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Preparing for Future Leadership Development Efforts in the United Arab Emirates: Studying the Transformational Learning Experiences of Women Students in Abu Dhabi

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Abstract

To consider designing future efforts toward developing leadership programs for women in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), it is important to understand how these women learn most effectively. In-depth, qualitative interviews were conducted with Emirati students at a women's college in the UAE to investigate their learning backgrounds, perceptions, and transformational learning experiences while students. Additional interviews were conducted with faculty and staff to provide insights into many of the issues, challenges, and experiences the students discussed. Since developing leadership is a transforming process, transformational learning theory provided a valuable theoretical lens to guide this study. This paper presents findings related to how college experiences have changed these women through important influences (e.g., individuals, support systems, activities, teaching methods, life situation), struggles and challenges (e.g., new environment, learning English), and internal processes (e.g., reflection, discovery of new roles and relationships). Implications for developing leadership programs are also outlined.

Keywords: transformational learning; leadership development; women; United Arab Emirates;

Abu Dhabi, adult education

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Organizations of all kinds (public, private, and social sector) in many countries around the world spend millions of dollars each year on initiatives designed to develop quality leaders, and unfortunately these efforts often result in disappointing outcomes. Yet, developing effective leaders has become one of the most critical challenges for many organizations today. Strong, competent leadership continues to separate high-performing, successful organizations from less effective businesses, institutions, or agencies. Because of its focus on learning and performance at the individual, group, and organizational levels, leadership development has now emerged as an important focus of human resource development (HRD) researchers and practitioners in many countries across the globe. However, in some countries, such as the United Arab Emirates (UAE), these efforts are only in their infancy.

Scholarly research in many disciplines on the UAE and its people is difficult to find, and research focused specifically on leadership development in that country seems to be almost nonexistent. Needless to say, there is no evidence of existing research on the development of women leaders in that country, and only a few indications that the development of leadership for women has even been addressed in the UAE in years past. However, it seems that things may be changing. On November 19, 2007, Shaikha Fatima bint Mubarak, Chairperson of the UAE Businesswomen's Council, gave the keynote address at the opening ceremony of the first World Women's Economic Forum, which was held in the UAE (Khaleej Times, November, 19, 2007). In her address on women becoming active partners in a nation's development, she encouraged women to be "proactive and take their aspired role along with men in the development of their country" (p. 29). She said, "We in the Arab world no longer want to see women standing on the

margin of events. Women should work hand-in-hand with men to achieve progress and prosperity we all aspire for” (p. 29). In addition, the Minister of Economy and Planning in the UAE, H.E. Sheikha Lubna Bint Khalid Al Qasimi (2007), stated

I believe that the pace of women’s empowerment is set to unfold even more quickly...By creating an environment in the UAE that enables women to be flexible in their approach to work—to choose a career path, to balance the demands of home, and the office, to contribute to the development of this nation, we are unquestionably contributing to the growth of the UAE’s GDP...The benefits of having women as agents for social change through taking a more visible role in society is not limited to paid employment...Women play a vital economic role in every country in the world, including the UAE, that keeps nations like ours moving forward...These women, whether they are doctors or home-makers, are on the front lines of our community in transition. They are demonstrating that women have a voice, as well as a unique perspective, and a key role to play in the social and economic development of the Arab world. (pp. 33-35)

With these emerging perceptual changes within the UAE, it is expected that there will be future opportunities for HRD practitioners to design and implement leadership development initiatives for Emirati women. However, without research that explores the backgrounds and experiences of these women in learning environments, it will be difficult to design programs that will effectively meet their developmental needs. Hence, the first step toward developing leadership programs for Emirati women is to first understand how they most effectively learn. To address this need, I conducted in-depth, qualitative interviews with Emirati students at Abu Dhabi Women’s College (ADWC) to investigate their learning backgrounds and perceptions. I also wanted to understand the transformational learning experiences they have had while at

ADWC. Learning that *transforms* individuals is learning that *changes* individuals. Since developing leadership is a transforming process, transformational learning theory provided a valuable theoretical lens to guide this research.

Transformational Learning Theory

In 1978, Jack Mezirow first articulated transformational learning theory (also referred to as transformative theory) and, although he focused on social change outcomes more than Mezirow, Friere's (1970) philosophy of education is based upon adult learning as a transformative process as well. As Merriam and Caffarella (1995) noted, "transformational learning theory is about change—dramatic, fundamental change in the way we see ourselves and the world in which we live" (p. 318). They explained that this kind of learning is more than merely adding to what we already know. Clark (1993) stated that "Transformational learning shapes people; they are different afterward, in ways both they and others can recognize" (p. 47).

The process of transformational learning is anchored in life experience. Mezirow (1990) defined learning as "the process of making a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of an experience, which guides subsequent understanding, appreciation, and action (p. 1). Mezirow's theory is about how adults make meaning from and interpret their experiences. According to Taylor (1993),

Transformative learning attempts to explain how an individual's expectations, framed within cultural assumptions and presuppositions—meaning perspectives, directly influence the meaning an individual derives from his or her experiences...When an individual has an experience that cannot be assimilated into his or her meaning perspective, the experience is rejected or the perspective changes to accommodate the

new experience. It is the revision and change of these meaning perspectives that is explained by the theory of perspective transformation. (p. 7-8)

Mezirow (1991a) defined a perspective transformation as

The process of becoming critically aware of how and why our assumptions have come to constrain the way we perceive, understand, and feel about our world; changing these structures of habitual expectation to make possible a more inclusive, discriminating, and integrative perspective; and finally, making choices or otherwise acting upon these new understandings. (p. 167)

Mezirow also outlines ten stages within the perspective transformation process although he admits that they do not necessarily need to be in the sequence outlined (e.g., Merriam & Caffarella, 1995; Mezirow, 1991). First the transformation seems to be initiated by a (1) disorienting dilemma (e.g., life event of experience—often a crisis) that cannot be resolved through problem-solving skills or strategies one has used in the past. Second, the individual engages in some type of (2) self-examination process that leads to a (3) critical assessment of his or her assumptions. Exploring ones' assumptions then leads to a (4) recognition that others have also gone through similar discontentment, transformation, and change. Next, the individual (5) explores options for change (forming new roles, relationships, and actions) and formulates a (6) plan of action. This includes a plan or strategy for (7) acquiring the knowledge and skills to implement it, (8) trying out these new role and/or behaviors, and (9) building competence and self-confidence in these new roles or relationships. Finally, (10) the individual then needs to integrate these changes back into his or her life (Merriam & Caffarella, 1995).

In sum, transformation learning focuses on three core components (Merriam & Caffarella, 1995; Mezirow, 1991):

1. *Mental Construction of Experience*: It is through engaging with each life experience to make meaning that there is an opportunity for a change in perspective and behavior.
2. *Critical Reflection*: “Effective learning does not follow from a positive experience but from effective reflection” (Criticos, 1993, p. 162). To reflect critically individuals must not only think about their experiences, but they must also examine the underlying beliefs and assumptions that influence how they make sense of their experiences.
3. *Development/Action*: Individuals must explore options for forming new roles, relationships, or actions. To truly transform, they need to try out their new knowledge, skills, or roles and then build new competence and self-confidence.

Mezirow’s theory has been explored in a multitude of studies with various types of participants. In 1997, Taylor published a critical review of the empirical studies of Mezirow’s transformation learning theory. He reviewed manuscripts that involved Mezirow’s model of perspective transformation or a related component, and those that provided a methodology section that demonstrated it was an empirical study and not just a conceptual piece. He found 39 individual studies including journal publications, Masters theses, conference proceedings, and dissertations. Taylor (2007) updated his review in 2007 by analyzing 41 additional peer-reviewed journal articles published between 1999 and 2005. The majority of the articles and dissertations he analyzed in these two studies were again reviewed for this paper. Taylor found that the majority of studies employed qualitative research designs that captured an often retrospective snapshot of the subjects/participants learning experience. Additional studies from 2006 and 2007 were also reviewed to gain insight for this current study. In all, a variety of samples were used in past research, some of which included interculturally competent individuals (e.g., Euro-Americans, African-Americans) (Taylor, 1994); professional women

(Compton, 2006); high school zoology students (Pugh, 2002); leadership development program participants (Neuman, 1996); mid-career women professionals (Carter, 2002); environmental activists (Kovan & Dirkx, 2003); university extension participants on fostering active citizenship (Lange, 2004); student nurses (Liimatainen, Poskiparta, Karhila, and Sjogren, 2001); ethical vegans (McDonald, Cervero, & Courtenay, 1999); adult learners in social crisis (King, 2003); HIV-positive adults (Courtenay, Merriam, & Reeves, 1998); women educators working overseas (Lyon, 2001); clients with rheumatoid arthritis (Dubouloz, Laporte, Hall, Ashe, & Smith, 2004); cohort group learners (Scribner & Donaldson, 2001); and graduate students (e.g., Taylor, 2003; Young, Mountford, & Skrla, 2006).

Transformational learning theory has been used as a theoretical framework for a variety of studies in a multitude of unique learning environments from dieing patients to healthy graduate students or working professionals. To date, no research has been published on Mezirow's theory being utilized as a basis for research in learning environments within the Middle East. Yet, it is clear that in some of these countries there is an emerging transformation in the opportunities available to and the perspectives toward women nationals. As higher education is now a focus for women in the UAE, anecdotal evidence has suggested that possible transformational learning experiences are occurring for many female students in the UAE.

United Arab Emirates, Abu Dhabi, and ADWC

To understand this research study, it is important that readers have some background about the UAE. Although there is evidence of extensive human occupation in 5500 B.C., the UAE has only been in existence since 1971, shortly after the first export of oil from Dubai in 1969 (Al Abed, Vine, & Potts, 2007). Since its establishment, seven emirates have consolidated their status to comprise the UAE (Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah, Amjman, Umm al-Qaiwain, Ra's

al-Khaimah, and Fujairah). According to Gimbel (2007) in the March 19, 2007 issue of Fortune magazine, “The emirate’s 420,000 citizens, who sit on one-tenth of the planet’s oil and have almost \$1 trillion invested abroad, are worth about \$17 million apiece” (p. 170). With a small portion of this wealth, the government provides free higher education to Emirati students in the form of various types of institutions throughout the country. Yet, this education comes with high expectations for success, and when students don’t meet these expectations they lose their opportunity to attend college. For many young women who now have desires to contribute both inside and outside their homes, college is their only hope to obtain the preparation they need to work outside the home and professionally contribute to their communities.

The same Fortune article also deemed Abu Dhabi—the cultural, governmental, and economic capitol of the UAE—as the richest city in the world (Gumbel, 2007). Within this city lies the campus of Abu Dhabi Women’s College (ADWC), which is the largest institution within the 16,000 system of the UAE Higher College’s of Technology (HCT) (Abu Dhabi Women’s College, 2006). The HCT system was established in 1988 to offer a more technically oriented education for Emirati citizens. All of the courses taught in these colleges are done so in English, hence, for most students the first year (i.e., Foundations years) focuses primarily on learning English as most young women have learned very little in their elementary, middle-school, and high school years. ADWC is a teaching-centered institution that provides “Emirati women with exceptional academic, technical and professional learning experiences in the classroom, on campus, and in the local and global community” (Abu Dhabi Women’s College, 2006, p. 1). It was opened in 1988 and the student population has grown from 180 to now over 2,500 students. There are approximately 220 faculty and staff from over 26 nationalities at the College.

Although there is not equity between sexes in the UAE, women have embraced education, particularly in the last decade or so. In fact, 95 percent of Emirati females enrolled in secondary school apply for acceptance to colleges and universities (Al Abed, Vine, & Potts, 2007). More women are now in the workforce, yet few are employed in middle or upper management positions. Although the traditional Arab culture is still embedded throughout the country and its practices, women have more opportunities than in past decades and are optimistic that they can contribute and influence on a larger scale than in past years.

Research Methods

This study draws on data I collected (November 2007 and May 2008) through in-depth one-hour interviews with female students on the campus of Abu Dhabi Women's College (ADWC) in the UAE. I worked with a full-time faculty member and two administrators on that campus to get access to the students. Before my initial visit, the faculty member emailed a short description of the study and my request for an interview to approximately 80 third and fourth year students. Nine responded via email that they were interested in being interviewed, and I set up interviews with the six students whose schedules were open during the times I could conduct interviews on campus. When I returned months later, I interviewed two additional students who heard I was coming to campus and volunteered to be interviewed. I conducted all interviews on a one-to-one basis with all being held in a private office I was given during my week-long visiting scholar experience. Each interview was audio-taped for later transcription. All of the Emirati women were current third and fourth year students at the College in varied degree programs.

I used the phenomenological research approach to design and conduct this qualitative interview project (Wolcott, 2001). Van Manen (2001, p. 9) explained that "phenomenology aims at gaining a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of our everyday experiences."

Connelly and Clandinin (1988, as cited in Cooke, 2004, p. 6) supported this general approach to research by stating that “the knowledge that emerges from this personalized form of research is of a practical nature...that can yield unique insights into the development of practical wisdom.” It was important to note, as Brunner (1998) outlined, that studying people’s experiences as opposed to what they merely do can provide insights of a much more useful nature for research based on understanding human development. This approach appeared to be the most applicable to understanding the transformational learning experiences of these students. It allowed each student the opportunity to use her own voice to describe her thoughts, perceptions, and experiences. Each interviewee also told stories that, according to Cubillo and Brown (2003, p. 283), “makes life experiences assessable in potentially relevant and meaningful ways.”

I drafted interview questions based on this research methodology, an extensive review of the literature (e.g., King, 1998; King, 2003; Liimatainen et al., 2001; Scribner & Donaldson, 2001; Taylor, 1993), and the review of other instruments based on transformational learning theory measuring similar constructs for different populations. They were open-ended probing questions designed to extract all types of information about the students’ learning experiences and perceptions. I designed some similar follow-up questions to encourage the students to search deeper for additional answers and rich descriptions. Four qualified individuals (two Arab men at my own institution and one scholar and one staff from ADWC) reviewed the instrument for quality and cultural appropriateness, and I made slight adjustments to the instrument based on their feedback.

Importantly, I also interviewed three ADWC faculty members and four administrators/staff about the College and their perceptions of the students’ transformational learning experiences. I did not audio-tape and transcribe these interviews as I did the eight

student interviews, but I took notes by hand. These seven additional interviews provided valuable insights and clarifications that were useful in analyzing and understanding the student responses.

A number of steps were utilized to analyze the interviews. First, I transcribed all of the student interviews in full. Second, after each transcript was read and reread, some slight adjustments were made; primarily these included cutting and pasting responses to appropriate questions when they were addressed in other parts of the interview. Next, the interviews were reread to identify key ideas and phrases about their experiences. Approximately 40 to 80 key phrases or ideas emerged from each interview. Fourth, all interview phrases or statements were grouped by topic. A total of 12 primary themes or categories emerged from the interviews. Fifth, all key ideas were grouped by theme so that results could be analyzed. Sixth, each category was analyzed to discover the detailed findings for this study that are presented later in the paper. Finally, the analysis was then provided to four individuals (ADWC administrators and faculty) who were asked to provide additional perspective and insight that might be helpful in understanding these students' experiences.

Findings

Backgrounds

To understand the transformational learning experiences of the participants in this study, it was important that the students describe related elements of their lives previous to attending ADWC. First, however, it is important to note that the term "school" in the UAE means elementary, middle, and high school, and Emirati students refer to higher education as "college" or "university." The three themes that emerged from the student descriptions of prior experiences included 1) lack of confidence, 2) school learning environment, and 3) lack of previous

opportunities to develop leadership and learn functional English. The students' responses were quite similar although each shared different stories and perspectives.

The strongest theme that emerged from these data was the lack of confidence the young women felt during their schooling years. One obviously competent college student told the following story about one aspect of her high school experience:

In school I didn't ever stand up in class to read like some other students. I didn't want to read because I didn't want attention brought to me, and I was scared. I think the reason is because I didn't have any confidence, but the teachers just thought that I couldn't read.

The teachers made many judgments about me because of my shyness to stand up and read. I remember one time a teacher made me stand and read. My body was shaking, and my voice was shaking. I even started to sweat. I did not do well.

A 20-year old student said, "In school I was not as confident as now. I just sat in my chair and never moved and never talked. I would just hope that I could try anything different, but I would not." Another stated, "I was a very shy person in school growing up. I didn't talk. I was so quiet and very polite (of course I'm still polite). I was afraid and didn't have the confidence in myself and my abilities." A fourth explained, "I didn't know I had anything important to say because I could not speak." A final student said, "In high school I was nothing. The teachers never knew me. I was unknown."

The students described their school learning environments as non-engaging, particularly those who had attended government schools. Because they wanted to do well to please others and to get accepted at the college and/or university of their choice, they worked hard. Their teachers were very strict, and discipline was imposed when they were not obedient. They had to "be very careful with the teachers." One explained, "If you don't do your homework then the

teacher comes and shouts at you. Then she reduces your grade by five marks. There is always a consequence for not doing your homework.” One 21-year-old student believes that she probably always liked to share her opinions, but she couldn’t do so in school. She noted,

I’m the type of person who likes to talk and say what’s in my mind. In high school if we say something they just tell us to shut up. They give us the ‘look.’ We had to be so quiet in high school, so I was always so quiet.

One participant explained, “In high school the teacher comes and gives us the lesson and then leaves. We didn’t have the kind of bond like we have here.” Yet, they believed their teachers wanted them to “succeed,” which primarily referred to passing with a good enough grade to get accepted by a university. A number of students agreed with the thoughts of one particular student when she said, “The classes were not just hard, but they didn’t ever show us how we could actually benefit from learning the information they were teaching us.” It was difficult for the students to become fully engaged in their learning experiences based on the teaching methods that were utilized by the schools and teachers and the learning environment created. Importantly, the three students who had attended private high schools had better perceptions of being engaged in their learning when compared to the others.

The majority of participants also mentioned that their middle and high schools did not provide opportunities for developing leadership and learning functional English. Five of the eight participants went to government schools and said they received very little English language instruction. One student explained, “High school was very different because everything was in Arabic. I had no idea about English. We took a course in English but the teachers were Arabic so we only learned the basics.” English language skills appear to be of great importance now to all

eight of these students, so the five who attended public schools reflected on how they wish they had received better opportunities to learn English in high school.

Decision to Attend College

The participants' fathers and mothers were profoundly influential in their lives, and in most cases both parents encouraged and supported their daughters in their decisions to attend college. One young woman said, "I always planned to go to college and believed it was important. I want to complete my degree. Even when I was a little girl it was on my mind." A second noted, "I planned to study in higher education even as a child. We were always thinking about what we were going to study." A third said, "I always knew I would go to college. It was a must." One woman explained that her parents had not gone to college but that they are very supportive of college for her. She stated, "They feel it is very important, more than the money. Now all of us children have gone to college." Interestingly, most of the participants' mothers did not attend college and "started having children when they were 14, 15, or 16." One student explained, "My life is different than my mothers. Back then, they were calling you spinster at 16 or 17 years old. Now it is 23 or 24. I'm still okay for three years!" On the other hand, one student has a father with a PhD, and her parents expect her to eventually earn a masters degree and possibly a Ph.D. Some of the participants noted that their parents, particularly their fathers, have changed their views in the past five to ten years. For example, one 31-year old student spoke of how she wanted to go to an American university when she was younger but her Bedouin family was very strict, and her father said he wanted "his girls to be with him." This woman then made the following statement:

My father is getting more open-minded now. Before we could only work with him, and now I'm working at an oil company. I come from a large family of eight sisters and three

brothers. Most of them are now educated. One sister is a doctor and another is a broker.

My father has come a long way!

Importantly, the openness and supportiveness of these young women's fathers seemed to directly influence the opportunities they had to learn and develop from "outside the classroom" experiences. Although a few of the participants had siblings who had not continued their education because they "got married to care for their families," these students felt determined to attend and graduate from ADWC.

All of the students said that the opportunity to attend college is very important and that being at ADWC is providing critical learning experiences for them. They spoke of the College being suitable for their interests and learning styles. One explained, "I came here because I like working more than studying. This college is more applied than universities, and this is what I wanted." Another said, "I don't like just taking examinations and doing only regular homework. I love other ways of learning." One student summed it up by saying, "I prefer college because they are looking at our skills. At the university they are just teaching." Others commented that the college seemed more "interesting and comfortable" than traditional university settings. A few women mentioned that the college was also close to their homes making attending ADWC very convenient for them. Another woman spoke of hearing of her college options in her final year of high school. She didn't know what the best choice for her was so she prayed about it, and she said, "God showed me the way." Finally, one student exclaimed: "The opportunity to attend college is very important to me. At first I wanted to finish college as fast as possible, but now I want to stay longer and get my bachelor's degree."

Personal and Professional Development

Attending ADWC seems to have been a major change for all of the study participants. One explained, “When I came to the college it was very difficult for me as it was a whole different life.” Another said, “I’m a different person now in college than I was in school. I’m 180 degrees different.” A third said, “Coming to college was the biggest change in my life.” The four primary themes that surfaced when analyzing the students’ responses regarding how they have changed include 1) confidence, 2) personal responsibility for learning, and 3) the development of skills and competencies.

The students went from being quiet, shy, and unconfident in many areas during their earlier schooling to acting very differently now in their third or fourth years of college. Although some noted that they still had a “bit of shyness and nervousness” during their first years of college, all now say that they speak up in class and are much more confident in most areas of their lives. One student said, “Once I joined the college I like to talk.” Another said, “Now I want to go out and give many presentations. I get out and do more than I did before. I’m even driving now!” Another stated, “I think my change was that I decided I wanted to be known by everyone. I saw how many women at the college and in the community have good positions at their work. I wanted to change.” Another said, “I feel like I want to learn a lot. I don’t want to waste my time being quiet. I really changed a lot. I feel like now I’m more confident, even at my work.” One student remarked, “I’m the type of person who likes to talk and say what’s on my mind. I couldn’t be myself in high school; now I can.”

Each of these students has had a remarkable change in her life because of experiences at ADWC. All mentioned throughout the interview how proud they are of what they have done and who they have become. It seems that the students’ pride is anchored in their belief that they (themselves) are central to their success. Two students noted that it was their responsibility to

want to learn and not the teachers or others. All of these students also believe that their own personal motivation, self-encouragement, and determination have been important in their learning and change during their college years. One explained, “I am so proud of myself. My family is so proud of me. They can see the difference between me and the other people not in college. They can see the good changes in me.”

The students spoke about developing a variety of life skills and leadership competencies (i.e., determination, responsibility, time management, open-mindedness, self discipline, professionalism, leadership, self-knowledge, and communication) while at ADWC. For example, one explained, “College was really hard but that made me want to succeed even more. Since I joined the college I have become more determined.” Another participant explained, “I have learned responsibility here. You have a project, and you have to do it. You have to no matter what. Even when you don’t want to do it, you do it anyway.” Others spoke of learning time management skills and how college requires them to organize their time—sometimes for the first time in their lives. One student said, “I was more closed-minded before. I had to learn to respect other people’s opinions even when they are not the same as mine.” A few students spoke of how they had to learn to push themselves to do things they didn’t enjoy. Because of the expectations at the college, they felt they have become more self-disciplined. The students also spoke of learning to be more professional through their college experiences. At least three of the students also spoke of the leadership opportunities they had in college. They have not only had the opportunity to lead, but to also enjoy these roles and learn to do them more effectively. One of the participants said that she decided to lead because if she did not, her own grades would suffer. Another student said that she asks many questions to the teachers because many of the girls just wait for others to do it. College has also taught the students I interviewed to begin understanding

their own strengths and weakness. One spoke of trying to understand what she could handle, and she decided she could not work and go to school because it would add too much complexity and stress in her life. Finally, all of the participants spoke in detail about their staggering improvement in communication skills, particularly in speaking and presenting in front of others (see next section for more specific findings).

Overall, each of the participants spoke of the love they have developed for learning. One explained, “When I began discovering my own abilities, then I had a desire to improve myself and learn even more.” Another participant made a statement that sums up the feelings of the participants: “I love to learn. My whole life now is learning. I want to complete another degree after I’m finished with this one. In fact, I want to learn and study until I die.”

Teaching and Learning Methods

To understand how these women learned, developed, and changed from their college experiences, I asked each of the young women to describe the teaching methods, pedagogies, and assignments they believe have most influenced their learning. I also encouraged them to talk about the learning culture at ADWC.

Presentation assignments. One of the two most often mentioned methods or assignments was the requirement they received to give presentations. They had not been required to present before coming to the College, so this was a very new experience for each young woman. According to one student, “Our College teachers taught us how to present, helped us with the tone of our voices, and helped us learn to prepare very well. Now I can stand up and speak.” During the interviews it became apparent that the experiences they have had in developing presentation skills have been very empowering for these students and possibly a central influence in increasing their self confidence during these years. One said, “I’ve learned to speak

confidently in front of people, especially in English. This is very important to me.” Another told the following story:

I have more confidence now. I made a speech in front of 200 guests. There were students and guests and the director came and other guests from outside the college. Before the presentation we had to call people and ask them to sponsor us. We had to call vice presidents of companies and ask them to come to this presentation. I liked this because I interacted with business people. I did it once, so now I would do it again. I know what to do. There were 13 of us in the group. When I gave my speech I feel it was very good for me. I was very nervous, but I was glad I did it. I learned something. I felt that I did a good job. Everyone told me I did a good job, and I got an A+ from my teacher. This helped my confidence.

Another participant provided the following example:

Most of the changes in my personality happened after we went to the hospitals for the first time to do anemia blood assessments. It was an exhausting week. After it was over we went back to the hospital to present our findings. From that day I really changed because I had never done any presentation in front of anyone except for the teacher and other students. This was for real people, like all of the hospital management team and all of the physicians. I had never talked in a microphone before. I thought “You can do it; you worked hard.” We had been working hard and even the Director had seen the preparation. It was a big deal, and it went very well.

One young woman said, “I was required to present more as I have gone through college, and now I’m more comfortable and like it.” Another student explained, “We have to do presentations

every week or so, so I quickly got used to it. I benefited a lot because these made me feel more comfortable in college.”

Learning English. The other most common response to my question about influential learning experiences is the women’s experiences in learning English. Learning the English language has become very empowering for these students, and it has also become a great source of pride as well. For six of the eight students it was the most difficult part of the college experience for them. Although they were smart and accomplished in high school, it seems that the requirement to learn English “shook them up” and “turned things inside out” for them, at least for a time. Now that they are fairly accomplished in speaking, writing, and reading English, they are so proud of themselves and see how useful it is for their future. One said,

When I travel with my family outside the country, I can be the one who can speak English and help the family. My husband does not speak English, so when we went on our honeymoon I was the one who could communicate with so many others and help us have a good experience in different countries.

Another explained, “I am so proud that I speak two languages. I feel like I can communicate well. I can understand so much more. Speaking English is very important.”

The challenge of successfully learning English has also improved the women’s confidence in many ways. One participant said, “Now I am not stressed, and I am proud that I have two languages. I know I am able to talk to anyone else in English. My confidence has improved.” Four of the participants specifically mentioned that conquering the English language has now given them a greater desire to take on other difficult challenges. For example, one student said that she chose to major in accounting because that was the one business area she was not confident in. She said, “I have confidence in other business fields like HR, planning, and

marketing, but I'm not comfortable in accounting. I chose accounting because I knew it would be a challenge." One student spoke of learning other difficult topics and said, "I knew that over time I could learn it. It is not just getting books. It takes time, but I know I can learn it." It is important to note that learning English seems to be the major challenge that most ADWC students confront at the College. All classes are taught in English, so they must become English speakers to succeed. One participant said, "English is the hardest thing." The Foundations (first) year is almost a traumatic experience for some students, particularly because of the language expectations, but also because everything is so new and different for the students during this year. Although the government provides free public higher education to Emirati nationals, if the students fail courses they are asked to leave the institution. One young woman noted, "If we do not do well in English then we will fail, and we won't have the opportunity to continue our studies." It puts great pressure on many students. These difficult and challenging experiences ultimately provided opportunities for high growth and development. One student said that she was used to getting all As in school, so when she received a "C" her first semester in English she was very frustrated. Her frustration turned to determination, and she received an "A" the second part of the year. She said, "It was really hard, but it made me want to succeed even more. Since I joined here I have been determined."

Two students said that they believed the reason they learned English so well was because most of the teachers are British and American. The students learned English by the way the instructors taught. Teachers motivated them to read often. They learned to go to the library to read books and magazine—a new experience for them. They listened to the radio and television so they could hear how words and phrases sounded. Practical application of skills and practice in general were strongly encouraged. One student said,

In learning English, reading stories was important. It really helps you learn. While we are reading, then we see the grammar and how they talk. I really was surprised that it has also improved my speaking. I listen to the sound of words and pay attention. My grammar and writing improved 100 percent.

Applied learning. Each student also highlighted many elements of the applied or active learning environment at the college. One stated, “I remember things good because of the direct application focus here. It really helps you stop to think, and the learning start to work. It’s fun!” Another participant said, “I like more active things. With my major I get to do a lot of work that is just like running a real business. I really like it.” Another said, “It is nice to go outside of the college and see other people. The College is all about learning, so we should do things that really help us learn.” Three students mentioned going out to companies to “talk to them and interview them about business topics.” One noted, “I learn good from this. I learn well from the field itself.” One health major said that she is involved in fund raisers to raise money for needy hospitals. She noted that this involvement has helped her learn many professional skills. Three students spoke in detail about their project-based learning environments where the business office environment is brought into their classrooms.

Seven of the eight students had done some form of work placement and spoke very highly of the positive learning and confidence-building influence it has been. One student stated, “Work placement has been very good. I did two last year. It helped because what we learned in class we then got to go see it in real life. It helped me learn and get better.” Another explained,

When we got to work placement, I also changed. Working is part of a whole different kind of learning. Working in the real life business is different than the college life. It was

good for me. The place I did my work placement offered me a job because they said I did very well. I took it, and it has given me more confidence.

Another student told the following story:

Last year I did work placement for one month. That was the second time for me to see different kinds of management. After the second placement I took an organizational behavior class. It was so very easy for me because I had seen these things in my work experience. My work experience was very good for how to manage. OB made sense after seeing things at a business.

Yet, the participants mentioned that some students struggle when they are exposed to the work environment. One student said, “Many are just used to being around women, and it is very hard to be around men.” They explained that “some girls can’t do well because there are men.” One also noted that sometimes there is discrimination in the workplace, but she felt that she avoided it because of the professional way she presented herself. Two participants admitted that they do feel judged at times by men and can’t offer their opinions on issues, but they remain optimistic that they are contributing and can do more in the future.

Reflection. All of the students spoke of various elements of reflection in their courses, although most did not use the word “reflection.” Many spoke of particular teachers who talked often of “how what we are learning relates to working after college.” All of the students noted that their college teachers have been much better about relating course learning to application than those in high school. One explained, “I learn how things relate to the working environment through many assignments. They talk about different cultures in the workplace. They let us talk and discuss, so we can think more about this. It helps to think about things.” One young woman

said, “Relating the material to life is important to me.” This finding was very prominent in all eight interviews.

The majority of the students I interview talked about writing in journals for the requirements of various courses. One explained,

We have to write in a journal for the classes that we do services and train people. We write about how the day went and how we felt about things. Then we talk about what we learn from it. This helps me remember.

Another said, “The teachers ask us to write in journals. Everyday we have to write what we learned and what we did. We call it an action plan or a journal.” A final student said, “We keep a learning log, and at the end we write a reflection of what we learned, why we chose this, and what we felt when that happened or this happened. It helped me think through the experience better.” During their first year, which is focused on learning English and math, they are required to write a lot of their thoughts down which helps them process the experience and practice their writing.

Other learning strategies. The participants spoke of how much they enjoy more engaging types of teaching. One explained, “The teachers are more open and flexible than in school. It is an open discussion many times, and I can say things out in the open. I think saying what you think helps you learn.” The students also felt that other assignments, particularly interviewing, researching, online projects, and writing in English in its different formats (e.g., written reflections, reports) helped these students change in many ways. For example, these assignments helped the students develop new ways of thinking, understanding, and performing. Four of the students also said that they learn a great deal about the “real business world” from guest speakers.

Learning culture. The students spoke about the College's learning culture. One student said,

It is very open here at ADWC. When the students first come here they may find difficulty learning the subjects because of the differences between school and college. However, they will soon be happy with the environment and see how people can support them.

It seems that many first-year students struggle when they first attend ADWC because the learning culture is so different that what they had experienced during high school. Yet now all of the participants enjoy the ability they have to "tell our opinions openly." One said, "We don't have borders here." One student said, "I think the college environment helps me think about others and also want to improve myself. The environment helps me want to improve my skills and read and see everything around me. I wasn't like this before." Another explained, "It is very interactive here. We are encouraged to go out into the community and interact with all kinds of people to learn and develop." The students love being at ADWC and believe that their educations can prepare them to effectively contribute in industry, government, and in their communities and homes.

Influential People

Teachers were mentioned over and over as the individuals who were most influential in the students learning experiences. One student said, "The teachers have made a difference in my life and my self esteem." A second explained, "The College has open-minded teachers who listen and support." Another stated, "The faculty are critical in the changes in me and other students." For example, one student provided an example of a teacher that changed the way she thought:

One woman faculty is a wonderful lady. She always tells us to really think and read the lines behind the story. Just don't read any news about a hospital, but think about what is

behind this hospital and this story. What is the future implication of this issue with this hospital? She taught us to always ask why and how and when. It helps me think differently.

All spoke of how important their teachers are in their learning and development, and each student said that she had one or more teachers who made her feel comfortable and have listened and encouraged her personally. Teachers give important advice to their students. One young woman said that a teacher had given her a lot of advice about what work experience would be like so she would be ready. Five of the students provided examples of teachers putting in extra time and effort to help them work on projects outside the scope of any particular class or giving them meaningful advice regarding involvement in activities outside of the classroom. For example, one student told the following story:

When I want support, I will find it. For example, I had an idea of doing a project on health. I love graphics and wanted to use it. I had an idea of doing a health magazine. The teachers were good to hear my idea. They are very kind so I can talk to them very easily without any borders between us. I got the first magazine done last year. That felt good. I'm now working on the second one.

Another student took her teacher's advice to take opportunities to travel abroad so that she could learn and develop more understanding about the world around her.

Providing honest and meaningful feedback seemed to be one of the most crucial activities these teachers provide to their Emirati students. One student said, "My English teachers were very helpful, because we had to do a lot of writing and speaking. They gave us a lot of feedback." Another stated, "My teachers really helped me get self confidence. They always believe in my skills and help me improve my skills by giving me feedback." One participant

noted, “My teachers give specific feedback on what we did right or what we should improve on. They come and talk to us individually and give us this feedback very nicely.”

The participants spoke of good friends (second most often mentioned after teachers) and peers. One student spoke of some close friends she has on campus in another program and how she was able to show them everything she did. She said, “My friends would give me good suggestions so I could improve my work and get better marks.” Another provided this example:

I met my best friend my first year here. She has been very important to me...I trust her, and trust is very important...I am able to share my feelings, desires, and concerns. We talk very openly and give each other feedback. When we have speeches, we listen and give advice to each other.

Influential friends were helpful and trustworthy, provided meaningful feedback, and were open and encouraging. Classmates and peers provided support for these students as well. One student said,

We are like family in my program. My classmates and I encourage each other often. We always say, “The best is yet to come.” All people have moments of weakness when we don’t want to carry on. It is difficult sometimes, but we keep encouraging each other.

Another said, “My group is very important and without each other we may not be here today. We work hard together. Some quit but we are a team so that is sad. We encourage each other and this has been very important for all of us.” One participant spoke of how older students at the college influenced her, as she noted: “I have learned from older students. Some are 30 years old, and we all learn from them. We get ambition from them because they are in school. It inspires me. That determination is important.”

The participants also spoke about ADWC administrators and staff as well as work supervisors. Staff members or administrators were influential because of their advice, encouragement, and motivational abilities. For example, one student said, “One advisor said that we needed an education and must study hard. I knew it was true. They are good people who are showing us the path to go. They challenge us, and I like to be challenged.” Another student remarked that a former ADWC director said the following to her one day: “Work hard and you’ll find a place here.” She said, “It was just one sentence, and it still affects me. I still remember that. He was a good man.” A few spoke of influential individuals in their places of work. For example, one talked of the powerful influence of one of her supervisors at work because he was supportive, gave positive feedback, treated her with respect, and offered lots of encouragement.

Other Learning Activities

The students explained that the College offers some extracurricular activities, but they wished it would offer more. Yet, they believe the offerings have definitely increased the last few years. Seven of the eight students have been involved in a variety of activities outside the classroom. One wanted to do more but felt she was limited by her parents. The College offers some formal programs that provide some leadership experiences for the students. One is the peer tutoring program. One student said, “Now I’m in the peer tutoring program...I do two hours of math tutoring a week. It has been a good experience for me. It has helped me learn, and I’ve learned to teach.” Four students said that they had been involved in student council on campus, which provided opportunities for learning and development. Another young woman was involved in a student forum as a student representative. One participant said, “The College also organizes field trips, like one to Dubai, which the students seem to enjoy. Last year I used to come to the college, do my work, and just leave. This year I decided to be involved in everything

that I can do. I know it will all help me.” This student seems to understand her own role and responsibility in using extracurricular and outside learning activities to supplement her learning experiences.

According to the students, the College has begun to offer sports on campus, but these students said many girls don’t participate. One said, “I might sign up for basketball, volleyball, table tennis, and everything. I like sports. We don’t get credit for it so many don’t sign up. If they give credit then more will be involved.” Another said, “The activities are not a must. They should require it. Even last week I told someone at the college that students should do more physical activity. I looked around and some of the girls were sitting and lying around. They need to be active!” Another participant said,

We should have better sports facilities for the girls. My brother is out of the country and he tells me how important physical activity is for my health. I think the College must require it so girls will be better.

One student did mention that she plays competitive soccer off campus and loves it.

Students are also able to attend and participate in conferences and also participate in outside projects or opportunities. Those who had attended conferences loved the experience. They enjoyed openly expressing their opinions in these forums and thrived on the opportunity to interact with individuals from other educational institutions and businesses. Two students also explained that they were able to interact with prominent individuals in society at these events, and they loved these experiences. In addition to the previous example of the student who produced a magazine on campus, one student spoke about her desire to help her new program get more students. She came up with an idea to make a video to help advertise her program so more students would join her major. She said,

I start to think how I can help get more students. So I did a video of the program. I talked to my teachers. They say “Fine, if you have the time you can do it.” I said, “Fine, I do have the time.” I worked with students already in the program to have them be on the video and share their experiences and talk about what opportunities they think they will have in the future because of this major. My one teacher helped me in editing all of these things. So, I made the CD for the program. There were only five people in a class at that time. This year we have 30 students. It has been only one year since the production. It feels like an accomplishment. I was proud of the results. People still remember me from the video.

Other students spoke of leading the efforts for a Breast Cancer Awareness campaign, and another talked about participating in an anemia campaign. They both noted that they learned more about leadership and how to see the people’s abilities and give them the right assignments. One student spoke about the opportunity she had to speak to younger students in the College about her experiences. She said, “I’ve been scared, worried, and concerned about all of the issues that concern new students. I like talking to them because I think I can help them see they can succeed.” Another successfully led an effort to keep a bachelor’s degree program at the institution, while another participated in speech and debate contests with other colleges around the UAE. Three students spoke of seeking out learning experiences outside the College to strengthen their English skills, including one who studied at the British consulate for two summers. She said, “We feel that to improve ourselves we need to take every opportunity we can. With this opportunity then we keep learning and getting better during the summers.” Other students used the College services outside of class to help them improve their English language skills. Traveling abroad also provided wonderful learning experiences for a few of these

students. As mentioned, some of the women at the College are already working in industry and speak highly of their learning experiences in these work settings. They have received opportunities for promotion based on their value as they are receiving and completing their education.

Future Plans

Each young woman reflected on how her college experiences have changed the way she thinks about her future goals and plans. All spoke of furthering their education after completing their current degree program. Seven of eight talked about master's work and three of doctorate level plans. Although marriage and children topped their list of important future plans, closely behind that was their desire to work at least part-time even while their children are young. One woman said,

I've kind of had changes in my ideas and attitudes since coming to college. I mean, I wasn't planning to work after college. After seeing how others can do it successfully, I want to look for a job that will be fun, a job that will let me continue my learning.

All of these women planned to work in their professional fields, while a few mentioned ideas to work in other professional areas as well. One said, "I want to work; I want to have a good position in my work. I feel that I can get this because of what I learn from college." Four spoke of possibly opening their own businesses in the future. None said they would do it immediately, as they see the need for more experience and time to learn. One particular young woman had specific plans regarding her future occupation and how she could do her part to make a difference in her community and country as well. She said,

I am thinking that I may want to run support groups for women. For example, there should be a group for women with children who have some disabilities like Down's

syndrome. Also, I've been thinking about a support group and services for women who are being abused by their husbands. Here we don't talk. It is like a shame if you talk about these things. I want to have these women come to a center, and we'll just take care of them. Women who are divorced don't have anyone to talk to either, and the state is just blaming them. The women always get the blame, so they need a place to come and talk. I am thinking of a support place for different categories of women. Like for sexual rape. We don't talk about these things either. It is not allowed to talk about these things. It is not allowed to go to the police and report it. It is not a common thing, but if anything happens the women do not talk. It is a shame for them. They think, "Why, why did it happen to me." It is not okay in this society to talk about it. In my psychology class we learned about these things and how it can affect women forever. I feel that something needs to be done to help. Maybe I can be the one to do this.

Each of the women I interviewed spoke of their desires to be "a good influence in the community" or in "making a difference in the community" as their future goal. For example one said, "I want to be someone who is known in the community and who is helpful to others." Another noted, "In the future I'm hoping that I will be someone who represents my country in a good way by being involved, especially as a woman." I pressed each student more when they gave me these general answers to see if they had more specific ideas. Interesting, most could not give me a more specific answer. I'm not sure they knew enough about the possibilities to know what they might be able to do. They were not sure how they will contribute in their communities and country, but they wanted to do so—someday, somehow. One explained, "I can search and see if there is any kind of thing I can do. Maybe I'll make my own way."

Discussion

The findings support the notion that the students I interviewed at ADWC have had striking transformational learning experiences while attending college. In comparing each research finding with the Mezirow's (1991) perspective transformation process previously outlined, it is clear that these students have either already experienced or are currently experiencing each of the ten stages Mezirow outlined. With limited article length, I determined that more detail in the *Findings* section of this paper would be more helpful for the reader than a more in-depth *Discussion* section. Hence, I will not discuss the meaning and application of most of the details presented. It is, however, important that readers clearly understand the connections between the findings and Mezirow's transformational learning theory. Table 1 provides insight into how these findings demonstrate evidence of each of the ten states in the perspective transformation process.

Table 1. Description of Findings Based on Mezirow's (1991) Perspective Transformation Process

Stage	Description and Examples
1. Disorienting dilemma	Starting college was one of two major disorienting dilemmas that served as a trigger event to start the transformation process. It was difficult in various ways for all of the students. The women's experience in learning English was the second triggering event. This was very demanding for all students, and it shook most of them to their core. It brought self-doubt and insecurity, and the task and the pressure was very challenging for them.
2. Self-examination	Starting college, learning English, and having other experiences caused students to examine themselves at a depth they had not yet experienced. Class assignments challenged them to reflect and examine their inner desires.
3. Critical assessment of assumptions	Through their college experiences, each participant had a variety of opportunities to assess their assumptions regarding their current capabilities, strengths and weaknesses, and future plans. By their third year of college, the participants seemed to broaden their assumptions of what was expected of them by others and listened more to their internal needs and desires.
4. Recognition that others have gone through similar discontentment, transformation, and change	The college environment provided an opportunity for these students to see others going through disorienting dilemmas, discontentment, and transformation. They saw changes in others and admired them for those changes. They observed examples of women returning to school after having children and women choosing to begin working outside the home after many years of being fulltime homemakers. The open learning environment provided many opportunities for students to listen to others' experiences, challenges, changes, and opportunities.

5. Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions	College provided ample opportunities for these women to explore options for new roles and relationships. Through coursework, extracurricular activities, and interactions with others, they began taking on these new roles during college and chose new behaviors and actions as well. They saw other students doing the same. It was a safe environment for them to explore.
6. Planning a course of action	The students were guided by their instructors and others to plan courses of action for change. Their learning experiences were fundamentally based in change, and the teachers provided opportunities for them to make these plans.
7. Acquisition of knowledge and skills to implementing plans	College course and experiences assisted each participant in acquiring new knowledge and skills through learning and application. For example, they learned to present through class assignments and learned to work in professional settings through work placement experiences.
8. Trying out new roles and behaviors	See #7. Application of learning is central at ADWC. Students are given changes to practice in the classroom and in real-life settings.
9. Building competence and self-confidence in new roles, behaviors, or relationships	Students developed confidence in their new skills and behaviors as they practiced and were exposed to new situations. They learned that they could connect with others at college and in professional settings and were provided with important feedback to know when they succeeded from individuals they trusted.
10. Integrate changes back into one's life	These students integrated changes throughout their college experiences step by step. The integration of new skills, behaviors, roles, and relationship occurred as they were "becoming" educated. New habits were formed and insights gained that helped them become who they want to become.

Implications for Leadership Development

Although these research findings cannot be generalized across all female college students in the UAE, it provides some insight into the learning experiences and preferences of Emirati women. There will most definitely be future opportunities for HRD practitioners to design and implement leadership development initiatives for Emirati women, and these findings can provide some important initial implications for designing programs that will effectively meet the developmental needs of these women. Understanding how at least some Emirati women effectively learn can give us ideas and strategies that may be helpful for developing programs that would be most successful in the UAE.

The following eight categories provide some practical implications in the design of leadership development initiatives and programs for emerging UAE leaders:

1. *Learning Environment:* Design an open, engaging, and interactive learning environment with ample opportunities for participant discussion. In a safe, developmental environment, encourage women to find their voices and express their thoughts and opinions. Design specific time for facilitators and presenters to listen to the participants. Facilitate activities and experiences that will help participants create supportive bonds with others that will last well beyond the completion of the program. Tell stories, provide examples, and invite guest speakers to give ideas to and inspire the participants toward the practical application of the concepts taught. Highlight the application of the material to practice by providing opportunities and assignments for women to practice what is being taught within the classroom and in real world settings. Design ways for participants to succeed in small tasks and then, as confidence is gained, build on those for larger successes.
2. *Reflection:* A critical aspect of a leadership development experience will include verbal and written reflective activities and assignments during and between classes or sessions. Many of these should, at least initially, be directed and structured. To help students make the connections needed to strengthen their reflective abilities, facilitators should design lesson segments with content on how to reflect and why this skill is important in developing leadership. Reflective activities targeted at helping participants find their own identity can be very helpful for these women. Through applicable assignments and activities, these participants need to begin understanding themselves (including their own strengths and weaknesses) at a deeper level than they have probably done so in the past. Through effective reflective activities students can learn by considering their experiences and then understanding how they can

- better learn from them. Also, designing experiences for participants to learn to reflect on their challenges and then use them to strengthen their leadership competencies can be helpful.
3. *Basic Competencies and Skills:* Female Emirati students have few opportunities during childhood and youth to develop basic leadership skills, particularly compared with participants in programs from many other countries. Therefore, leadership development programs should be designed to assist participants to learn and strengthen basic competencies and skills (e.g., time management, responsibility, presentation, speaking, interpersonal communication, professionalism, self-discipline, assertiveness, confidence, and self-esteem).
 4. *Open and Honest Feedback:* These students take to heart the feedback they receive, so it is important that this feedback be accurate and honest. The majority of feedback should be given on an individual basis (not in front of a group). Careful consideration should be used to determine when and how feedback should be presented, and it should be carefully linked to intended outcomes. These women have a sincere desire to improve, and they want to make a difference. They trust those who teach them and seem to respond best to those who care about them and want them to succeed. Design a meaningful discussion on how the participants' friends, parents, and others can give helpful feedback and insight that can help them grow and develop.
 5. *Challenge and Support:* Emirati women interested in leadership enjoy being challenged. They respond well to environments and situations that challenge them to think differently and broader about situations, opportunities, and potential contributions. Discuss how challenges can be important learning experiences and how

- difficulties, struggles, and even failure can teach them as much, if not more, than successful situations. They need to understand that challenges provide learning and build competence. Ask the participants to do difficult assignments, but provide support, assistance, and encouragement so they have a “safety net” if they need it.
6. *Encourage and Advise:* Participants will take encouragement and advice from instructors/facilitators very seriously. They respond well to those who believe in them. They reflect on guidance and suggestions they receive, and trust that if they follow the advice they will learn and grow. For example, students may not consider attending a conference or participating in extracurricular activities unless they are personally encouraged to do so. The participants tend to create important bonds and relationships with those who reach out to help them. Discuss future options and opportunities with them throughout the leadership development program, and help them see culturally appropriate possibilities. They need to be able to envision how they can contribute within their homes, communities, workplaces, and government. Using examples and role models of successful and respected women in their own culture will provide powerful learning moments.
 7. *Comprehensive Structure:* Effective leadership initiatives for women in the UAE will be designed as longer term programs. Many basic skills need to be introduced and developed throughout the length of the program. The program should include a full scope of face-to-face sessions and outside projects, assignments, and experiences. Assign participants to lead projects in their colleges or communities so that they can begin implementing the skills and competencies they are learning. They need to practice what they are taught to be able to retain the information and skills learned.

Assign them to participate in conferences and other extracurricular activities they may have access to during the leadership program. Help the participants understand how these experiences can help them develop and learn. Although not common in this culture, encouraging participants to increase their personal health by participating in fitness and wellness practices can provide a host of benefits critical for emotional and physical wellbeing—important for emerging leaders.

8. *Sensitivity to Culture and Backgrounds*: Facilitators, presenters, and designers must be educated about the UAE and Arab culture before involvement. These individuals must be cautious about their own assumptions, respectful to unique cultures, flexible to make adjustments as needed, and be open to listening and learning (open-mindedness). Presenters must be sensitive in determining suitable discussion topics and in sharing appropriate experiences. Also, the family and home is of utmost importance for Emirati women and discussing leadership in the context of family, community, and work settings can be beneficial.

Importantly, these implications revolve around the three core components of transformational learning outlined earlier in this paper (Merriam & Caffarella, 1995; Mezirow, 1991): 1) mental construction of experience, 2) critical reflection, and 3) development and action.

Although there are a number of limitations for this study (e.g., self-selection of participants, sample size, exploratory methodology), it provides a starting point to the exploration of how HRD practitioners can assist in developing leadership in Emirati women. Of course, future HRD research in all aspects of leadership in the UAE is recommended and needed—both qualitative and quantitative. In addition, articles written about the experiences of practitioners who develop and implement leadership programs for women in the Muslim world

can be very useful for future efforts of all kinds. Because of the rapid changes in the UAE and other Arab countries, timely research topics that have immediate practical applications for the implementation of leadership development programs are recommended. This study is only the beginning.

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