The art of dealing with religious and cultural diversity in the classroom

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The Art of Dealing with Religious and Cultural Diversity in the Classroom

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Abstract

Religion is an intrinsic element of our cultural mind-sets that implicitly impacts how we communicate, not only at work but also in the classroom. Indeed, there is a general consensus in the management literature that religious dimensions within a wide range of work and learning contexts are important variables which impact our communication and leadership. This article fills a gap in this literature by exploring how different religious and cultural based norms may specifically impact the student-teacher (and also student-student) interaction in a higher education empirical setting. A brief discussion of fundamental values within five world religions is first offered in order to explore how these values may manifest themselves in differing cultural contexts. The article then reflects upon real classroom experiences in a business school setting. Based on these classroom cases, a five-point plan is provided to offer practical guidelines which can be applied by teachers to make the most of religiously and culturally diverse learning environments. By knowing yourself, acting with authenticity and actively seeking out interaction with different others we can practise what we preach and develop personal mindfulness as learning facilitators – this is the art of dealing with religiously and culturally diverse classrooms.

Keywords: classroom communication, religious based leadership norms, intercultural experiences, mindfulness

1. Introduction

Much has been written in the past few decades concerning management of religious and cultural diversity (Gould, 1995; Niles, 1999; Fornaciari & Lund Dean, 2004; Fry, 2005; Kriger & Seng, 2005; Lund Dean et al., 2003; Parboteeah et al., 2009). Yet, how such values affect classroom interaction and leadership in higher education is an under-researched area. Consequently, the current paper endeavours to understand the underlying, and often unspoken, religious dimensions of cultural diversity and how these can affect the way we interact in both work and learning environments. Religion is one of the key defining factors of culture (Carnegie, 2009). Nevertheless, one should avoid conflating religious diversity with cultural diversity. Even though these variables are strongly correlated, religion is a separate construct (Geertz, 2004). Our culture and value systems are larger constructs influenced by our religious norms, in addition to other factors such as our worldview, language, gender, ethnicity, race and other social issues.

The purpose of this study is to explore how such religious values intrinsically underpin cultural norms and impact how we communicate, especially in a classroom setting. Three classroom examples of religiously and culturally diverse communication experiences are discussed. A conceptual matrix is then presented to contribute to our understanding of the possible linkages between perceived communication behaviour and underlying variances in religious based cultural values. These linkages are then connected to suggested classroom communication and leadership initiatives for facilitators to consider. To conclude this article, the authors offer a five-step plan in developing religious and cultural mindfulness in the business school classroom.

Data for the study is collected through participation observations, interviews, anecdotal data and secondary data found in the literature.

2. Literature and Theoretic Starting Point

This section presents a synthesis of extant literature within the research streams of religion and spirituality, cultural diversity and cultural values. We introduce a taxonomy of religious values and expectations within five world religions. Subsequently, a relationship is framed between religious and cultural values in order to interpret communication strategies in a religiously and culturally diverse business classroom context. Hence, while

educators recognise that teaching and learning are complex activities evolving from social and cultural complexity (Sparapani et al., 2014), a gap in the literature is identified by the authors for this study: an exploration of the underlying religious values that underpin our cultural behaviour in relation to the complex activities of communicating in the business classroom.

Even conceptualizing religious and spiritual values within culture and communication can be difficult, as these remain multifaceted constructs. Some researchers have supported spirituality's equivocation with religiosity (Del Rio & White, 2012). Consequently, in the context of this study we accept the presumption of Del Rio and White (2012) that religion and spirituality are equivocal constructs that are implicit elements of cultural diversity and communication norms. Furthermore, we accept that diversity within each religion will always be present and that to what degree one is actually a practising believer of any given religion cannot be easily measured quantitatively.

Our goal is to explore how a better understanding of a communication theory based on religious values can assist the teacher in communicating in the classroom. Consequently, we will firstly delineate salient ways in which the values and beliefs of the major religious traditions of the world can impact the learning environment and act as mirrors in the development of dialogue norms. The roots of our value systems often lie in our religious traditions. This is especially so within people who self-identify as 'spiritual but not religious' (Fuller, 2001; Warner-Søderholm, 2008). According to Park (2008), approximately 90% of the world's population is religious. It is, however, hard to measure such values accurately, as people's beliefs run from true belief through doubt to absolute non-belief. Indeed, Iannaccone (1998) posits that a number of global trends in world religions correlate with this high figure, namely: 1) the rise of Islam in many parts of the world, 2) the considerable growth of Protestantism in Latin America combined with significant growth of evangelical Christianity in the USA, 3) the continued influence of Buddhism in Asia, and 4) the sustained role of Hinduism in Indian society. These trends all indicate that even in a contemporary society, religious dimensions are still an intrinsic element in most people's lives on a global level, and may therefore colour how most individuals interact (Parboteeah et al., 2009). Many of the characteristics of spirituality or religious values in individuals—the building of community and concern for social justice within the organisation for instance—are basic themes of all religions (Fry, 2005; Hicks, 2003). What is more, the values of service, truth, charity, humility, forgiveness, compassion, thankfulness, love, courage, patience and hope, are also common to all religions, according to literature (Fry, 2005; Kriger & Hansen, 1999; Kriger & Seng, 2005; Warner-Søderholm, 2008). Nevertheless, a significant difference between the religious values of most world religions is found in how the leader is perceived. In this paper we posit that by understanding how members of different religions perceive the role of their teacher as classroom leader and how respect is given within these religions it is possible to work towards better leadership and communication in the classroom. Table 1 in the appendix offers a taxonomy of the primary values and expectations of the teachers/leaders found in five religious traditions.

Understanding of such a taxonomy of leader-follower communication values within higher education can help students and faculty to better predict cultural expectations of the teacher-student interaction in relation to the possible underlying religious-based norms experienced by both parties. This can assist classroom management and promote pedagogical processes and learning. In terms of the status and role of the teacher in the Christian tradition, the teacher is likely to be respected as a role model, whereas in Islam, the teacher as a leader is more likely to be perceived as a much more revered servant of God. In Judaism the teacher, as leader, is likely to be seen as a symbol of knowledge and as a valued asker of questions. In Buddhism, in contrast, the teacher will likely act as a greatly honoured role model for compassion and inquiry into true meaning. In Hinduism, the teacher may be expected to lead by example and encourage development of skills such as honour to seniors, deeper inner awareness and perception.

Such diversity in religions along with diversity of race, gender, language, ethnicity and value systems are important aspects of communication in the classroom environment. As such, diversity understanding can be framed as a set of conscious practices that involve understanding and appreciating interdependence of humanity, cultures and religion in order to practice mutual respect for qualities and experiences that are different from our own. Hence such diversity understanding includes recognising different ways of being and ways of knowing. Clearly, recognising that building mindfulness and alliances across differences promotes working together to eradicate discrimination (Patrick & Kumar, 2012).

The concept of cultural diversity—the distances measured of cultural norms between two or more cultures—has been widely researched. Scholars have taken varying approaches to the definitions of the concept of culture and the means to define dimensions necessary to operationalize, measure, and make significant cross-cultural comparisons (Cavusgil & Das, 1997; Earley, 2006). Indeed, anthropologists, psychologists, and social scientists

seem to agree that the word 'culture' presents definitional problems and is difficult to measure and to quantify. Culture operates in a highly complex context with psychological, institutional, political, geographic, and other factors (Harrison and Huntington, 2000; Schein, 2004; Bertsch & Warner-Søderholm, 2013). The societal cultural values data applied in this present study are taken from Project GLOBE's study (Global Leadership and Organizational Behaviour Effectiveness) by House et al. (2004). This on-going research is a multi-phase, multi-method project examining the interrelationships between societal culture, organizational culture and leadership. Over 170 social scientists and management scholars from 62 cultures representing all major regions of the world are engaged in this long-term programmatic series of inter-cultural studies. Clearly, when evaluating the GLOBE project's research in relation to Hofstede's seminal work, it can be seen that despite the use of different terms to identify cultural dimensions in the GLOBE project, many of the cultural dimensions identified by House et al. are related conceptually and correlate empirically to Hofstede's dimensions (Leung et al., 2005; Bertsch & Warner-Søderholm, 2013). The GLOBE model, however, offers a set of nine cultural dimensions that is more comprehensive and rigorous than Hofstede's. These are linked to extensive theoretical underpinnings in relation to key cultural studies carried out during the last 60 years. In this article we offer a summary of project GLOBE's nine cultural dimensions, as we wish to apply data from this research to help us understand real classroom experiences in relation to cultural practices and underlying religious values. The nine cultural dimensions are:

i.   Performance Orientation societal practices: The degree to which a collective encourages and rewards group members for performance improvement and excellence.

ii.   Future Orientation societal practices: The extent to which individuals engage in future-oriented behaviours such as delaying gratification, planning for the future.

iii. Gender Egalitarian societal practices: The degree to which a collective minimizes gender inequality.

iv.   Assertiveness societal practices: The degree to which individuals are assertive, confrontational and aggressive in their relationships with others.

v.   Collectivism societal practices (Institutional): The degree to which institutional practices encourage and reward collective distribution of resources and collective action. (Group): The degree to which individuals express pride and cohesiveness in their organizations / families.

vi.   Power Distance societal practices: The degree to which members of a collective expect power to be distributed equally.

vii. Humane Orientation societal practices: The degree to which a collective encourages and rewards individuals for being fair, altruistic, generous, caring and kind to others.

viii. Uncertainty Avoidance societal practices: The extent to which a collective relies on social norms, rules, and procedures to alleviate unpredictability of future events.

Now that the extant literature has been reviewed, Figure 1 is an initial visualisation of the relationships between cultural practices (GLOBE dimensions), religious values and classroom communication and leadership behaviours to be explored in this study.

Performance Orientation		Christianity
Future Orientation		Islam
Gender Egalitarian	Inter-Relation	
Assertiveness		Hinduism
Collectivism		
Collectivism		Judaism
Power Distance		
Humane Orientation		Buddhism
Uncertainty Avoidance		

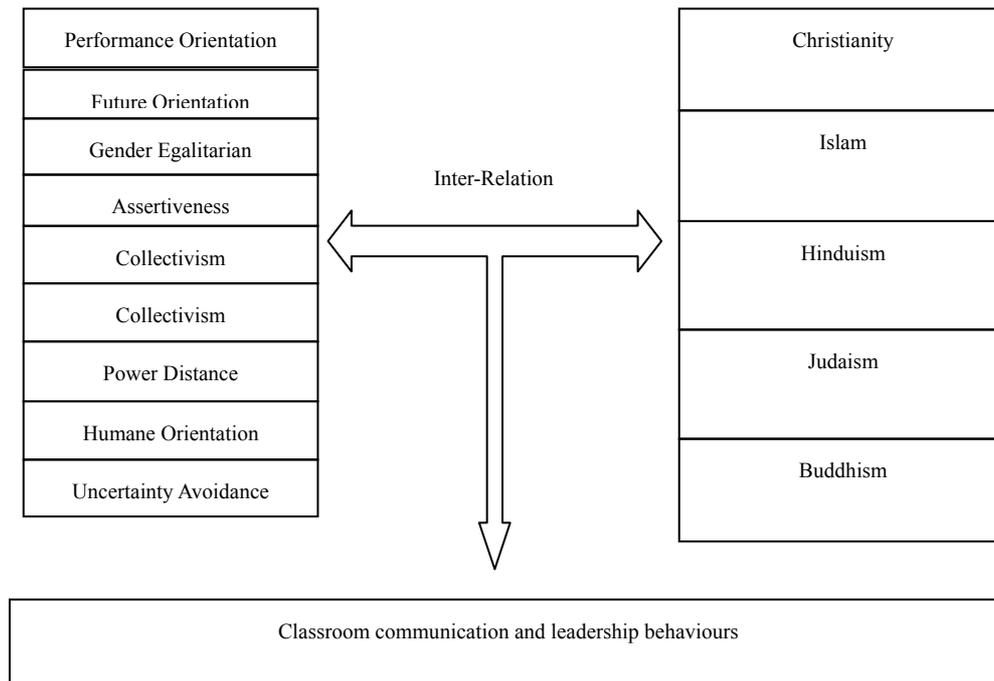Classroom communication and leadership behaviours

Figure 1. An initial visualisation of the relationships between cultural practices, religious values and classroom communication and leadership behaviours to be explored (adapted from Rajasekar & Renand, 2013; Hamdi & Rajablu, 2012)

In the next section, we illustrate how these value differences can manifest themselves in differing expectations of the instructor within classroom dialogue with three cases. Data for the case studies has been collected through participation and observations. Careful consideration has been taken to avoid tokenism. Participants gave permission for the data to be used, and anonymity has been guaranteed in the archival data. Methods, such as the case study observation approach, combined with secondary data, offer the authors the opportunity to shed light on the complexities of classroom communication that have, to a great extent, escaped earlier studies in the field. Generalizability may not be possible in other cultural settings outside those discussed in this study. Future research could investigate a wider range of classroom cases. Student / faculty surveys could in the future lead to more in-depth quantitative data to support the case interpretations, such as levels of religiosity and cultural value correlations in each respondent.

3. Three Classroom Experiences

3.1 Vignette #1: Intercultural Dialogue with Hong Kong Chinese Students

The following example of cultural differences is taken from a dialogue experienced by one of the authors with a group of international students in Oslo, Norway. In drawing a plenary discussion to a close, two Hong Kong Chinese students were asked if they would be paying close attention to the forthcoming Hong Kong elections, and whether they were looking forward to possible political developments in Hong Kong. The intent was to show respect for and interest in them as a minority group in the international classroom. The two women had excellent communication skills and were skilled in discussing business cases when working together, but were usually silent in plenary sessions. The hope was to offer them an informal platform from which to share information with the class and a chance to show their excellent communication skills to their peers. The rest of the students in the lecture hall listened with interest to hear how these two reserved class participants would reply. The two women looked at each other in surprise for a moment and then smiled politely. They then dropped eye contact and looked down. After a few seconds they said quietly, still looking down, "Yes, Miss," and said no more. I wished them luck in the elections, and the class took a break. When all the other students had left the room, the two students in question came up to the lecturer, still smiling politely. They said most reverently, "Excuse us, please, Miss. We didn't want to say anything to you in front of the whole class, but the elections were actually held yesterday."

3.1.1 Reflections

There may be several cultural values linked to differences in religious and cultural based norms in this classroom experience. These two students were members of the Buddhist faith and spoke proudly of their temples in their home communities. In Buddhist philosophy the teacher is revered and honoured. Any public contradiction of the teacher would damage both the harmony of the class and the status of both the students and the teacher. Consequently, cultural values such as power distance, respect, and the importance of 'saving face' were more important to these students than correcting the inaccurate information.

Trompenaars and Hampton-Turner make an interesting comment regarding how we accord status. They write, 'There is a correlation between Protestantism and achievement orientation, with Buddhist cultures scoring considerably more ascriptively' (Trompenaars & Hampton-Turner, 1996, p. 106). Consequently, the incident with the Hong Kong Chinese students may indicate that religious-based cultural values can lead students to ascribe status to a teacher as a revered, senior member of society. Scandinavian students, on the other hand, would be far less likely to confer status on the basis of age or experience. They would be more likely to give higher status to a teacher based on his or her achievements, given their identification with culturally Protestant values. The Chinese-Buddhist students tend to view harmony and honour as central values in a high context culture. The low context Scandinavians, on the other hand, tend to value honesty above honour (Warner-Søderholm, 2010b).

In the Chinese-Buddhist culture, the norm is to not contradict lecturers. Moreover, interpersonal relationships are often characterised by a high power distance, where senior people with status (e.g. teachers) are approached with considerable deference. In a Buddhist-influenced learning culture, knowledge is interestingly seen as a static form possessed by wise, senior people, which is, in turn, passed on to students (Knee, 1998, p. 2). Consequently, any form of contradiction or disagreement from a Buddhist student would be seen as tending to create dishonour. A more dialectic and interactive classroom environment would be encouraged by many Protestant based cultures such as in Scandinavia and the US.

In this case, the lecturer could have held an introductory lecture for international students from the above class at the start of the semester in order to encourage interactive class participation and to signal the value placed on a low power distance relationships. Case studies in international classroom communication norms could also be discussed in order to appreciate differing norms in interaction.

3.2 Vignette #2: Coaching Middle Eastern Students

A second communication barrier was experienced in a recent undergraduate class in business communication. Towards the end of the course, the students were scheduled to give individual presentations as a practice opportunity for upcoming final oral exams. When a male student from the Middle East made his presentation, it was clear that he hadn't prepared sufficiently. With just a week before the final exams, an opportunity arose to offer him concise, constructive feedback, both orally and in writing to help him pass the exam. Male and female group members were invited to offer the student constructive feedback so that he could have a number of different sources. Generally speaking, in the low context Scandinavian culture, honesty is said to be valued above harmony in classroom dialogue. Unfortunately, during and after the feedback session, the class and the instructor experienced a surprising amount of aggression from the student in question, aggression bordering on hostility. The student was given open and honest feedback in a step by step fashion on his oral performance and the language and knowledge areas which he needed to work on were highlighted carefully. The feedback took place in front of the whole group.

3.2.1 Reflections

By giving the student detailed feedback on his strengths and weaknesses in front of the class, an extreme loss of face may have occurred. The Islamic culture highly values honour above other values in a value system where power distance is accepted and gender egalitarian values are more reserved than in a Scandinavian society. The instructor feedback in front of his peers may have been misunderstood as leaping to dishonour. In addition, this dishonour could have been exacerbated by a female lecturer and female peers offering judgement on his performance as a male. In times of crisis the inner values of our religion often surface as part of our identity. If we as learning facilitators do not take into consideration the dialogue norms of different cultures, and if we forget that honour plays a key role in most eastern religions, we will miss the 'teachable moment' and close the door on a learning opportunity. In situations such as the one mentioned above, a pre-workshop briefing would have helped the student be prepared to value useful feedback, and a post-workshop de-briefing would have offered an opportunity for valuable reflection. The instructor had mistakenly believed that by planning these workshop sessions to avoid the Friday prayer times, religious mindfulness had been shown. Errors can hence be

easily made when one only shows mindfulness to the superficial symbols of a given religion.

3.3 Vignette #3 Hierarchical Values among Hindu Males in the Classroom

We often create micro-groups of students at random in our business school to encourage new networking in international groups. Everyone is given a number from one to six. All the 'number one students' form a working group, all the 'number twos' form another group and so on. On many occasions, the groups which have ended up by chance with many Indian members have formed a clear system of seniority or hierarchy, even though the students have been of similar age. Furthermore, these groups have traditionally appointed leaders who were males.

By discussing family traditions such as careers, marriage and family situations, it is often discovered that the students in question are of the Hindu faith. The male student leaders in these situations often expect subservience from younger or female team members, especially if they have a similar cultural background. Moreover, senior male students may question the validity of a younger, female, junior faculty member as classroom facilitator as a person senior to them but younger in age. Hence, misunderstandings can easily occur and valuable input is consequently lost (Yu & Wu, 2011).

3.3.1 Reflections

Such traditional high power distance values are often implicitly tolerated by the class and lecturer in order to maintain superficial harmony and may even continue to be tolerated during the whole semester if not explored early on in the course discussions. Once again, an information session at the start of the semester to clarify the importance of gender egalitarian values within a Norwegian classroom—combined with a discussion of diversity management to add value to learning—would be an important measure. We should always strive to avoid stereotyping and applying tokenism in such cases. Still, if we can show an understanding of possible underlying assumptions of traditional Hindu philosophy in classroom communication, we can place them on the agenda for discussion. This will add value to our teamwork in the classroom.

4. Lessons and Implications

By sharing such experiences with new classes and faculty, the opportunity arises to open up discussions and comments as to how our religious and cultural based values are often mirrored in our behaviour. Students can reflect upon differences in issues of authority, conception, gender expectations, contexting, non-verbal behaviour, and not least, expression of emotions (Victor, 2009). Discussion of such experiences can offer an opportunity for both students and educators to work for respect for others, both in and out of the classroom. Making young people from differing religious and cultural backgrounds aware that there is more than one approach to communication in learning, and preparing them for the dialogue norms of the other culture, will become increasingly important in our multi-cultural environments.

We also need to remember that elements of each teacher's personal identity—his or her individual race, religion, culture and teaching style—are of crucial importance to dialogue in the classroom. As learning facilitators we cannot be all things to all people, but we can facilitate inclusiveness. Table 2 depicts some practical examples of perceived differences in classroom behaviour, which can be linked to religious and cultural diversity within a Norwegian empirical setting: variances in religious dimensions of the students' and teachers' different cultures. This table was generated via a process of observation, focus group interviews with colleague educators, and by reviewing extant literature within the field of multiculturalism and religious values related to classroom behaviours. These classroom based examples come from observations of perceived behaviour of international students, with a classroom leader who holds culturally Protestant values. The practical measures suggested in the table below endeavour to recognise and respect differing ethnocentricity.

Every teacher brings his or her behavioural norms into the classroom, as the students do as well. How we look, how we dress, speak, act and how we see the student-teacher relationship have a significant effect on the classroom environment. When we choose to contemplate classroom leader-follower norms through the paradigms of the religious traditions of Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism, we can argue that it is likely that such value structures can be a source of unexplained variance in leadership-follower behaviours, both in and out of the classroom. As depicted in Table 2, there are possible variances in religious based cultural norms which can be mirrored in different perceived student behaviour. The classroom leadership initiatives discussed in Table 2 offer practical advice to fellow educators. For example, in relation to perceived student behaviour such as lack of commitment to process learning, a possible explanation could be that 'meaning making' of such student based learning can be problematic in some cultures, as the teacher will not be 'all knowing' in this context. Furthermore, in some countries process learning does not count towards the final grade

and so is seen as a waste of time (Saunders & Kardia, 2009). As a classroom leadership initiative, your school's approach to process and formative learning should be clearly introduced at the start of the semester and learning expectations should be clearly understood. De-briefing of learning achieved can be introduced to encourage greater reflective skills.

Table 2. Perceived international student behaviour: possible variances in religious based values and classroom leadership initiatives (Warner-Søderholm, 2010a)

Perceived student behaviour:	Possible explanation: Possible variances in religious based cultural dimensions:		Classroom leadership initiatives:
Does not participate in group work.	Cooperative group work is not used in all countries- may be seen as 'giving away knowledge' or cheating.	Possible discomfort in the concept of teacher and students as givers of knowledge (O'Neal & Hopkins, 2002).	Group work skills need to be specifically explained and taught. The group work culture in the classroom needs to be made clear. Goals set by each team (Gorski, 1995).
Student shows uneasiness towards informal, open ended learning processes.	For students who are used to formal lessons, an informal classroom may be seen as chaotic, undemanding, and unprofessional.	Possible variance in acceptance of moving away from the concept of the teacher as the role model.	Discussion needed of Socratic vs. Confucius approaches to learning. Clear guidelines and time frames set, encourage de-briefing discussions (Broomfield, 1987; Gorski, 1995).
Students talk loudly, overlapping speech with others.	This task oriented behavior shows enthusiasm in some home country schools but may seem rude in others (Longaton, 2009).	Differing expectations of showing respect (power distance and gender egalitarian issues) and role of 'maintaining face' and reverence.	Groups should set rules and goals for active participation and be encouraged to learn from each other. Guidelines made for acceptable communication styles (Hall, 1976).
Student seems reluctant to engage in debate.	In some cultures it is seen as disrespectful to disagree, in other cultures, one only speaks if one is well prepared (Saunders & Kardia, 2009).	Possible differences in the role of respect and honor assigned to members in a community. Variances in the acceptance of democracy in the classroom.	Debate- and group work skills training should include openness, encouragement and an understanding of diplomacy. Expectations should be clearly set by the teacher in terms of learning outcomes and evaluation methods (Saunders & Kardia, 2009).
Student is dominating and uncooperative when dealing with co-students or teachers of another gender.	Separate schooling is the norm in some cultures. Secular environments may also be unusual for some students. Gender roles can be very conservative with males dominating (Saunders & Kardia, 2009).	Differences in traditions of gender equality in terms of the traditional assignment of honor and reverence to senior male members of a community.	Professional dialogue etiquette should be discussed at the start of the program to set 'ground rules'. Teachers and co-students should show status in their appropriate behaviour in the classroom. Group dynamics could be decided by the teacher. De-briefing sessions should be encouraged to discuss effective communication (Saunders & Kardia, 2009).
Lack of eye contact, smiling when disagreeing.	Keeping eyes downcast and smiling can be signs of respect (Longaton, 2009).	Traditional ascription of honor to senior members, obligation of others to maintain face and harmony In a high power distance society.	Better understanding and acceptance of verbal and non-verbal communication differences should be encouraged (Hall, 1976; Longaton, 2009).
Lack of commitment to process learning.	In some countries process learning 'counts for nothing' in terms of grading, and is seen as a waste of time (Saunders & Kardia, 2009).	'Meaning making' of such exercises can be problematic as the teacher is not 'all knowing' in this context.	Your school's approach to learning should be clearly understood. Expectations and learning activities should be clearly introduced. De-briefing of learning achieved should be included (Warner-Søderholm, 2010b).

5. Discussions: Guidelines for the Educator - From a Religiously and Culturally Diverse Perspective

The following steps are offered to fellow learning facilitators as more general guidelines for incorporating a religious and cultural mindfulness into classroom management (See Table 3). We advocate that by becoming more aware and mindful of our own personal beliefs and values, by acting with authenticity, and by honouring the beliefs of others we can further develop mutual trust in an international classroom. Table 3 was created through a process of: 1) retrospectively reflecting on situations when we have had to question our own life values and ethnocentricity and, 2) incorporating the reflections and reasoning of other related endeavours to understand the effect of spiritual perspectives on teaching and leadership (Simon, 1979).

The process of self-, and other-directed questioning that an instructor might engage in to understand the effect of religious and spiritual based values in the classroom, whether expressed or implied, is an intrinsic step in developing mindfulness. Question asking is one of the most powerful tools for re-directing attention in the classroom (Kriger, 1989). In Table 3, self-directed question asking elements have been added to each step as a practical initiative in becoming more contemplative of our own mindfulness at each stage of the process. Such self-directed questions about class processes can help us as educators to prepare for the needs of a multi-cultural classroom and to reflect upon the climate we hope to develop.

Table 3. Guidelines for the educator from a religiously and culturally diverse perspective: A Five-Point Plan (adapted from Simon, 1979; Kriger, 1989; Neal, 1997; Kriger & Hanson, 1999; Kernochan et al., 2007; Warner-Søderholm, 2010a)

5 steps	Self-directed questions:	Personal goals:	Practical guidelines:
Step 1	Have you questioned your own values?	Know yourself	Step back: Identify and be aware of your values and beliefs. Know your own life values in order to understand where other people stand in terms of their values, spiritually and otherwise (George et al. 2006; Quinn, 2005).
Step 2	How can you act ethically?	Act with authenticity	As a manager or as an educator it is important to avoid being a chameleon, constantly shifting behaviour and espoused values. Recognise that you cannot be all things to all people.
Step 3	How can you encourage respect for others?	Respect the beliefs of others	Create a classroom climate where values and personal ethics are explicitly valued. Actively show professional curiosity and openness for the religious practices, values and beliefs of others. See each minute in and outside of the class as an opportunity for learning and reflection.
Step 4	How can you act as a role model?	Be a role model of how to trust others	Spiritual beliefs and values are deeply ingrained. Legitimise the diversity of values and religion-based behaviours of others. Smith (1991) in discussing diversity of approaches to spirituality and religion uses an analogy of a wheel, where the centre of the wheel is Truth or Ultimate Harmony and Oneness. The circumference of the wheel symbolizes ordinary life and the spokes of the wheel are the different religions, each unique but all leading to the same Essential Oneness. Each individual is thus 'travelling on his or her own path from the circumference of the wheel to the same Truth' (Kriger & Hanson, 1999, p. 305). Actively avoid holding on to feelings of frustration – recognise and deal calmly with the emotional labour of teaching.
Step 5	How can you develop personal mindfulness?	Actively seek out interaction with others from different spiritual cultures	Practice what you preach: This will help both you and your students to be flexible in your worldviews and to grow both professionally and personally. Your life can then tend to be filled with more trust, compassion and tolerance of religiously and culturally diverse others – you will develop more as a whole person. Our spiritual practice in the classroom is often largely invisible because our actions do not come with explicit religious labels. A compassionate act is a compassionate act, whether it springs from cultural values based on Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam or Judaism (Schmidt-Wilk et al., 2000; Pielstick, 2005; Kernochan et al., 2007).

6. Conclusion

The goal of this article has been threefold. Firstly, the purpose has been to explore how different religious and cultural based norms can impact student-teacher communication. It may be argued that many communication

behaviours discussed in this paper are implicitly culturally based rather than based on religious norms. This can be seen to be a limitation of this study. Nevertheless, our religious values are an intrinsic part of our cultural make-up and need to be placed on the agenda for research into learning and teaching in higher education today, since religious diversity is an important component of cultural diversity. Future research can explore the statistical relationships of these variables and continue this debate. Future research should also explore to what degree a society actually practices a given religion in order to document specific levels of religiosity.

It can be argued that a positive working and learning environment which supports religious diversity can lead to improved mental health, physical health, and improved general life satisfaction (Chia, 2009; King et al., 2009). Indeed, religious diversity literature supports these discussions and posits that, in essence, such diversity, combined with constructive interaction between different religious communities within a society or organisation, leads to religious pluralism – a sense of acceptance. Indeed, Walzer (1996) claims that the challenge of a diverse society is to embrace its diversity while maintaining a common life. It is this dynamic that leads to the ideal of the pluralist society as a 'community of communities' (Patel & Hartman, 2009), whether from a local, global perspective or in a classroom community.

The second purpose of this article has been to map a matrix of perceived international student behaviour, possible variances in religious based values and classroom leadership initiatives. Nevertheless, the authors are aware that a limitation of this paper could be seen to be the case study nature of the data collection for the matrix summary which limits generalizability of the findings. The authors hope that such case studies and matrix summaries can help colleague practitioners to explore the relationships between classroom communication behaviours and religious based cultural values further. Thirdly, the purpose of this article has been to offer practical guidelines which can be applied in our diverse learning environments. These guidelines were gathered from data from the above cases, combined with summaries of extant literature in the field. It is hoped that the classroom experiences, the practical guidelines and self-directed questioning techniques offered in this article will enhance our understanding of how we can and should further develop mindfulness in our religiously and culturally diverse 'classroom communities'. A further limitation of this study can be said to be the presentation of rich anecdotal reflections and conceptual models rather than the presentation of models based on traditional statistical analyses. It is hoped that future researchers can develop this conceptual model further by collecting more comprehensive empirical data both quantitatively and qualitatively for a more robust model to be developed.

Kernochan et al. (2007) claim that they have personally benefited from efforts to become more compassionate, mindful, and selfless in the classroom. Yet they warn us that these values are not cure-alls. They will not stop students from plagiarizing, or guarantee that you create inspiring classes since balance, overall, is important (Kernochan et al., 2007, p. 71). Nevertheless, individuals operating from a religious paradigm are believed to 1) be more likely to trust others, 2) share information more freely, and 3) work in concert in teams and with co-workers to accomplish mutual objectives (Biberman et al., 1999; Kriger & Hansen, 1999). These are important working qualities for both students and business people. Hence, understanding how different religious and cultural based norms impact student-teacher communication can help us to create healthier and more human learning environments and work places which are also more economically viable and sustainable.

As educators today, we all face the responsibility of recognising the need for everyone to respect existing norms and policies in our schools and organisations while also endeavouring to develop healthy places to work. Higher education classrooms need to become cross-religious and cross-cultural experiences, so that students can learn to engage in constructive dialogues and ultimately come to accept and manage diversity. This is the art of dealing with religious and cultural diversity in the classroom.

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Appendix

Appendix 1. Taxonomy of religiously diverse values and concepts in five religions

	Judaism	Christianity	Islam	Buddhism	Hinduism
1. Leader as	Teacher & Question-asker	Role Model	Servant of God and His Creation	Teacher & Role Model	Role Model of the "gods"
2. Exemplars	Abraham	Jesus	Mohammed	The Buddha	Rama / Krishna
3. Leadership through	Meaning-making	Love & peace	Embodying the 9 Names of God	Being an Example	Examples and stories
4. Validity primarily established through	Testing & perseverance	Faith	Belief	Meditation & investigation of awareness	Awareness & Perception
5. Core Vision	Oneness	Love	Surrendering to God	Wisdom & compassion	Liberation from duality
6. Revelation through	Ten Commandments & the words of the Prophets	Example & life of Jesus	The *Qu'ran* through God's Messenger, Mohammed	Direct experience	Self-inquiry & practice
7. Source of Wisdom for Leaders:	The Torah (*Tanakh*)	The Old & New Testaments	The *Qur'an*	Investigation of inner self; Pali Canon & *Abhidharma*	*Upanashads* & *Bhagavad Gita*
8. Basis for Moral Leadership	The *Mishnah* (610 rules for correct behavior)	Moral Virtues	*shari'at* (the Law); *ada*; Remembrance	*cila*; the 10 Precepts; Mindfulness	4 goals of life (*purusharthas*): meditation, pleasure, worldly success, liberation from rebirth

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