

I. Introduction

My first introduction to American University of Kuwait (AUK) came during the summer of 2008, as Dartmouth's homepage announced Provost Barry Scherr's visit to Kuwait to renew the advisory agreement between the College and AUK. Although intrigued, I read the article through the lens of skepticism, thinking that this was just another feather in Dartmouth's cap, another source of publicity to promulgate the image of a socially responsible Dartmouth.



A View of AUK from Salem al Mubarak Street

While taking a course in Political Anthropology the following fall, Professor Dale Eickelman brought the young institution to life through a series of teleconferences between Dartmouth and AUK students to discuss trends of modernization, globalization, and Westernization in Kuwait. Starkly contrasting the preconceived skepticism with which I viewed the AUK partnership, the

teleconferences were highly stimulating, and I began to view the institutional relationship as worthwhile.

The teleconferences allowed me discuss modernization trends with Kuwaitis and people of other nationalities living in Kuwait, for whom this was not the subject of a journal article but the reality of daily life. Injecting vitality into the sterile, scholarly prose that we read for the course, the teleconferences gave me faces and personalities to associate with the people of the Middle East, a group that so often falls victim to sensationalism and slander.

II. Working at AUK and the Arabian Heritage Project

While at the American University of Kuwait, I worked in the Arabian Heritage Project, a research and public outreach center that strives to cultivate understanding of and interactions with the cultural heritage of the Gulf region. I was also a reading lab instructor in the Intensive English Program, a pre-university language program that prepares students for entry into AUK, and a student consultant to *The Voice of AUK*, the monthly student newspaper.

The Arabian Heritage Project is one of the most vibrant elements of the American University of Kuwait. Under the leadership of Dr. Lisa Urkevich, Associate Professor of Musicology and Ethnomusicology at AUK, the Project hosts a large-scale, campus-wide festival in the spring semester to celebrate the music, crafts, and heritage of Kuwait's Bedouin roots and fills the



Located at the Arab Fund Headquarters, this fountain incorporates traditional Arab craftsmanship with shapes that hold religious and cultural symbolism.

calendar in the fall with an interactive lecture series, inviting some of the best scholars to share their work with the AUK community.

During my time at AUK, the Project hosted two lectures, organized an interactive workshop, and held a poster design contest for students in AUK's graphic design program. Dr. Saad Sowayan, a Saudi scholar of Bedouin oral tradition, gave a fascinating lecture on his years of traveling throughout Saudi Arabia and recording Bedu chants and rituals. As a result of his extensive research, he argues that the chants have been almost made extinct by the unbridled Westernization and infiltration of technological innovation.

The second event, centered on Sadu weaving, the traditional and distinctive textile tradition in Kuwait, was almost three events in one. Welsh scholar of textiles Dr. Keireine Canavan, Program Director and Principal Lecturer of Contemporary Textile Practice at the Cardiff School of Art and Design, discussed her research at Kuwait City's Al Sadu House, a living museum of Sadu weaving (which Charlie, my fellow Dartmouth-AUK intern, and I had the privilege to visit). She was joined by weavers from the museum, who led an interactive workshop and demonstration in which attendees tried their hand at weaving their own piece of Sadu.

The Arabian Heritage Project, in conjunction with the graphic design faculty, hosted a poster design competition for AUK students. Students in a special topics course in poster design each made a poster to advertise the event. Each was required to incorporate Sadu weaving into their designs, and it was wonderful to see how each student thought to incorporate the craft. The winning design was used as part of the "press kit," and appeared in numerous newspapers in Kuwait. The student artwork was displayed in a "gallery" for the AUK community to view before and after the lecture and workshop, and the winning poster design was used as part of the press kit to publicize the event.

During the workshop, an international lawyer with Kuwaiti heritage weaved Sadu for the first time in her life. She raved about the experience, laughing that she had never weaved Sadu even though she had grown up with it in her home. In my mind, this was the Arabian Heritage Project at its best. The event shared scholarly research on Arabian culture, but went beyond this by inviting the local community to interact and engage in various ways.



An example of traditional Sadu weaving.

Dr. Lisa entrusted to me many of the logistical and detail-oriented elements of preparing and organizing Arabian Heritage Project events. Much of the advertising for our events was my responsibility. I designed posters displayed around AUK and throughout Salmiya, the neighborhood of Kuwait City in which AUK is located. Press releases which I wrote about upcoming events were published in the English-language daily newspapers in Kuwait, including the *Arab Times*, *Kuwait Times*, and *al-Watan Daily*, and were translated for publication in the Arabic-language papers as well.

The Visual-Performing Arts program of AUK also hosted a joint recital showcasing the talents of students, faculty, and administrators from both Dartmouth College and the American University of Kuwait. The recital featured three students from AUK: a pianist, flautist and guitarist, as well as several faculty members. From Dartmouth, the recital showcased Laurel Stavis, Executive Director of the Dartmouth-AUK Project and conservatory-trained mezzo-soprano, and myself. I sang “Pa-pa-pa,” a duet from Mozart’s *Magic Flute*, and played the Rimsky-Korsakov Concerto for



After the recital, Dartmouth and AUK performers and administrators pose for a photo.

Trombone. It was most gratifying to participate in this new area of collaboration between Dartmouth and AUK. The recital was very well attended, and it demonstrated the strong potential for Dartmouth and AUK to work together in the arts.

III. Intensive English Program

Since the language of instruction at AUK is English, ensuring strong written and oral communication skills in English is quite important for students’ future success at AUK. Being a part of this process was an immense privilege, and a great deal of fun! My teaching responsibilities with the Intensive English Program quickly began to consume the greater part of my day and time spent with my students was often the highlight of my day. As a reading lab instructor, I worked with the students on grammar, writing, and critical reading skills. However, my time spent with my students in the IEP accomplished much more than just that.

I was nervous to meet my students on the first day of class, not knowing what to expect or how difficult the task would be. The students took to me quickly, and we got along quite well. Although we did work on grammar -- I think they all know how to punctuate correctly now!! – the lessons were more profound. We worked on essay writing and how to craft thesis statements and conclusions; in reading an abridged version of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* we discussed the finer points and nuances of literature; we began to use the university library

collections to conduct research; and reserved one day each week for what the students affectionately called “Negotiations,” a round-table discussion about topics of their choosing to help improve their spoken English.

It was very clear from the beginning that I had come from an education background that differed greatly from theirs. This is not to say that one is necessarily better than the other, but simply different by nature of circumstance and cultural context. But I tried to use past teachers and experiences as models for my interaction with them, and introduce them in a small way to the “tough questions” and challenges which made me grow as a student: the “why” question.

My relationship with those eighteen guys really flourished. They very quickly felt comfortable asking me for help on their essays, and each afternoon students visited my office for help with writing or revising. More often, though, students would come by to just chat. They wanted to know what it was like to go to school in America, what I thought about different political issues, or how I was getting on in Kuwait.

The diversity of the students in the class – filled with Kuwaitis, Iraqis, Iranians, Libyans, and other nationalities – made for an eclectic mix of perspectives.



My IEP students and I on AUK campus.

IV. The *Voice of AUK*

The final element of my responsibilities at AUK was with the student newspaper, *The Voice of AUK*. This piece of my internship prompted a lot of interaction with university-level students at AUK, which offered yet another level of connection to the campus community. It was gratifying to work with a student organization, and I gained valuable perspectives on the challenges confronting student journalists at AUK and professional journalists in Kuwait generally. I wrote articles for the *Voice*, including a review of a piano and vocal recital which I attended while in Kuwait. It was quite enjoyable to work with and get to know these students, and I was privileged to be given the opportunity to offer my perspectives, comments, and suggestions on how to improve the paper’s operations.

V. Living in Kuwait and Arab Hospitality

It was not easy to land in Kuwait at the end of the summer and during Ramadan. The intense heat often exceeded 120° and, because eating and drinking during the day are prohibited during Ramadan, not being able to drink water posed some challenges to being outside during our first few weeks in Kuwait. But the heat did not prevent us from beginning to immerse ourselves in Arab culture. During Ramadan, Nur Soliman, an AUK student who visited Dartmouth in summer 2009 as part of the reciprocal part of



Visiting the Kuwait Towers

the Dartmouth-AUK exchange, invited Charlie and me to her home for *iftar*, the fast-breaking meal during Ramadan. This was a wonderful introduction to Islamic custom during the holy month, as well as the beginning of a deep relationship with people who quickly became our surrogate family. Nur and her family included us in many family outings to Kuwait City, took us to art exhibitions and concerts, and invited us to dinner each week. It was a great comfort to be part of a family while so far away from home, and the selfless hospitality with which Nur's family welcomed us helped to make the experience as enjoyable as it was.

Once the summer heat abated, Charlie and I ventured into Kuwait City. We enjoyed the Sadu House and Museum, the Kuwait Towers, walking around the old *souk* (marketplace), and visiting the National Museum, which still serves as a relic and reminder of the Iraqi invasion as it has not yet been fully rebuilt. Another favorite spot was the *corniche*, the beautiful promenade built along the coastline in Salmiya. I enjoyed reading here on afternoons, and I always met such friendly, warm people during walks.



Eating with my fingers!!

One of the warmest displays of hospitality came from my eighteen IEP students, who insisted on taking me out to dinner to express their appreciation towards the end of my stay in Kuwait. We went to a traditional Kuwaiti restaurant, and all of the Kuwaiti members of the class were quite proud of displaying their culture and cuisine to me. They insisted that I eat with my hands, as per the Kuwaiti custom. I was hesitant at first, but I agreed, and enjoyed this immersion into an old Kuwaiti tradition. My students greatly enjoyed

watching my fingers wrestle with the rice. But we had become so comfortable with each other that it became something to joke about later.

This dinner with my students is representative of my time in Kuwait. The increased comfort, interpersonal appreciation, and cross-cultural understanding of each other truly characterize my time in Kuwait. AUK played a great role in my personal development, and I am quite thankful to have had the opportunity to play a role in the growth and development of the institution and community of the American University of Kuwait.

VI. Final Thoughts

Those teleconferences occurred over a year ago now, and the intervening time has brought me to Kuwait, not only to experience those globalization trends we had discussed but also to interact personally with the students, culture, and lifestyle that were on the other side of that computer during the teleconferences. Immersing myself in the culture and mores of the Kuwaitis and interacting with Arab culture on its own terms were critical to the value of the time spent there.

Perhaps the most eye-opening anecdote shared with me was about the American involvement in Iraq in 2003. A student from Baghdad told me that March 20, 2003 was one of the best days of his life, noting that he then felt free and safe to walk outside even though there were soldiers

outside his door. After all, he said, these American soldiers were there to protect him, and were not representative of a government against its own people. I was at first shocked to hear him speak of this event so positively, as Western media often portrays this day quite differently. But it was clear that he was heartfelt about this, and I greatly appreciated that he shared this unique perspective with me, as it helped me to understand the U.S. involvement in Iraq in a whole new way.



The minaret of a mosque in Kuwait City.

This story is representative of the perspectival change that my time in Kuwait sparked. Meeting and speaking with so many individuals from different backgrounds gave me a good sampling of Arab points of view, and these were synthesized into a more accurate and appreciative understanding of the region than the one portrayed in the media, the source from which most other Westerners receive their information and opinions about the Gulf region.

Despite geographic separation and cultural differences, people at home and in Kuwait pursue remarkably similar goals. Students at AUK are seeking an education which they hope will empower them to be model individuals. Families are strong units of support and people aim to surround themselves with sustaining, encouraging communities. People enjoy each other's company and of course, good food. Of course, there are differences. But observing these similarities and using them to build bridges to traverse those cultural differences was critical to the success of my time in Kuwait and to the development of strong, sustaining relationships and to expand my understanding of the region to include a more appreciative, nuanced understanding of Arab society, culture, and values.