Interview Transcript

Interviewer: Seif Eddin Abdel Rahman
Narrator: Lammert Holdijk
Date: 02/21/2012
Place: Narrator’s office
Prince Alwaleed Bin Talal Bin Abdulaziz Alsaud Hall
Room P076
202.2615.2028
College: The American University in Cairo (AUC)
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Date completed: 21 Feb. 12
21 February 2012

Persons present: Seif Eddin Abdel Rahman - A
Lammert Holdijk - H

Abdel Rahman: Would you please introduce yourself.

Holdijk: My name is Lammert Holdijk. I am the associate chair of rhetoric and composition.

Abdel Rahman: Okay, and you have been in the AUC community for how long?

Holdijk: Thirty years.

Abdel Rahman: Thirty years! And, you’ve been a professor and you’ve designed a course, a seminar course, right?

Holdijk: Yes, I basically have been teaching the writing courses and directing the program for many years, but in the last 4-5 years I developed a course called, Who Am I?

Abdel Rahman: Okay, and why exactly did you do that?

Holdijk: Because I found that students were not able to make the transference between the various types of the knowledge that they had. For example, they have their personal experience, their spiritual experience, their psychological experience, their educational experience, their
political experience. How do you put it all together? And so, I tried to design something that started with what I think is the most important factor in understand knowledge is yourself. And once you understand yourself, you can integrate all different kinds of knowledge because usually the blockage to the integration of knowledge is yourself.

Abdel Rahman: So the three main courses that you should go through when it comes to the core curriculum do not go through that, so this course helps people discover themselves and put it all together?

Holdijk: Yes

Abdel Rahman: So this happened before with different courses, with different professors designing different courses aiming at the same thing, but most of them don’t carry on, like the rhetoric course last semester: rhetorical reading of literature? The 399-course? This didn’t carry on this semester.

Holdijk: No. We have to distinguish here between the core course, the Who Am I? course and the rhetoric courses. The Who Am I? course is basically part of the core requirement. The RHET course is part of the writing requirement. So the RHET courses, especially at the advanced level, 399 is what is called a selected topics course, which means it can change every semester. Once we pilot a course and we find that there’s a response, we make the course permanent by applying for a specific catalogue number and following semesters it is then put into the catalogue. Also because we have a writing minor not a major, we cannot offer every course every semester. So
sometimes you’ll find that a course is offered one semester and then not offered the second semester.

Abdel Rahman: So what’s the criteria for a good pilot course? Like what makes you say, “we’re gonna go on with that?”

Holdijk: We have a committee called the curriculum committee and the curriculum committee and what we call the minor committee they examine the syllabus and take a look and see that it fulfills the criteria for a rhetoric course. Which are a number of criteria. Once it fulfills the criteria of the rhetoric course then we allow the teacher to pilot it for a semester to see how it works.

Abdel Rahman: And then?

Holdijk: And then if there’s a demand, it seems students are interested, etcetera, then we put it into the catalogue.

Abdel Rahman: Okay, then what about cancelled classes? Like this semester, what was it?

Holdijk: There were two courses that got cancelled

Abdel Rahman: Yeah! The 444…(interviewee interjects)
Holdijk: These were under-enrolled. And this is a university policy. In other words, if not enough students register for a class, and the minimum usually is 10, then the university is...there has to be special conditions for the course to be continued, if there’s under-enrollment, that’s not just our department. And because students is very difficult to predict if students are going to be taking a course or not. So if they decide not to take a course, and it’s under-enrolled, then we have to cancel it according to the regulations of the university.

Abdel Rahman: Okay. Back to your course, the course you’ve designed. I’ve seen that you’re into Sufism, and I guess this helped you design the course, in a way?

Holdijk: Yeah, partially.

Abdel Rahman: Yeah, and how is that?

Holdijk: (interviewee takes a deep breath). Well, because you know there’s an expression in Arabic, “Mann ‘araf nafsahoo, fa’kadd ‘araf rabahoo?” [translates into, “he who knows thyself, knows thy God.”]

Abdel Rahman: Yeah.

Holdijk: Yeah, so most inner traditions in almost every religion emphasize the fact that self-knowledge is the key to understanding all knowledge, and so that’s one of the reasons why I saw
that as the best access for students. And also, there’s nothing more interesting to students than themself, you know. You can always get them to study that! (Interviewee smirks)

Abdel Rahman: (interviewer smirks) That’s kind of true, so do you see yourself designing more courses for this university?

Holdijk: We’ve already submitted an advanced course at the 400-level, a capstone, in which we talk about how to map all the different types of knowledge that people have into an integrated view because one of the things, this, I mean the university tries to do this through inter-disciplinary courses. But I think there really needs to be a course that takes a larger view of all the disciplines and how you integrate it into the ethics of the workplace, into your spiritual practice, into your psychological development, into your professional development, how do you integrate them into one single theory. And there are, there is one very specific theory developed by American psychologist-philosophers and it's a very useful map that you can use, and this is what we'd like to teach at an advanced level.

Abdel Rahman: From what you’re saying I can understand that AUC students have developed, throughout whatever the 30 years you’ve been here, to acknowledge that fact and start learning from it?

Holdijk: No, there has been a study in the US that one of the things... American education is a very specific type. Western educational systems emphasize left brain knowledge acquisition. Yeah, that’s their emphasis. But, human beings do not only consist of that. I mean in recent years, over the last 10-15 years, we’ve had very well known books on emotional intelligence. We
don’t have a course on how to be more emotionally intelligent. We also don’t have a course...
there’s been several studies done in American universities on how to integrate spirituality into
the educational system; not specifically a religious education, but a spiritual education. In other
words, I’m trying to get a grasp on the meaning of life. Everybody has a different belief system,
but to grasp meaning of life, this is a very important thing that most people do outside the
university, and sometimes what you learn, even in university, may conflict with what you
understand from your belief system, right? So how do you integrate that? What are the methods?
Where is a forum for discussion of that? And so there’s been a move in recent years to try
integrate more of different branches of how we know things into one package so that you don’t
exit from the university, a schizophrenic, you know?

Abdel Rahman: (Interviewer giggles) So what’s the weirdest thing you’ve been told about your
course?

Holdijk: The weirdest thing? Not really. I haven’t really had any negative... The main thing is
that they… students often go to their parents to tell their, you know... to ask their… I have a
section on death in the course, and they’re asked theoretical-ethical question: that if you’re
hooked up to machines or in a comma, you know. Would you want the plug to be pulled? So,
sometimes the students say you know, we’ll go home and ask our parents these weird questions.
But, usually the response is always positive because people don’t think about these things and
they are situations that you are confronted with. Well, if you are confronted with an ethical
situation like your mother or your father were on some kind of life support system, would you
pull the plug or not? Is that an ethical decision? Is it spiritual; what influences your decision, you know? What is your religious belief?

Abdel Rahman: Did the AUC community, as a whole, develop a good writing skills when they…, after 30 years you’ve been here? Did you see it improving?

Holdijk: Yes, definitely. When I first started, I don’t think students appreciated the ability to write. One of the big… We reorganized the department about eight or nine years ago in response to critiques that they were not writing well and that’s why we developed the three and four-hundred level courses specialized in the discipline so that students who are business majors learn how to write business communications. Technical majors like engineers or computer software engineers learn how to write manuals so, like; when they go into the workplace, they’re more competent.

Abdel Rahman: Okay. What’s the next step for the rhetoric department, in the next like 2-3 years?

Holdijk: We’re hoping to… we have a lot of responses from students who are interested in our minor, and much of our minor is creative writing. So, we have many of our courses in creative writing are full, like Writing Children’s Literature, Creative non-fiction, where you talk about some incidents that’s true and you put it into … We have: How to Write Novel, all these things, these courses are very well subscribed. So, we’re thinking of moving into a major with an
emphasis on maybe sharing courses with other departments like the PVA or the Journalism because we emphasize it as a writing major.

Abdel Rahman: Thank you, sir.