A Neocolonialist Invader or a Postmodern Exile?: the American-Style University in the ‘Desert of the Real’

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Drawing on current criticism in the field of education, as well as elements of Cultural Theory, this paper aims to interrogate the cultural appropriateness and educational significance of American educational values in the Middle Eastern context. Recent criticism has emphasised the difficulty of implanting these values into culturally different classrooms and challenged the idea of ‘educational neocolonialism’ that takes place in the process of such implantation. If teaching is to be effective and ethical – and if it is to avoid the pitfalls of neocolonialism - it needs to reflect the cultural specificity of the learning environment. Moreover, blind indoctrination into Western/American educational principles in the Middle East may potentially lead to their debilitation and eventual devaluing. In the terminology of Jean Baudrillard, American-style teaching can become a simulacrum of other cultural realities, and the classroom itself can become a ‘map without a territory’. On this reading, the American-style university emerges as an exile rather than an invader. As a hybrid of two cultures, it is dependent on a continuous act of reinvention and reinterpretation. Thus, by calling into question the ‘real’ of the American-style university in the Middle East, this paper will also attempt to suggest new meanings and underscore the potential for cross-cultural education in the region.

To illustrate the possibilities of such reinvention, this paper will discuss ‘textuality’ and cross-cultural dialogue as methods of teaching English Literature in the American-style Middle Eastern university. Instead of creating a simulacrum of the American-style teaching and learning environment, the classroom, by way of such dialogue, can operate on principles which are more concrete, culturally specific, and, hence, more ‘real’. In the wake of globalisation, the application of cross-cultural, comparative, postmodern dialogue as teaching methodology is both meaningful and necessary.