Teaching Abroad and Bridging Cultures

What you propose to do? I propose to (1) teach Geography of the Middle East in the Department of Geography and Planning at the United Arab Emirates University during the academic year from September 2011 to June 2012, (2) give guest lectures and presentations about my publications and current research, and (3) establish research links with interested colleagues and research centers in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The content and intent of the proposed activities take into account the overall context and mission of the Fulbright program, especially the focus on “face-to-face exchanges” as an effective means of “engaging foreign publics” in order “to increase mutual understanding between the people of the United States and other countries.”

Why it is important? I think teaching abroad is important because it can (1) bridge cultural gaps, (2) further scholarly understanding, (3) dispel misconceptions/stereotypes, (4) decrease prejudices, (5) provide experiential and empirical knowledge, (6) enhance reputation of home and host institutions, and (7) be viewed and valued as a form of “academic diplomacy” whose mutual learning experience can benefit both teachers at home and students abroad. Fulbrighter Donald Hall, who taught abroad four times at the university level and in four different countries, noted that “faculty members need the experience of teaching abroad as much as students need the benefits of studying abroad.”

Teaching abroad is likely to gain some significance given the new phenomenon of “campus emigration” amidst concerns that shrinking budgets and depleted savings can impact graduate-student stipends at home and the ability of families abroad to afford American college tuition (in addition to visa hassles and increased student-visa fees to cover surveillance). At the same time, teaching abroad could also be challenging since U.S. teachers abroad may have a lot to answer for and a lot to learn from because of America’s tarnished and battered global image in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the war on terrorism, the Iraq and Afghan wars, and the lack of progress in the Palestine-Israel peace process. The following examples may illustrate some of the cultural, political, and scholarly challenges (mostly related to the Palestine-Israel conflict) which U.S. teachers may occasionally expect in the Middle East.

First, according to a June 2008 survey report by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, 71 percent of Americans say that the United States is less respected in the world than it has been in the past. Earlier the 2004 Report of the Defense Science Board Task Force on Strategic Communication acknowledged that “America’s negative image in world opinion and diminished ability to persuade” are linked to U.S. support for Israel. From 2005 to 2007 Undersecretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs Karen Hughes made substantial efforts to (1) increase the public diplomacy budget to nearly $900 million, (2) energize the government-funded/Arabic language Radio Sawa, Alhurra satellite television, and Hi magazine, (3) focus on winning the hearts and minds of Arabs and Muslims for the sake of the war on terrorism, and (4) spend some time touring key Middle Eastern countries and speaking directly to the people. It was quite revealing that Karen Hughes resigned in December 2007 after advising both President Bush and Secretary Rice that U.S. assistance in resolving the Palestine-Israel conflict would do more than anything else to improve U.S. standing worldwide. Similarly Undersecretary of State for Public Diplomacy Charlotte Beers (the predecessor of Karen Hughes) resigned in March 2003 after acknowledging before a Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing that “the gap between who we are and how we wish to be seen, and how we are in fact seen, is frighteningly wide.”

Second, in May 2008, Jewish American professor Norman Finkelstein was denied entry into Israel and deported to the U.S. in connection with his “criticism of Israel.” In February 2006, American professor Claudia Kiburz was sacked from Zayed University in the UAE for an in-class display of “blasphemous cartoons” about Prophet Muhammad. Professor James Petras noted that the man who solicited, selected, and published these cartoons was a Ukrainian Jew (operating under the name “Flemming Rose”) with close ties to the Israeli state and to Jewish-Polish-American Daniel Pipes (founder of Campus Watch). “Flemming Rose” aimed at provoking conflict between Muslims and the West, thus fulfilling the “clash of civilization” prophecy and polarizing the world in favor of Israel. In August 2003, the UAE government shut down the Zayed Center for Coordination and Follow-Up (a think tank) after the Anti-Defamation League of B’naï B’rith, the Middle East Media Research Institute, and other pro-Israel organizations accused the Center of promoting “anti-Semitic and anti-Israeli views.” The Zayed Center hosted and/or received praise from many American and European officials, including former President Carter, former President Clinton, former Vice President Gore, former Secretary of State Baker, French President Chirac, Belgian Foreign Minister Michel, and others.

Third, the Middle East Studies Association of North America (known as MESA), the flagship of Islamic world studies, was challenged in 2007 by a splinter group led by the founder of MESA itself, Bernard Lewis, a Jewish American professor emeritus of Near East studies at Princeton University. Arguing that MESA has been politicized, Lewis broke away and founded the Association for the Study of the Middle East and Africa. Lewis received the National Humanities Medal from President Bush in 2006, won the Irving Kristol Award at the American Enterprise Institute in 2007, and earned the epithet of “the most significant intellectual influence” behind the Iraq war. After recalling Lewis’s advice on “the history and the way forward in the Middle East” following the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990, Vice President Cheney said in May 2006: “I decided that day that this was a man I wanted to keep in touch with, and whose work I should follow carefully in the years ahead. Since then we have met often, particularly during the last four-and-a-half years, and Bernard has always had some very good meetings with President Bush.”

How you propose to do it? My teaching philosophy stems from my approach to geography as an interdisciplinary and synthetic area of inquiry that is sensitive to the critical issues of our time. Beyond learning basic geographies, the students are trained to think critically to identify, measure, describe, explain, and propose solutions to complex problems and issues of our time, including (1) the making and unmaking of the global political map and the regional framework of the contemporary world, (2) man-made and nature-made environmental change versus sustainable socioeconomic development, (3) the north-south divide and the movement of people and resources across the divide, (4) the cultural unity and political diversity of Islam, (5) the Palestine-Israel conflict and the United States, and (6) the war on terrorism and in Iraq and Afghanistan. For example, beyond the basic geographies of oil reserves, production, consumption, and prices, we raise the question: “who gets what from Middle East oil?” I believe that the values of academic freedom and cultural tolerance promote the kind of persuasive scholarly engagement capable of creating the right environment for bridging cultures by encouraging moral and political judgment to be rooted in tangible facts, not the other way around.
Why the United Arab Emirates? I prefer to teach in the Department of Geography and Planning at the UAE University because of a number of professional and personal attractions. First, the geographic position and strategic location of the UAE between the Arabian/Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman is quite remarkable and attractive from the perspective of political geographers interested in geopolitics as it relates to past, present, and future U.S.-Middle East relations. Second, in recent decades the UAE has enjoyed rapid demographic and economic growth, a great deal of political stability, and close private and government ties with the United States whose officials often praise the UAE’s “generosity with oil revenues” and “moderate foreign policy stance.” A major oil producer and a growing commercial hub with an 80 percent non-citizen population (largely South Asians), the UAE is attracting a wide range of people, government, business, and academic interests. UAE University Political Science Professor Abdulkhaleq Abdullah has suggested that with current economic and immigration growth rates, “the citizens of the UAE will constitute zero per cent of the population” by 2025.11

According to the U.S. Department of State, the UAE ports host more U.S. Navy ships than any port outside the United States, and more than 6,000 companies from more than 120 countries operate at the Jebel Ali deep-water port in Dubai.12 Michael Moore, the founding Director of the Institute for International Economic Policy at the George Washington University’s Elliott School of International Affairs, said that the UAE became “the single largest export market for U.S. goods and services in the Middle East” in 2006 when it imported $2,571 of U.S. goods per capita, exceeding Kuwait ($821), Saudi Arabia ($330), Japan ($468), Germany ($501), Mexico ($1,287), and Israel ($1,558).13 More significant for teachers and researchers is the UAE government’s huge investment in the institutional and physical infrastructure of higher education, including new cities and campuses with new library and information-technology facilities, classroom space, labs, dormitories, student services, athletics and performing-arts facilities, faculty and residential housing, and other mouth-watering higher education conveniences.

There is a proliferation of American and European universities and museums in the UAE. Examples include the Paris-Sorbonne campus and Paris-Louvre Museum in Abu Dhabi, the American University of Sharjah, the Michigan State University Dubai, the Montana State University and New York University campuses in Abu Dhabi, and the Masdar Institute of Science and Technology (MIST), developed with the assistance of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). MIST is the first tenant of the $22 billion Masdar City, the first world’s carbon-free city, built on 700 hectares adjacent to Abu Dhabi’s international airport.14 This higher education infrastructure is drawing the attention and interest of many observers, researchers, teachers, and students from the United States and many other countries. For example, the New York University’s plan to open a campus in Abu Dhabi seems to have been widely welcomed, even by Israeli and Jewish faculty although there are no diplomatic relations between the United Arab Emirates and the State of Israel.15 This overall interest in the wider region is further illustrated by the remarkable fact that the Fulbright Program in Pakistan “is the largest in the world,” according to U.S. Ambassador to Pakistan, Anne Patterson.16 My first contacts at the UAE University include Dr. Saif Al-Qaydi, Dr. Dennis Leavens, Dr. Donald Baker, Dr. Gerry Garland, and Dr. Ahmad bin Touq (the latter an alumnus of Indiana State University). I also have family members in the UAE (the Office of Sponsored Programs at Indiana State University stresses that the Fulbright program “creates the opportunity to establish international ties, new teaching insights, personal knowledge from living abroad, and positive experiences for the scholar’s family”).

What benefits it will produce for the home and host institutions and for the applicant?

Needless to say that winning a Fulbright grant is considered an important academic achievement since it brings good reputation for the award winner and his/her home and host institutions. On the UAE University campus, I will share my (a) teaching experience, (b) research findings, and (c) intellectual perspectives as they stem from my: (1) teaching experience in the United States and Mauritania, (2) years of straddling the cultural divide between the United States and the Arab world, (3) Arab-Islamic cultural background, (4) interdisciplinary and synthetic approach, (5) cultural perspective on Islam, and (6) publications and current research. I expect to get some fresh feedback from my UAE students and audiences when teaching courses or giving guest lectures or presentations. In this way I expect to learn new facts and update my ‘old’ lecture notes for my current research and for my home students. I also want to explore some research links with interested colleagues and research centers and seek ways to translate into Arabic one or more of my English publications.

How you will adapt your materials to the culture and language of the host country?  
If the teaching is in Arabic, course materials might require some adjustment in the reference materials and methods of delivery. I will specifically need to translate my English materials (syllabi, PowerPoint slides, assignments, etc.) in addition to identifying new teaching materials in Arabic (textbooks or customized readings and videos). If teaching is in English, little adaptation of the reference materials and methods of delivery will be needed or required since the UAE shares a lot with the USA in terms of demographic diversity, cultural pluralism, financial capitalism, and higher education system. I can offer Geography of the Middle East as a classroom-based course or a Web-based course.

What experiences have prepared you to teach in this country? My teaching philosophy is shaped by (1) the epistemological nature of the discipline of geography, (2) the definition of a set of explicit teaching goals, (3) the identification of appropriate teaching methods, and (4) the measurement of teaching outcomes. It is also rooted in the favoring of eclecticism over dogmatism and in the belief that knowledge is a basic human right, and ignorance can be eliminated whenever things are presented the way they are. I have the teaching experience and cultural background to teach at the UAE as I have taught the following courses under a variety of geographic, cultural, and linguistic settings at Indiana State University, Francis Marion University, University of Kentucky, and University of Nouakchott:

- Geography of the Middle East
- World Geography
- Cultural Geography
- Political Geography
- Seminar in Global Studies
- Development of Geographic Thought
- Planning and Development in Mauritania
- Geography of Africa
- Introduction to Political Economy
- Economic Geography
- Geography of South Carolina
- Lands and Peoples of the Non-Western World

What do you propose to teach? The equivalent of an American university General/Foundational Education course that encourages students to (1) learn beyond their own narrow specialization or major, (2) write and think across disciplines, (3) work in collaboration with others, (4) think critically & reason logically, (5) develop some internet and computer research skills, and (6) be sensitive to others’ values and problems in a way that foster mutual understanding within and between cultures and nations.