the students were more cohesive in Tanzania and Turkey than they were in the United States. In Tanzania for example, all 17 students boycotted my class even though five of them needed the class to graduate that year. In Turkey, one student who

was doing well in the class willingly allowed other students to copy from him on the final exam, putting himself at risk. In the Tanzania case, the fact that the students were a cohort who started at SAUT at the same time three years earlier, were going through the same program, taking pretty much the same classes every year, was probably a big factor in their decision. They had developed a special bond among themselves. However, it also seemed that the students in these two countries generally felt closer affinity to other students in the class, either the entire class or a smaller number of students in the class, than the students in the United States. The students in the United States are generally more individualistic; they would not risk their success by willingly providing help to other students.

2. In Tanzania, the students were hesitant to tell me that they were having difficulty with the class and needed help. Even when I asked the Student Rep if I was giving them too much work and if it was too difficult for them to do it, he not only denied that they were having difficulty, he seemed to take offense at the fact that I was asking it. He told me that they had classes much harder than mine.
3. In Tanzania, I felt that the students were afraid to challenge the lecturer. In the United States, if what the lecturer says is not clear or appears to be contradictory to what he had said earlier, the students will point out the contradiction and ask for clarification. In Tanzania, the students never asked anything that appeared to be questioning what I was telling them.
4. Fear of retaliation from the lecturers. I was told that in Tanzania the lecturers do sometimes give bad grades and fail the students on account of what they did. So when the students told the DVCAA that they were afraid to come back to the class fearing that I

would give them bad grades because of what they did, their fears were not totally baseless. In the United States, a lecturer would not dare to fail a whole class because of the students' behavior.

For educators who are teaching in foreign countries, having someone who is familiar with the culture of the country and can speak the same language as the educator would certainly help, but it probably is not sufficient to prevent all potential problems. This is probably one area where you have to learn on the job, but just be careful not to make mistakes that are too serious to rectify.

**Institutional factors:** Institutional factors relate to the rules and regulations at the institutions that the educators and the students have to interact with to conduct their daily activities. These are primarily the universities and the sub units within universities, such as the faculties and departments, and the government agencies that have jurisdiction over the universities. Some of the issues that I observed and experienced and are directly related to such institutions include:

1. At SAUT, at least in the Faculty of Engineering, the students had too much responsibility and leeway in deciding their daily class schedules. Because of the ever changing conditions related to the traveling lecturers from Dar es Salaam, students constantly had to shuffle their timetables to accommodate the lecturers. This imposed a big responsibility on the students on the one hand and gave them too much power on decisions related to class schedules on the other hand. It was because of this that my schedule was changing frequently. This function should have been handled by the Civil Engineering and Electrical Engineering Departments (which were the only departments in the Faculty of Engineering) or by the Faculty of Engineering. An individual could have been designated to assign class times and rooms and resolve any conflicts. I believe that

this was a problem specific to the Faculty of Engineering at SAUT, which was a relatively new Faculty and did not have the sufficient number of resident lecturers at the university to teach all the necessary courses. Other Faculties at SAUT did not have this problem and I am sure that other universities in Tanzania and in other countries would not have it either. In contrast to what happened at SAUT, at Sanata Dharma, when I needed extra time with the students to make up a couple of weeks of classes that we missed, the secretary of the Mechanical Engineering Department made all the arrangements, making sure that there were no conflicts with other classes, and informed me and the students of the revised schedule.

2. Universities should have clear rules and guidelines to let the students and the lecturers know what they can and cannot do. They should also have clear rules and guidelines in resolving any conflicts that may arise. A well-defined line of authority should be evident as to who to contact in times of conflict. In my experiences, I felt that such rules were available and enforced by the administration at the Northwestern University in the United States and Bogazici University in Turkey, but not at SAUT in Tanzania. In Turkey, when I was faced with the situation of seven students copying from each other on the final exam, and at Northwestern University, when I discovered in one of the classes I taught that two students had copied each other's papers word-by-word on a take-home exam, the department heads addressed the problem right away and rendered a decision. However, at SAUT when the students informed me that they would not continue with my class, I had a difficult time getting help from the Head of the Department and the Dean of the Faculty of Engineering. I had to go all the way up to the Deputy Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs before someone could talk to the students and find out what was going on. Even

then, it took five weeks to resolve the issue. The DVCAA negotiated with the students and had some of the students return to the class. The dean, who had been newly appointed to his position at the time, actually complained to me that the students at SAUT had too much power, instead of offering his help to resolve the situation. The HOD complained that the students were avoiding him also. He also told me that this was the third time the same students were complaining about a lecturer and requesting a different lecturer and that in the previous two occasions the university administration had ruled in the students' favor and had provided a different lecturer.

3. The government agencies that have jurisdiction over the universities should provide timely advice and guidance to the universities. The agencies that administer student enrollments and scholarships should follow the established schedules and not change them at the last moment. When I went to Tanzania the second time, I was originally scheduled to teach during the first semester of the 2015-2016 academic year. However, in August 2015, I learned that, because of the national elections on October 25, 2015, the start date of the academic year at SAUT and all other universities in Tanzania was being delayed until November. Not only did I have to change my travel plans, but all the students and lecturers at all the universities in Tanzania had to revise their timetables and extend the academic year into July 2016. While at SAUT in 2016, I was told that some of the students may not be able to take the final exam of my class, because the government had not provided the scholarship funds to pay for the students' university fees. These types of last minute changes and schedule delays not only cause undue hardships on the universities and the students, but they also provide bad examples to the students.

## Conclusions

University students, just like any other sector of a society, are heterogeneous in their behavior and learning habits. They behave in different ways depending on their upbringing, socioeconomic status of their parents and the communities they live in, cultural norms they are accustomed to, and the types of institutions they attend. Such differences in student behavior can be more apparent when the socioeconomic, cultural, and institutional factors suddenly change in going from one country to another. Some of these differences have been highlighted with examples provided by the author's teaching experience in four countries: Turkey, United States, Tanzania, and Indonesia. These countries not only occupy very different levels on the human development scale as measured by the United Nations Development Program's Human Development Index, as an indication of different socioeconomic conditions in them, but they also show large differences in their cultural patterns and educational institutions.

The highlighted differences in student behavior and learning have been presented not to show which ones are good or appropriate and which ones are not, but rather they have been highlighted to demonstrate that they happen, and that educators who venture into other countries to teach at the university level should recognize their existence. As challenging as these differences can be, they also provide opportunities to the educators to learn about different countries and cultures. These educators should try to learn about the country and the culture of the country they are going to as much as possible before they leave their home country and be mindful of them in their daily activities after they arrive in the country. Although each country is different and the examples provided herein may not apply to all the countries, hopefully this paper will help those educators who decide to go and teach at universities overseas as well as the

researchers who want to explore the differences in higher educational systems in various countries.